LUDIC YŪGEN

AESTHETIC AS METHOD IN THE ART OF RECORDING

Stuart Charles John Gregg
B.A., Master of Creative Arts

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Stuart Charles John Gregg

20 January 2017
Abstract

This doctorate has been conducted as a practice-as-research based project, resulting in
the submission of the 2 hours of recordings of creative work for examination. The
written thesis that accompanies the creative work has a tripartite structure, and follows
the model described by Robin Nelson in the text *Practice as research in the arts:
principles, protocols, pedagogies, resistances* (Nelson 2013, p.34).

The first section, A Conceptual Framework, outlines the history and theoretical
implications of the aesthetic of yūgen, surveying the evolution and etymology of the
term and describing the traditional techniques used in classical and medieval Japan to
evoke the aesthetic in the fields of poetry, painting and garden design. This section
concludes with an investigation of the author’s creative translation of the aesthetic of
yūgen into the methods of ludic yūgen, as used in the author’s creative praxis. These
methods involve the use of miegakure, improvisation, omission, limitations, sparse
means and the manipulation of shadows and darkness.

The second section, A Location in a Lineage, reviews historical practice in the art of
recording which has involved the use of the methods of ludic yūgen. The locating of
these methods in the rock genre, specifically in the recordist tradition, is elucidated. The
use of the methods of ludic yūgen by recording artists such as The Beatles, David
Bowie, Brian Eno, Robert Pollard, the Bomb Squad, Beck, Pixies and others is
described, and the researcher’s creative work is revealed as belonging to an
unacknowledged tradition of ludic recordists working in the realm of popular music. In
addition, the role of humour in ludic yūgen, the ludic approach to music and the
importance of the artist’s unique voice are delineated.
The third and final section of the written thesis is essentially a diary of creative practice, functioning as a linear exegesis that traces the development of the creative work and the evolution of the intellectual context in which that praxis takes place.
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This thesis is dedicated to my family
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CD 1
1: 40 days
2: blood of time
3: burninsonoplastica
4: please don't take
5: flowing blue
6: eternal trash
7: declare the capsule
8: ship shop
9: mudlarker
10: skank john
11: million dollar suit
12: cazzjat
13: where oh where
14: dirty lil soul
15: kohl mynaah
16: look and sit
17: salop salai
18: stolen nation
19: come september
20: briefcase killa
21: gaza fridge
22: in the boot of the car
23: sheer jingo
24: yesoo
25: dusty knave
26: who sent u
27: ravity
28: updragger
29: hootin' tool
30: choy choy
31: ladder up
32: under the sand
33: give me back my body
34: coochie mix new
35: miss lonely clean
36: on tic
37: sleep well final
38: kalya prey
39: chillplain
40: too beat to work on
41: ysoannngree
42: runway god
43: castor gate
44: banker's lament
CD 2

1: ah well
2: big tree
3: as a whole
4: i shall walk free
5: justify your self
6: hullabaloo
7: ludic cross
8: the yukon
9: drift net dream
10: gay ali
11: god dust
12: me no likee speakee
13: winter brave
14: klan dentist
15: angel chatter
16: so u say
17: because of everything
18: hollis
19: feed em sugar
20: gringo
21: kindless
22: high priest
23: icon ick
24: terra beauty
25: oh me oh my
26: swoonwalk
27: gone to fresno
28: lion of buddha
29: archimedes
30: strut yo
31: on my wings
32: loserville
33: clone drown
34: smilegiver
35: mr jackal
36: happy as
37: years at table
38: mutango three
39: lazy little elephant
40: the onside rule
41: willie the sheik
CHAPTER 1

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter traces the evolution of yūgen as an aesthetic ideal, from its beginnings in Buddhist scholastic circles to its elaboration in the poetry and theatre of medieval Japan. I will explore the influence of Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism, these traditions being the spiritual climate in which the notion developed. An allied exploration is into ways in which yūgen points towards the inexpressible depths of the living mystery and involves an acknowledgement of the limits of language and thought. This is in preparation for the attempt to evolve the notion by extending the ecstatic connotations available to the idea. This crucial step is taken when I add the idea of the ludic to the idea of yūgen, and thereby create a new colouring for the aesthetic: ludic yūgen. In so doing, I provide grounding for the creative climate in which the artistic practice will be enacted as improvisation and recording.

The Japanese word yūgen has a complex history and meaning. It has been suggested the first use of the concept of yūgen was as a response to the Buddhist sutras when they first arrived in China, transmitted by travelling monks from India. Audiences for the new philosophy sensed a profound depth and mysterious quality to the teachings and it was in China that the descriptive yūgen was first used to signify this mysterious depth. In Mandarin Chinese, the word appears as 神秘, (pronounced Shēn-mì). Thornbill relates that:

Yūgen itself is a compound of two Chinese graphs; the first means ‘faint’ or ‘distant’, the second ‘dark’ with overtones of ‘mystery’. . . . The second character ‘gen’ [Ch. hsuăn] predominates . . . and thus the expression has a
strong Taoist flavour. Hsuan is used in Lao Tzu to represent the dark, mysterious aspect of the Tao – the nameless, formless realm antecedent to the differentiated world of light, and the primordial nature to which all things return. (1997, p.37)

Taoist thought places great importance on the ineffable nature of truth, for the Tao (the Way) cannot be named and escapes all attempts at intellectual capture. As the Buddha’s teaching, the dharma, traveled across Asia, from India through China and onto Japan, it was filtered through local mythic frameworks as ideas interpenetrated and coloured each other, like paints blurring on canvas.

In written Japanese, two characters make up the word. Yu and Gen: 幽玄

Yú means hazy, dim, dark, deep, quiet, otherworldly, and is found in such words as yúshi (deep contemplation), yúhei (confinement), and yúkon (spirits of the dead). Gen means subtle, profound, or dark and it is also a name for the other world. It is seen in the words genó (inmeasurable depth), genshu (subtle beauty), and gensi (profound mystery or esoteric truth). Yúgen, the combination of these two characters expresses profundity and evanescence detached from reality and indicates a mystical state in which beauty is but a premise, something of an unknowable nature. (Komparu 1983, p.14)

I am going to focus here on the metaphysical colouring of the concept, as it appears in the realm of Zen and Taoist writings. The conceptions of yúgen that occur in the critical treatises on waka poetry and the Noh theatre are useful and will be discussed later, but they are of secondary importance in our framing of the word.
In Japan, yūgen came to be pivotal to aesthetics in Japan, the essence of artistic practice and the central ideal of medieval literature (Brandon 1971). The concept became, according to the scholar Brower, "the ideal of an artistic effect both mysterious and ineffable, of a subtle, complex tone achieved by emphasizing the unspoken connotations of words and the implications of a poetic situation" (Richie 2007, p.54). In literature, according to the generation, the individual and the genre, the conception and the nuance of the term yūgen varied, depending on who was using the idea (Brandon 1971, p.31). In Zen and Chinese Taoist writings, yūgen took on a metaphysical tone, dealing with religio-philosophical realms of thought. For Chinese poets, yūgen was a descriptive term, used to evoke the quality of a scene or emotion. In critical treatises on poetry and Noh plays, yūgen assumes a more theoretical colouring and is used as a way into the discussion of artistic methodologies and aesthetic judgement (ExEAS 2012). By the Kamakura era (1185-1333) the term assumed its more universal significance in relation to not only literature but fine art, gardening and theatre (Deane 2012).

Some believe that any attempt to define yūgen is an exercise in futility, as the word escapes definition by its very nature. However, an attempt must be made to approach an understanding of the idea, and words are the tools I am using here. There are many readings that stress the indescribable character of yūgen. One scholar suggests that while “yūgen may be comprehended by the mind . . . it cannot be expressed in words. . . . It is quite impossible to explain wherein lies the interest or the remarkable nature of yūgen” (de Bary 1964, p.279). The mind can understand the idea of yūgen but a linguistic web cannot ensnare the notion. Yūgen defies explanation, yet seems to demand further explication. Other writers suggest that holding any hope of understanding yūgen is foolhardy. Marra goes as far as to say that “yūgen is something
well beyond the reach of man’s immediate perception and understanding, since it is too
depth and too far for humans to reach, even conceptually” (Marra 2011). Similarly,
Upton (1968) sees conceptual knowledge as futile in approaching the idea, for “yūgen
as a Zen term, has never been — and cannot be — actually defined”. However, Upton
differs from other scholars by offering a succinct characterisation of yūgen, when she
writes that “yūgen is conceived of as the most gracefully refined expression of beauty:
beauty which is felt — as the shadow of a cloud momentarily before the moon, and an
echo of a softly flowing brook, are felt” (Upton 1968, p.v).

The revelatory maxim that true art deals in the currency of feeling, and does not
traffic solely in understanding, is crucial to any attempt at illuminating what yūgen
might be. Writers readily acknowledge the primacy of feeling when dealing with
yūgen, one suggesting yūgen reveals a concern with “deeper, often darker, wonder”
(Powell 2011). Rheingold describes yūgen as "an awareness of the universe that
triggers feelings too deep and mysterious for words" (Richie 2007, p.54). I glean from
these insistences on yūgen’s ineffability that the primary quality of the aesthetic ideal is
a concern with feeling, with a moment, a glimpse of vast and fragile beauty that leaves
us agape, in awe, our conceptual machinations rendered useless.

The inexplicability of yūgen presents an irresistible challenge to the scholar and artist,
despite the consensus that all attempts at defining the idea will fail. Yūgen is an
emotional reality that arises when contemplating the mystery at the heart of things: the
mystery of Nature, of the Universe, of being itself. The idea reveals itself as beyond
words, a subjective response to an objective reality. It is out of reach of our
understanding, yet dwells within us. Yūgen points toward the metaphysical, to which I
now turn.
Yūgen is a deeply evocative aesthetic and is concerned with the vast unfathomable nature of the universe and being. As previously conceded, all attempts at pinning down the characteristics of the idea are problematic, but in an attempt to clarify the ideas that the term can be said to encompass, two notions will be explored below. These central aspects of yūgen relate to the metaphysics enfolded by the term and are as follows: The Otherworldly, The Mysterious, The Inexplicable and The Empty and the Boundless. I shall deal with each in turn.

There is an otherworldly, mystical connotation to yūgen. Thornbill suggests that “yūgen represents both the Tao and the transcendent wisdom of Mahayana Buddhism as we perceive them: dark, unintelligible and mysterious” (Thornbill 1993, p.37), and Marra asserts that “in ancient China, yūgen came to indicate the other world, as well as the Taoist Way and Buddhist enlightenment” (Marra 2011). The ‘other world’, the ‘dark, the mysterious’ point to the unseen, yet, as Thornbill suggests, there is a contradiction that adheres in the term. He surmises that the experience of yūgen can suggest both penetration to the inner world, where perceptual darkness turns to inner illumination, and also the unification of opposites, whereby dark and light are experienced as non-dual. . . . Yūgen as Absolute is affirmed. Yūgen is beyond the law of cause and effect: it is True Nature, it is manifest in all things. (Thornbill 1993, p.52)

Yūgen is on the grandest scale of all, and deals with the universal mystery of being. The Tao te Ching describes yūgen as “the obscurest of the obscure . . . the swinging gateway of the manifold mysteries” (Ames 2010, p.77). There is light in this darkness of yūgen, and it is the play of light and dark that leads beyond opposites to the apprehension of non-duality, a crucial insight in Zen thought. We embrace the
‘Absolute’, in which differences and differentiation are dissolved into ‘True Nature’. It is a poignant awareness of a rare moment that cannot be clung to, as it is “fleeting, momentary and never obvious” (World One-Two 2010). The philosopher Alan Watts characterized yūgen as “sudden perception of something mysterious and strange, hinting at an unknown never to be discovered” (World One-Two 2010). It is the intuitive recognition of our ignorance concerning the boundless fields of being, the moment when the mercurial ground dissolves beneath our conceptual feet. At such a time, I might accept that any attempts to ensnare this mystery in the porous net of language are an exercise in futility.

Higginson (1992) writes that yūgen “invokes wonder and astonishment … (and) is mystery, vision, revelation, delight, poetry all together” and simultaneously “invokes the very subtle, says without saying, always saying more than what is said” (Higginson 1992). Yūgen implies a metaphysical vastness, cosmological in scale that offers a hint of the eternal that proves impossible to hold on to. What intrigues here is the unfathomable enormity that the aesthetic deals with, and yet I read it is ‘very subtle’, exhibiting only a hint of its subject. The aesthetic has at its heart this dialectical relationship between a boundless subject and its necessarily limited artistic evocation.

This internal dichotomy within the aesthetic of yūgen is further illustrated by Brzostoski, who writes that yūgen is “understandable but unknown . . . intuitive and rational . . . dark and light . . . wet and crisp . . . yūgen is wonderful and mysterious . . . internal ice and lonely with resignation” (Brzostoski 1981). Mayada surmises that yūgen is primarily concerned with that which is beyond our ken, “a highly metaphysical aesthetic value which is grounded not in the positive aspect of experience (i.e. that which can be experienced), but rather in negative experience (i.e., that which cannot be experienced)” (Mayada 1991, p.34). I would argue that the aspect of yūgen which is
most grounded in ‘negative experience’ is its potential for expression in artistic work. The feeling itself, though dealing with the vastness of Being and subject to fleeting conscious apprehension, is open to us but is of such depth and profundity that its conscious and conceptual expression struggles to evoke the sublimity of the experience. That “moment when the veil of the universe is lifted just enough that you can almost feel the eternal” (Hip Forums 2008) is the foundation of the Sisyphean task for any artist seeking to give form to that which is beyond concept but can be understood viscerally by the spirit.

The aesthetic of yūgen developed in the soil of Zen, sharing the understanding that physical reality is illusory illusion and that the ultimate reality lies beyond the senses and outside the grasp of language. An essence of Zen is the awareness that "all form is void, that the universe itself is an ephemeral object. Such an awareness is too deep for the kind of aesthetic categories that govern ordinary art. It cannot be depicted, only suggested” (Rheingold 1988, p.85). At this point, I must introduce the Tendai school of Buddhism, a precursor to Zen in medieval Japan, which “exercised a profound influence on the concept of yūgen” (ExEAS 2012). As LaFleur relates in detail, Tendai Buddhism exerted tremendous influence on the aesthetic of yūgen because there was an emphasis on the idea

that all things were empty of self-existence. Its unyielding dialectic at the same time refused to allow emptiness to congeal or reify into an absolute or independent principle; it demanded . . . that emptiness too be emptied. The operation of this ongoing process of emptying implied a vastness and richness in the universe as explored in its inter-relatedness. Since nothing anywhere could
be found to have independent existence, there were no stopping places or barriers within reality. (1983, p.100)

LaFleur goes on to explicitly connect this selfless, fluid apprehension of reality to the depth, density, distance and wondrous quality that became to be so much a part of yūgen. Reality is boundless in the most precise sense: since there are no hard, absolute, or independent entities, there are no boundaries or limits to the deep and mutual interpenetration of all existent things. Yūgen acknowledges and discloses this. (LaFleur 1983, p.100)

This is at the core of the medieval Japanese religious, philosophical and aesthetic matrix, and I might need to dwell on these fundamental truths of the age if I am to understand the world in which the aesthetic of yūgen bloomed. The doctrine of anatta (non-self) is one of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths, and, when experienced first-hand, opens the doors of perception to the wonder of a universe in perpetual flux, all things appearing and disappearing subject to the cosmic play of forces dancing within this realm of illusion. In medieval Japan, it was through the technique of shikan meditation, “practiced for the realisation of three truths (the phenomenal (ke), the void (kū), and the middle (chū))” that aspects of yūgen came to be experienced (ExEAS 2012).

The process of shikan meditation may be crudely described as follows. Initially, the practitioner would meditate on the reality of perceived phenomena, the world as experienced through the senses: next, they would dwell on the emptiness of the individual and the world; finally, they would concentrate on holding the middle ground between these two positions. This is a place of non-dual apprehension, where the reality
and emptiness of experience is acknowledged and such awareness abides. It is the ground of yūgen.

This tripartite concept from shikan meditation is analogous to Thornbill’s important idea that “traditional yūgen discourse is based upon a progression of three discrete stages (the following pages offer diagrammatic representations of this idea):

1. The conventional clarity of differentiating consciousness
2. Semantic/imagistic obscurity and
3. Penetration leading to non-duality

Symbolically the progression is from brightness to darkness to inner brilliance. . . The important point is that yūgen . . . is a dynamic experience. If a sense of movement from stage 1 to stage 2 is present, the effect is achieved. However, if reification occurs at stage 2, a simple static dualism of light and dark, strong and weak, results. At this point, momentum must be restored by the negation of this duality, achieved at stage 3” (Thornbill 1997, p.53).

LaFleur’s description of the meditative process involves the journey from “the phenomenal to the void to the middle”, and this is the metaphysical soil for the yūgen aesthetic, which grows to manifest as Thornbill’s three stages: “Clarity to obscurity to (inter)penetration”. The step taken from spiritual concept to discursive procession is a result of “the Tendai truths emphasizing interdependency of all things (which) functioned as an affirmation of the ‘indeterminacy of meaning’” (ExEAS 2012). I must highlight here that it is the metaphysical experiences of non-self and non-dualism that are intrinsic to the aesthetic of yūgen. The challenge that the aesthetic poses to the artist is simply that while an experience of the true feeling of yūgen is possible, the direct and
unmediated expression of such awareness in artistic form is futile, and can only be implied. I shall now explore how artists and others have previously attempted to evoke yūgen in their practice.

Thornbill’s diagrammatic representations of yūgen
Note. From the chapter *Yūgen after Zeami* (Brandon 1997, p.40-41)
Traditional Creative Techniques for evoking Yūgen

Traditionally, artists in poetry, theatre, painting and landscape design who engaged with the aesthetic of yūgen have focused on the use of darkness and shadows, avoiding the obvious and direct expression of ideas, in combination with the techniques of miegakure and omission. There has been an emphasis on the symbolic image as a portal to yūgen and a certain sparseness of means, in the sense of a minimalist approach to practice. Artists seeking to evoke yūgen have also concentrated on the development of a unique approach to practice, whereby their creative techniques were as individual as their experience of the feeling of yūgen.

In the techniques used in the evocation of yūgen, there is a preoccupation with shades of darkness, with Thornbill declaring that “yūgen must in some fashion embody a light / dark dialectic” (Brandon 1997, p.40). The focus on darkness is reflected in the preference for suggestion, rather than the use of bold, unambiguous statement. Yūgen seeks to focus the reader/spectator on that which lies beyond the realm of the senses. By utilising darkness and suggestion, artists seek to bring the distant near, giving shape to the formless. There is also a sense in which the evocation of yūgen is attained by the hiding of the obvious and a certain austerity of means. As previously discussed, the defining of yūgen is nigh on impossible and therefore the use of imagery is of paramount significance in evoking an understanding of the aesthetic experience. An interpretation of these methods in light of the idea of ludic yūgen will be attempted further on when I come to the contemporaneous framing of the term.

Yūgen is characterized by the “the use of darkness to create stillness and tranquility and the utilisation of the technique of miegakure or avoidance of full
The artist seeking to evoke the feeling of yūgen utilises minimalist techniques and offers a silhouette of obliquity, preferring to suggest and hint at the mystery of things rather than indulge in the bold direct statement or obvious line. Darkness is of paramount importance in the palette of yūgen and is an acknowledgement of the unknown, unseen and unspoken that yūgen arises from and gives rise to.

In Zen garden design,

the most prevalent element of yūgen . . . is the use of miegakure, or ‘hide and reveal’, where the whole garden is not shown through a window, just a small piece. Or a bend in the path offers just the barest of hints of what waits around the corner. The play of shadows on the garden is another display of yūgen ‘darkness’. (Helpful Gardener 2003)

Miegakure is a technique of fragments, of partiality, of the incomplete; as such, it reflects our own relationship as individuals to the encompassing mystery of the unfathomable whole.

Recording is itself a field of artistic endeavor to which miegakure is integral, for recording deals with acousmatic sound. Acousmatic is defined by Schaeffer as “a sound which is heard without its cause or source being seen”, and Chion elaborates that “Radio, phonograph, telephone, all of which transmit sounds without showing their emitter, are acousmatic media by definition” (1994, p.71). Recording is a medium of the unseen, and entails an intrinsic mystery as to the source of sounds as heard by the audience. In the evocation of yūgen, recording is an ideal form of expression, as it possesses an integral potential to heighten the apprehension of the unknown, bypassing the logical faculty of the mind in the sheer immediacy of its affects.
The techniques practiced in the arts of yūgen involve “obfuscation, shadow, partial reflections and the silhouette of ideas . . . . Yūgen involves vagary, but a vagary that points to the profound” (Silman 2000). In pursuit of yūgen, artists are impelled to use the moment and the fragment, but this is no aimless fracturing of time and space in hope of conjuring the infinite. At their core, the techniques of yūgen are concerned with reflecting the very mystery and vastness of being, and such a task necessitates the embrace of the amorphous. Artists have relied upon the oblique approach utilised traditionally in the arts of yūgen, a tendency revealed in the following characterization of yūgen taken from the field of landscape architecture, which states that yūgen "does not let one see where it leads; it gives subtly to the scenery, increases its ramifications, creates a sense of seclusion and depth, and prevents the visitor from taking in everything at one glance" (Yang 1982, p.75). There is here the recognition of the partial and the mystery, reflecting again the very real fact of the human experience of yūgen as the intuition of the cosmic whole and our incapacity to grasp such immensity.

Given the difficulty of directly describing the feelings emanating from yūgen, it is obvious in the work of visual artists and poets that the symbolic use of imagery is essential in the attempt to evoke yūgen. Odin states that yūgen is manifested in moments where “ethereal phenomena gradually fade into the surrounding void of mystery and darkness” (2001, p.23), these moments captured through the employment of “poetic images of dim shadows and twilight darkness” (Odin 2001, p.247). Some images through which the aesthetic of yūgen has been illustrated include:

- out in the distant water some ships hidden behind a far-off island (Watts 2009)
- wild geese suddenly seen and then lost in the clouds (Watts 2009)
- sun sinking behind a flower-clad hill (Zeami 2014)
to wander on and on in a huge forest without thought of return (Zeami 2014)

a thin cloud veiling the moon or by autumn mist swathing the scarlet leaves on a mountainside (de Bary 1964, p.279)

the shadow of a cloud momentarily before the moon, and an echo of a softly flowing brook (Upton 1968, p.v)

huts being encroached upon by dusk, the enveloping of mountains by mist, the obscuring of the moon by clouds, the fading of people into the shadows (ExEAS 2012)

The manifestation of yūgen in imagery relies upon the intuition of the evanescence of natural phenomena and the transient solidity of all things before they are swallowed by the void at the heart of the living mystery. This imagery is used to suggest the depth and mystery that adheres in the aesthetic, and in light of the previous discussion of the difficulty of directly expressing yūgen in words, it is no surprise to find that “exponents of the principle of yūgen exalt the exceptional significance of the mask, symbol, metaphor, and aesthetic suggestion” (Andrijauskas 2001, p.371).

There is a disavowal of the obvious in the techniques of yūgen, which can lead to a refusal to be pinned down to a singular field of meaning. This is evidenced by the technique of omission in medieval poetry, outlined by Keene (1993), who relates that “to achieve (yūgen), words were sometimes omitted from poems, even words necessary for comprehension, and the difficulty of the poem that resulted was justified in terms of the elusive depths hinted at by the ambiguity” (Wilson 2011). Ambiguity is a means to hint at the mystery that yūgen seeks to evoke, and the technique of omission can be seen as akin to Mayada’s earlier description of yūgen as a “negative experience” (1991, p.34). It is significant that what is not said or shown can be used to evoke the quality of
yūgen and it is worth noting that “the artist needs to highlight his unique relationship with the work of art and by means of an imperceptible stroke, suggestive detail, or symbol just barely reveal a hidden aspect of beauty” (Andrijauskas 2001, p.371).

The artist must explore their own unique techniques and ways of working in a medium or with a form in order to “barely reveal” a glimmer of the yūgen aesthetic. Traditionally, the magnitude of the truths which yūgen points towards were hinted at, rather than nakedly revealed through the use of bombast and direct reference, which is, in any case, beyond possibility. In yūgen, no spotlights are used, for the shadow is the thing.

In summation, I can say that the traditional techniques used in the literary, performing and fine arts of medieval Japan to evoke the aesthetic experience of yūgen involved images of darkness, shadows and the unknown, the technique of miegakure (hiding then revealing), omission of parts of the whole and a sparseness of means. The artist was also expected to cultivate a unique approach to the creative act, borne of the individual differences in the varieties of experience that constitute the moments of yūgen. This broad outline of traditional techniques reveals that the emphasis on darkness in yūgen presents an opportunity as to how this darkness might be construed in preparation for an investigation of the translation of the aesthetic of yūgen into the methods of ludic yūgen in the art of recording. In the playful tweaking of Thornbill’s (1997) position that “yūgen embodies the nonduality of principle (symbolically represented by darkness) and phenomena” (p.40), it is to the positive connotations of darkness I now turn.
The Ecstatic Mystery of Darkness

In this section, I investigate the modern connotations of darkness and how we might perceive the idea of darkness in another light. This lays important foundations for developing the concept of ludic yūgen, which I shall come to in due course. There are problematic connotations of darkness for the modern audience, particularly in the West. In a context where, for most Western audiences, darkness evokes annihilation and death, not mystery, I need to elucidate the potential of mystery as an idea to be embraced playfully in a joyful spirit, as an aesthetic of delight and rapture. Brandon encapsulates the difficulties of attempting to contemporise the aesthetic of yūgen when he writes that “yūgen . . . is not a viable component in 20th century Western works of art because they are overwhelmingly dark in tone and portray darkness as wholly evil, whereas yūgen arises out of a dark-light dialectic in performance” (Brandon 1997, p.7).

In an age of dominant secular humanism, in which the self is presented as the only measure of being in the universe, the darkness (and non-dualism) which is so much a part of yūgen has come to represent absence, oblivion and death, and all the existential crises attendant to those tropes. Darkness, Thornbill writes, “has come to signify the finality of death, the annihilation of self and existence” and no longer evokes “the allure of the infinite” (Thornbill 1997, p.57-58)

Brandon insists on the dark-light dialectic as being a dynamic process integral to the yūgen aesthetic, and goes further on to say that yūgen is not just a general transcendental experience, but one of a particular kind that depends upon positive connotations of darkness, connotations which were present in Buddhism and in Taoism of medieval Japan but are not present in modern life. (1997, p.7)
We are, in short, afraid of the dark and what it represents for us. That ‘positive connotations of darkness . . . were present in Buddhism and in Taoism’ was in part due to the fact that, as LaFleur explains,

the languages of China and Japan have a greater facility for expressing the mutuality and balance between what is and what is not: they are not as intrinsically tilted toward defining being as real and nonbeing as a privation. As languages, they do not give the benefit to the being side of things” (1983, p.103).

The people of China and Japan could hold the seemingly contradictory notions of being and non-being in mind simultaneously and their language reflected this capability. This leads us back to the idea of darkness representing the non-duality of existence and non-existence, in which being and non-being interpenetrate one other and co-exist in the realm of yūgen. Thornbill elaborates on this aspect of non-dualism, stating that

in traditional yūgen, darkness symbolizes both the intuitive and a higher plane of being. . . . Yūgen is not merely an aesthetic preference for dark over light. Rather, it is a dynamic process by which one is propelled into obscurity, potentially entering a realm that transcends light and darkness. (Thornbill 1997, p.59)

Thornbill goes on to acknowledge that “an aesthetic (yūgen) based on a dialectic of light and darkness, the visible and the invisible, has quite a different meaning in the 20th century than in medieval Japan” (Thornbill 1997, p.57-58) and he sees this difference as primarily due to the fact that the “allure of the invisible as a realm of greater, not lesser, meaning is lost, as the discourse of truth, being and existence becomes merely a discourse of the describable” (p.57-58). The contemporary focus on banal empiricism as
an all-encompassing explanation for being has bleached the brightness out of the dark, rendering the invisible, indescribable and unseen realms unfit for thought, having no immediate utility. We seem to no longer have the ability of the medieval artist and thinker to embrace the potential of darkness as a symbolic tool to liberate us from dualistic thought and lead us beyond ourselves and the confines of the conceptual mind.

It is possible, some scholars argue, that the darkness of yūgen can be updated and made relevant to the contemporary world. Thornbill calls for artists to “utilize modes of expression that somehow negate these newly constricting conceptions of darkness, or that operate on entirely different terms” (p.57-58), which can be read as calling for a return to the non-dualism of the darkness of yūgen, in which being and non-being co-exist in a dynamic process that takes us beyond the notion of darkness as the frightening void in which we cease to have a self. Thornbill is supported in his argument by Odin (2001), who writes that the yūgen aesthetic of medieval Japan was never an aesthetic of “reclusion, withdrawal, rejection and isolation” but instead is “an aesthetics of ecstasy, rapture and delight of events observed through disinterested contemplation of beauty, which affirms the intrinsic value of things just as they are in the hidden depths of their emptiness/suchness” (p.120-121). This recognition of yūgen as an aesthetic characterized by reveling in the positive connotations of darkness, of ecstasy in darkness, is reinforced by Alan Watts’ reminder that “Zen takes ‘positive delight’ in the void” (Watts 1958, p.10).

Here I am taking decisive steps towards a playful handling of the yūgen aesthetic, towards the core creative practice of this research, to which I give the designation ‘ludic yūgen’. No longer is darkness to be feared as the symbolic extinction of self; indeed, I am moving towards an apprehension of the darkness of yūgen as a realm where being and non-being co-exist and interpenetrate, and an aesthetic space in
which I might gleefully romp through all the dualisms of creation and take delight in the groundless ground I find myself on. As I move towards the methods of ludic yūgen, it is helpful to note the ideas of Japanese theatre director Suzuki Tadashi, who writes that

audiences cannot be expected to be entertained by a theatrical form that does not acknowledge three areas of fascination…in contemporary society: speed, technology and diversity. . . . Noh can appeal to the spirit . . . but not in terms of the ancient forms in which it is cast. (Brandon 1997, p.190-191)

Suzuki is here writing about the Noh theatre, but the point is valid for all forms of artistic expression in the contemporary moment. I agree thoroughly that the ‘ancient’ aesthetic of yūgen can appeal to the spirit of a modern audience, but only if the practicing contemporary artist uses methods imbued with the three ‘areas of fascination’ (speed, technology and diversity) that Suzuki identifies. I am now ready to develop a deeper elucidation of ludic yūgen as a set of methods to be used in the practice of recording music. These methods arise from a playful approach to the traditional ideas and techniques used by artists and described by scholars seeking to express and explicate the aesthetic of yūgen.

**Ludic Yūgen: From Aesthetic to Method**

This section outlines the transformation of the aesthetic of yūgen into the methods of ludic yūgen. This transformation entails an examination of the idea of play – the ludic – as it relates to creativity, and specifically to musical creativity as practiced in the art of recording. Recording is posited as a potent, highly ludic activity, for which the methods of ludic yūgen are compatible. These methods of ludic yūgen are then detailed, as they are enacted in the art of recording. Finally, I expand the notion of “anti-production” (Bennett 2010) and how it relates to the methods of ludic yūgen. A case is
made for the emergence of the recordist as specific type of artist and how ludic yūgen relates to such an idea.

In the definitive text dealing with the philosophy and history of play, entitled *Homo Ludens (A Study of the Play element in Culture)*, Huizinga (1949) makes the case for the integral, indeed primal, place of play in the human experience. He claims that “play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play” (Huizinga, p.3). Huizinga reiterates his plea for the recognition of play in the development of the human realm when he writes that “law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primeval soil of play. Genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilization” (Huizinga 1949, p.5). The ludic is the essence of the human being and the worlds we have wrought. Huizinga (1949) characterises play as “contain(ing) tension, mirth, fun . . . (it) is irrational, voluntary, superfluous . . . play is free: it is, in fact, freedom” (ibid). Play is “distinct from ‘ordinary’ life both as to locality and duration”, being both secluded and limited, and is “enchanting (and) captivating” (ibid, p.10). Play is invested with the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things: rhythm and harmony, and it is here that Huizinga hints at the importance of play to music, and music to play. Scholars of aesthetics and creativity can learn much from Huizinga’s description of play, for his discussion of play in terms of tension, poise, balance, contrast, variation, solution and resolution reveals that play and, consequently, aesthetics are borne of the same womb.

In tracing the origins of play, Huizinga (1949) cites Frobenius’ compelling theory as to how ritual came to be in the world of ancient man, stating that “the experience of life and nature, still unexpressed, takes the form of a ‘seizure’ - being seized on, thrilled, enraptured” (p.16). Frobenius imagines the man of prehistory
becoming gripped by “the revelation of fate . . . by the reality of the natural rhythm of
genesis and extinction - this leads him to represent his emotion in an act - a necessary
mental process of transformation” (p.16-17). The act Frobenius refers to is the invention
of ritual. Enthralled man, becoming aware of the cycles of life, of the rhythms and
harmonies of days and nights, begins to perform ritual to express that awareness and
emotion. As time moves on, “the thrill of ‘being seized’ by the phenomena of life and
nature is condensed by reflex action . . . to poetic expression and art” (p. 16-17).
Seizure becomes ritual, transforming emotion and awareness to action. From the
vantage point of the conceptual framework of this research, Frobenius’ notion of ‘being
seized’ sounds remarkably similar to the description of yūgen as “an awareness of the
universe triggering feelings too deep for words” (Rheingold 1988, p.85). I might take
the liberty of saying that for Frobenius, the feeling of yūgen inexorably leads to the
creation of ritual; being ‘seized’ by cosmic awareness is the precursor to all rituals of
creation, especially play, from which, as Huizinga would have it, all else evolves. For
Frobenius, there was only one source of true creativity. He writes that the “creative
faculty in a people as in the child or every creative person, springs from this state of
being seized” (ibid, p.16), and, in Huizinga’s assessment, there is no more apposite
description of the “process of creative imagination” (ibid, p.16), a process which
functions essentially at the level of the poetic, as a consequence of play. The creative
imagination is the quintessence of the ludic impulse.

All attempts at the definition of music’s nature and function revolve around this
core of ludicity, whether stated directly or obliquely alluded to. For Huizinga (1949),
music is the “highest and purest expression of the facultas ludendi / the ability to play”
(p.187), music and play sharing that space beyond the realm of practical reason, where
necessity, utility, duty and truth do not hold sway. In Huizinga’s conception, the values
of rhythm and harmony transcend logic and all ideas of the visible and the tangible. Poetry and music share the ludic values of rhythm and harmony, but the poet traffics in language and therefore strays into the world of ideation and judgement. It is only music that never departs from the sphere of pure play (Huizinga 1949). This umbilical connection between music and play accounts for the depth of our response to music, for as Huizinga states, “All true ritual is sung, danced and played…in feeling music, we feel ritual” (Huizinga 1949, p.158). Music is a field of endeavour steeped in ritual, sprung from play and inescapably entwined with the spirit of yūgen and the practice of recording, as we shall see next.

As play is the essence of music, the art of recording music is a field in which the methods of ludic yūgen are apposite and organic to the medium. The art of recording invites play; it is a ludic activity at its core. As Kesting (1993) adjudges in his book on Callas, “the record is the ideal medium for the art of sound play” (p.67), potentially making the recording studio the ultimate ludic space. Anyone familiar with the modern digital audio workstation must recognise that it allows for playing with sound in an infinite number of ways. It offers a vast canvas for sonic play, in which the characteristics of play (tension, poise, balance, contrast, variation, solution and resolution) can be explored. It must be acknowledged that while I might describe the studio as a ludic utopia, in actuality, the process of recording can be very dry and serious, for often artists, engineers and producers are capturing performances for posterity, under pressures of commerce and constrained by time. However, the process of recording in a studio is potentially playful, if the activity is approached in a ludic way. It has been argued that studios are “configured to facilitate – or unfacilitate – particular kinds of work” (Bates 2012), and the ludic recordist is encouraged to create a space conducive to play through pursuing the idiosyncratic accumulation of instruments
and equipment. Ultimately, the degree to which any studio is a ludic space depends on the orientation, attitude and aims of the recordist involved.

The studio as ludic space is deeply congruent with Huizinga’s (1949) depiction of play as having “a closed space . . . marked out for it, either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings. Inside this space the play proceeds, inside it the rules obtain” (p.14). Bates (2012) defines project studios as “acoustic environments isolated from various perceived outsides”, and this characterisation reinforces the notion that the recording studio is marked as occupying a clearly defined, isolated space wherein rituals of play occur. This play can be said to give the studio a sense of being sacred space, for as Huizinga reminds us, “sacrament and mystery presuppose a hallowed spot. . . . There is no distinction whatever between marking out a space for a sacred purpose and marking it out for purposes of sheer play” (ibid, p.20) Here Huizinga solidifies the alliance between play and the sacred, and it is fair to say that the studio can be a playground for the recordist possessed of a playful spirit. For Huizinga, play is a spiritual act: for musician Robert Pollard, “making records is a spiritual thing” (Woodworth 2006, p.158). The recording studio “shape(s) the kinds of musical and social practices that can transpire within” (Bates 2012), and the studio of the ludic recordist is a space where play and the spiritual are entwined, each becoming the other. In ludic yūgen, the studio of the recordist operates as the site of this nexus of play and spirit, becoming an “active agent in the process of recording production” (Bates 2012), a facilitator of the ludic moment(s) that constitute the art of recording.
Ludic Yūgen and The Art of Recording: Methods

In this section, I seek to elucidate appropriate methods for the practice of recording in the spirit of ludic yūgen. The digital processing of the audio signal in recording reveals itself to be a fecund field for the application of playful methods derived from techniques traditionally used by artists attempting to evoke the feeling of yūgen.

One such technique used primarily in the design of Japanese landscape (or Zen) gardens is that of miegakure, which is best translated as hide and reveal. There is a philosophical sense in which miegakure is integral to the art of recording, simply because the instrument is several steps removed from the audience – it is hidden and revealed, for example, in that an electric guitarist creates and controls an electric signal, and the ensuing sounds produced depend on the capacities/interactions of the preamplifier/amplifier: essentially the instrument is used as a means of generating and manipulating electronic sounds (Gracyk 1996, p.74-75). The original audio signal is hidden but its effect is revealed and magnified, and miegakure becomes a simultaneous rather than a linear procession.

When I apply my ludic mind to the idea of miegakure, possible methods for use in the practice of recording suggest themselves immediately. The first of these practical methods is the application of distortion to the incoming audio signal. Each or all instruments – guitar, drums, bass and voice – are subject to distortion merely by fact of journey through a microphone and/or mixer on their way to the Digital Audio Workstation (hereafter abbreviated as DAW) which is housed in a computer. Once the audio is ‘in the box’, once it has entered the recording track in the DAW, further
distortions can be applied by way of plug-ins, these being software specifically designed to modify the tone and timbre of sound.

Distortion is a mixture of the original audio and the overdriven or otherwise manipulated signal, and as such, is a definitive instance of miegakure, as the original audio is hidden and yet revealed simultaneously. Mixing is the conglomerate of processes involved in combining all recorded tracks into a final sonic outcome, and offers further possibilities for the use of the technique of miegakure, as tracks can be dropped in or out, volumes lowered and raised and tracks and sections of tracks can be made to hide, reveal themselves, disappear and reappear in endless combinations. A specific type of distortion that may be effective in evoking a sense of yūgen is the use of a glitch-generating plug-in on the voice, cutting the audio in small pieces and manipulating these pieces through a variety of sonic effects. The audio of the sung lyric is alternately hidden and revealed, resulting in semantic meaning being frustrated and an air of mystery as to what is precisely being sung and what such interrupted vocalising might be alluding to. Other instruments may also be glitched.

The emphasis on shadows and darkness is another major element in the evocation of the yūgen aesthetic. Possible studio methods to be used in recording which might reflect this emphasis are those of delay and reverb, in which the sound is manipulated by repetition, elongation and placement in artificial acoustic space. The use of these techniques is, according to Doyle, “rock’n’roll’s fundamental spatial production insight – the idea that sonic spatiality might be rendered in any way musicians and producers chose” (Doyle 2004). I am playing here with the reflections of sound, the magnifications of sonic nuance and the creation of sonic shadows and dark spaces in which a sound lives, decays and dies. How a sound is made to live in various spaces, for various lengths of time and the manner in which it decays and dies
(commonly referred to as the ‘envelope’ of a sound) offer us intriguing possibilities for a plethora of playful manipulations, and lies firmly in the tradition of popular music recording.

One striking image that evokes yūgen is that of “wandering on and on in a huge forest with no thought of return” (Zeami 2014), and this image suggests the practice of improvisation, defined here as composition in real-time. Improvisation involves a lack of pre-meditation, an absence of an overall plan with primacy given to ‘in-the-moment’ play, and offers the recordist the experience of working with the intense momentary interweaving of colliding sonic lines. The actions and reactions of the improvising recordist occur in a space of sublime ludicity, as tracks are layered upon each other in the creation of a piece of music, each interaction being a sequence of moments of play captured as they happen.

The important point to acknowledge here is that in the methods of ludic yūgen, I am playing with these techniques. To be playing a musical instrument by ear is defined in part as “to proceed instinctively or step by step according to results” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary 1976, p.845) and in the practice of multi-track recording such playing is integral to the process. Play is the essence of recording, and hence recording is a field in which the methods of ludic yūgen are organic to the medium. The art of recording invites play; it is a ludic activity at its core. These techniques are not prescriptive nor are they dogmatic; they do not represent immutable laws of practice. In playing in the spirit of ludic yūgen, I may abandon, reverse or make perverse these techniques.

It could be argued that yūgen is an aesthetic of fragments, of moments, of omissions, of a flash igniting the night and then swallowed by the dark. It follows that
the practice of recording music is a fertile artistic activity in which to exercise the methods of ludic yūgen as they are outlined here. In the process of recording, fragments and moments are captured as tracks that can then be manipulated in endless combination; the use of omission is central to the art. Omission is a central technique in the evocation of yūgen (Wilson 2011) and this is analogous to the playful hiding of parts and editing of the whole that recording involves. I can extend the playful method of omission to the central composition form of popular music, that of the song. Songs traditionally have a variety of forms, but the most common is that comprising a verse, chorus and bridge structure. By the omission of all or part of that structure, or perhaps ignoring such considerations altogether, the recordist may come closer to working in the spirit of ludic yūgen.

Allied closely to the idea of omission in the evocation of yūgen is the traditional sparseness of means that is intrinsic to the aesthetic of yūgen. A fetish for limitations is essential to the yūgen aesthetic. In the contemporary age of recording, the limiting of options becomes imperative to the recordist using the methods of ludic yūgen. The DAW of today’s recording studio offers endless permutations in a customised modular digital environment. The choice of instrumentation, effects, and editing tools is overwhelming in its breadth. Ludic yūgen acknowledges the fecundity of opportunity that the DAW offers, but is aware simultaneously of the potentially paralysing effect of infinite choice on the creative mind. Therefore, in ludic yūgen, there are limitations on instrumentation – perhaps only combinations of guitar, bass, drums and vocals are used. In the DAW, a minimal number of tracks are to be used. Similarly, in the digital processing of audio signals, ludic yūgen prefers the use of minimal plug-ins and effects.

In regards to the endless capacity for redo of takes and reiterations of performance, ludic yūgen prizes working with single takes, often first takes – there is no
compiling of the best parts of individual performances (referred to as ‘comping’) and the copy and paste potentialities of the digital realm are curtailed. This is not to say that the methods of ludic yūgen favour the documenting of live performance with little or no alteration. Ludic yūgen uses methods that encourage the recording of raw energy, unmediated performance and subconscious utterance. The resulting tracks are then subject to minimal interference, but not in any pursuit of purity, perfection and clarity. Mistakes are cherished and enshrined in pride of place. Post-performance editing is allowed but not mandatory. Each individual piece (or song) dictates how much editing is needed. Ludic yūgen understands it is vital to know when to leave well alone and when substantial shaping of a performance is warranted.

The equation of yūgen as the progression from “clarity to obscurity to interpenetration” (Thornbill 1997) offers us a method for use in recording in which I playfully abandon the idea of linear progress, in the sense I am not moving from clarity through obscurity to interpenetration, but rather I am experiencing clarity, obscurity and interpenetration simultaneously, as recording can capture these qualities at once, sonically. For example, the clarity of a percussion or bass track mingles with the obscurity of a processed guitar and vocal and interpenetration beyond duality is achieved. It is not a linear process but one that happens all at once. This is a method of ludic yūgen to be explored in the practice of recording.

Closely related to these notions of clarity and obscurity is the playing with the dialectic of light and darkness that is essential to the aesthetic of yūgen. The contemporary ludic turn I am exploring in the art of recording would involve an expansion of this dialectical play to include playing with all manner of pairs of opposites and other dialectic relationships to be rendered in sound. Some possibilities include high / low (pitch and culture), fast / slow, old / new, male / female, rough /
smooth and good / evil. All these binary formations are fecund concepts which a playful creative mind can apply to exploring the tensions and contradictions inherent in language. It is how these ideas are reflected in the practice of recording that will go some way to exemplifying this as a method of ludic yūgen.

There is a sense in which the darkness of yūgen can also suggest ignorance. I can extrapolate this notion to suggest how ignorance can lead to playfulness in the practice of recording. This moves us towards a ludicity based in an ignorance that can take many forms. There is the ignorance of musical notation, resulting in an entirely sonically-based approach to recording music, a focus on material in the concrete. The illiterate, self-taught musician does not understand the tradition of Western notation and practices the art of recording entirely from the vantage point of how music sounds, being unconcerned with the transcription of the musical event and its representation as a system of markings on paper. This sound-based approach to recording may result in unexpected combinations of key signatures, rhythmic configurations and melodic invention as the illiterate recordist does not recognize the ‘rules’ of common musical practice as it exists in the Western written tradition. The ludic recordist views music not in terms of notes or pitch or harmonic relationship, but instead sees music as textures and rhythms, as frequencies, lines, tracks and blocks of sound to be played with. The recordist adheres to the maxim that how music sounds is inseparable from what it is.

In playing with the material of music, rather than the theory of music, I find I might need a different vocabulary. In the seminal text The Poetics of Rock, Zak (2001) designates five broad categories to “represent all of the sound phenomena found on records: 1) musical performance, 2) timbre, 3) echo, 4) ambience (reverb) and 5) texture” (p.49). Of these categories, texture (that quality of composite sound images created by the interaction of diverse elements) is the most important as it is the result of
all other ingredients. It is the aggregated sonic quality of a recording, and textural depth is developed by any combination of elements that differ from one another in some way. This emphasis and acknowledgement of texture as the primary quality of a recording is analogous to a painter believing that the pigment is more important than the line. When texture is paramount in the sonic hierarchy, the materiality of sound is to the fore. Excessive theory will never compensate for dull sonic textures.

The ignorance of commonly accepted practice, in relation to composition and traditional music theory, extends to the recording process itself, a method defined by Bennett (2010) as "anti-production – the use of unorthodox recording and production techniques that go completely against what is, and has been, considered engineering protocol" (p.243). Bennett further characterizes ‘anti-production’ as “the sound of aggressive spatial positioning and mix technique, with rough edges and noisy moments, devoid of the perfection, clarity and polish so associated with technology-driven productions” (p.244). Within this blindness to the learned axioms and storied wisdom of commercially successful record producers, there would seem here to be a focus of the capturing of the raw energy of a performance and an abandonment of the tropes of perfection and clarity. This liberates the recordist from having to aim for some flawless sonic nirvana, and instead unleashes untold potential for the playful creative employment of ‘unorthodox’ techniques, including those methods designated here as the methods of ludic yūgen.

In a ludic twist, I might extend the idea of anti-production to encompass ignoring the goal of production itself. Anti-production might not be concerned with production at all. Could anti-production be seen as a method/ethos that is focused solely on process? The methods of ludic yūgen in the studio are used in the process of recording, and the resulting artifact is merely the by-product of the process, for I am
playing, and the process of play has no purpose. It is pointless but significant. Tied up with this is the breeching of the traditional division of labour in the recording studio, which would often see the musicians performing, the engineers capturing the performance on disc or tape, and the producer overseeing and intervening in that process when necessary. In ludic yūgen, these roles are not to be seen as exclusive, as recordists are able to simultaneously embody each role in their practice. The distinctions between musician, producer and engineer blur as boundaries are crossed, and lines of demarcation severed and erased.

This is an extension of the ethos of anti-production into the realm of ludic yūgen, which is against the notion of a separate role for the producer. It is not merely anti-production, but it is a way of thinking about recording that acknowledges the historical development of a certain species of recording artist whose practice and artistry is intrinsically holistic. The practice of a recordist encompasses writing, performance, and engineering, all of which are tasks that might be undertaken by a traditional record producer. As Zak states, “Recordists learn to engineer their sounds as part of a comprehensive compositional practice that includes writing and performing” (Cook 2009, p.76).

Bennett (2010) points to another characteristic of anti-production as being “the use of technological precursors to current systems” (p.3) and it might be useful to consider the issue of instrumentation in recording as an example. Anti-production mainly refers to the technology of recording, particularly focusing on analog recording equipment, rather than any emphasis on instrumentation. However, there is a case for considering the use of precursor instruments as belonging to a strand of the anti-production methodology. I am thinking here mainly of the employment of the
traditional rock instruments of guitar, bass, drums and vocals as representing precursors to the keyboard-based, sample-reliant modules of the current digital studio.

An illustration as to how the methods of ludic yūgen might be applied to studio practice is to consider a well-worn metaphor often applied to the art of multi-track recording. Multi-track recording is that process where individual tracks are recorded separately and layered onto each other to create a musical piece. Producer and musician Daniel Lanois (Smeaton, King and O’Connor 2001) talks about recording a song and compares it to building a house, laying the foundations (drums) first and building everything around that. This is a common practice among record producers and there is truth to the analogy. What the methods of ludic yūgen outlined above emphasise is that there are so many different types of houses that can be built and an unlimited range of creative architectural options available to the builder. We do not all need to live in rectangular brick constructions – ludic yūgen asks what does a tree house sound like? How can I build a subterranean bunker and flood it with natural light? What about a house that is half-ruined, abandoned, and incomplete – does that not suggest a more mysterious story, leaving more questions than answers? The methods of ludic yūgen encourage the building of a unique sonic dwelling on each occasion of recording.

Conclusion

In this conceptual framework, I have explored the evolution of the aesthetic of yūgen. I have ventured into the philosophical and religious climate in which the notion was born and flourished, and touched upon the metaphysical qualities of yūgen. Traditional creative techniques for the evocation of yūgen have been detailed, as has the necessity for a contemporary rebirth of yūgen as an aesthetic force in 21st century artistic practice. The playful methods of ludic yūgen, derived from historical
techniques, have come into focus as the guiding principle behind the practice of recording as undertaken in this research. The next stage of the writing is concerned with locating the practice in a lineage. The idea of ludic yūgen is a new designation but it will be shown that many recordists throughout the history of popular and marginal music have been utilising similar methods to those of ludic yūgen. Ludic yūgen will be revealed as an unacknowledged tradition in the art of recording, a set of methods to which I am giving a name.
CHAPTER 2
LOCATION IN A LINEAGE

Ludic yūgen is a set of methods derived from the aesthetic of yūgen, and in the history of recording popular music, there are many examples of artists utilising the methods of ludic yūgen. Artists often employ one or some of these methods, without ever referring to the process as ludic yūgen: a core innovation of this research is giving a name to these methods. In this section, I firstly locate of the lineage of the ludic recordist in the genre of rock musicians operating as studio artists. I then explore the emergence of a new category of artist, known as the recordist. These sonic mavericks are integral to the idea of a lineage of recording practice that evinces the use of the methods of ludic yūgen. The history of creative recording is replete with recordists whose approach to the process of recording encompassed many of the methods I call ludic yūgen. The philosophical position that underpins the ludic yūgen approach to recording is the idea that the art of recording music is foremost an art of sound play.

The ludic approach to music is explored, and I elaborate on how playing with the material of sound is the true activity of ludic yūgen, and why the conventional scholastic emphasis on written notation, technique and virtuosity holds no sway in the studios of ludic yūgen. Mistakes, ignorance, spontaneity and the insistence on capturing songs in natal form have a special relevance in the studios of the ludic recordist, and these facets of ludic yūgen are explored in detail below. I investigate the studio as the central creative space of ludic yūgen, and delve into the importance of humour to the recordist working with the methods of ludic yūgen. I then move on to reveal the history of the methods of ludic yūgen in popular music recording. The methods of miegakure, omission and improvisation are examined, as are the exploration of shadows and
darkness and playing with dialectical binaries, contradictions and paradox. I reveal the emphasis on the creation of novel textural combinations and the importance of limitations, these methods of ludic yūgen having all been employed by creative recordists in the production of popular music.

The Rock Musician as Ludic Recordist

In locating the methods of ludic yūgen as belonging to a tradition of popular music recording praxis, this research is focused on those artists best described as operating in the genre of rock music. Rock is here not restricted to blues-based forms but rather embraces all manner of creative music of the broadest variety that has electric guitars, drums and vocals as basic instruments and the recording studio as the key technological site of praxis. In this formulation, rock music can be seen as encompassing any genre of studio-based sonic art that evinces the creative use of percussion and amplified stringed instruments.

There are two prime reasons for locating the methods of ludic yūgen in the rock tradition. Firstly, rock music has at its core the search for novel textures and modes of expression (Gracyk 1996), and this tendency to pursue the sonically new is primarily undertaken in the studio environment where, relieved of the pressure to perform and reproduce commercially successfully sounds, the recordist is able to play within the studio, following their instincts towards original creation. Rock is a musical practice that has, at least since The Beatles’ retreat to the studio, essentially been a recording art. The studio is at the centre of the creative work in rock (Gracyk 1996), as will be revealed by the examination below of the work and words of artists such as The Beatles, Public Enemy, Robert Pollard, The Breeders, Radiohead, Brian Eno, David Bowie and
others. Secondly, rock music as a genre is not bound by any proscription of musicians untutored in the common practice tradition, or lacking in technical virtuosity (Tamm 2005); in fact, rock as a wide genre is populated by auto-didact musicians whose very lack of training does not prejudice them against the adoption of creative methods, such as those of ludic yūgen.

In situating the methods of ludic yūgen in the rock tradition, the ludic recordist is shown to be a dominant strand of praxis that has flourished within the broad expanse of the rock genre, and it is a creative arena in which the methods of ludic yūgen can be seen as intrinsic to the art form. I will now go on to describe a specific kind of rock musician whose praxis illustrates concisely the lineage of recording artists employing some, if not all, of the methods of ludic yūgen.

The Recordist – New Taxonomy

In locating the methods of yūgen in a lineage of practice, it is imperative that an understanding is first established as to the emergence of a certain strand of recording artist. The term ‘recordist’ encompasses the overlapping of the roles of “songwriters, arrangers, performers, engineers, and producers” (Zak 2001, xii). They perform, record and engineer their own recordings; they are at once musician, producer and engineer. The recordist confounds the notion of musician and producer as fulfilling separate roles, an idea described by Lin as a “trite occupational distinction, something that hip-hop, electronic, dub, and avant-garde artists had in fact been obscuring for decades” (Lin 2010, p.28). These studio-centric genres of music have seen the engineer/producer/performer distinctions collapse, merging into a singular practice undertaken by the individual artist. Brian Eno has stated that the idea of the “producer as someone who mediates and converses between the completely non-technical
musician and the completely non-artistic engineer . . . is now dead because most musicians now occupy all three of those roles to some extent‖ (Cunningham 1998, p.378-379).

The appearance of the solo recordist is tied up with the advent of available technology and a simplification of the recording process as it became visible on the digital platforms of the personal computer. Eno believes that as computers have allowed musicians to “increase their familiarisation with studio practices and the technology behind the recording process . . . the traditional producer is gradually becoming a thing of the past”. This situation, he says, was “triggered by the introduction of MIDI” (p.378-379). In the late 1980s, the previously analog process of recording began to be translated into a digitally modeled environment, and computers and screens appeared in the recording studio. In tracing the development of the Jamaican recording industry, Hitchins states that 1992 marked the beginning of the shift from the “serial multi-track recording model” to the presently dominant computer-based recording model, “where musical elements are derived from samples, electronic instruments and microphones, but captured as digital sound files that can be manipulated using cut and paste editing” (Hitchins 2014, p.9). This shift to digital technologies has since accelerated and the result is the contemporary moment where the recording process is now available to anyone with access to a personal computer, some ancillary software and equipment and a working knowledge of the technology. As the technology of MIDI and home computing became available and more affordable, the solo recordist became a more common phenomenon. Twenty-five or thirty years ago, the cost of establishing a typical recording studio, including a mixing desk, instruments, preamplifiers, amplifiers, microphones and sundry outboard devices such as reverb and delay units, would require a substantial investment to own and was
expensive to rent. The technology was large, heavy and somewhat arcane. The principle of the recording process in the analog and digital realms is similar, in that the signal of the performance(s) is captured and during mixing is altered to then arrive at a final output, but the revolution of digital recording allows for the whole process to take place in virtual space, meaning that a recordist might choose to use samples of existing performances and compose using MIDI interfaces into a sequencer, without the air being disturbed by any vibrating string, resonating membrane or stretched vocal cord. Alternatively, a recordist might construct a modular studio that takes in analog and digital equipment, creating a hybrid environment that encompasses both worlds.

The solo recordist is essentially an individual who is most comfortable in the studio environment and choses to work alone. Trent Reznor is a renowned example of the species, who

began and thrives as a lone musician/engineer, and has come to rank among studio-rat superstars such as Prince, Dr.Dre, Timbaland, and Brian Eno. . . . He embodies the shift from the twentieth-century commercial recording industry’s complex labor pool of songwriters, musicians, recording engineers, producers, and mixing professionals to the twenty-first century home-studio composer/musician/engineer. (Carr 2011, p.31)

‘Solo recordist’ is a more concise descriptive for the “twenty-first century home-studio composer /musician / engineer” (p.31) and this type of recording artist is present throughout the genres of popular music. I might note that Dr.Dre, Timbaland and Prince all produce work for collaboration and/or perform live for an audience. If I am to be fundamentalist about the definition, the solo recordist is an artist who rarely collaborates or performs ‘live’. Solo recordist ‘superstars’ rarely exist in any
mainstream sense, as solitude and obscurity are necessary to engender the climate in which the methods of ludic yūgen can flourish. The contemporary solo recordist is engaged in the art of recording and that is their primary focus. They may play many instruments or only the one (the studio as instrument). Their studio environment can be as simple as a single laptop or as intricately elaborate and vintage as a trust fund allows. They might be musically trained and base their work on the symphonic constructions of Romanticism, or they might depend solely on improvisations concocted from ignorance and angst. There are no formulae for the recordist to follow and, in ludic yūgen, an individual’s unique approach to the art of recording is considered the most valuable artistic currency to possess.

The true value of this designation of ‘recordist’ is that it allows us to describe a specific artistic activity and actor, where no such description has previously sufficed. Eno suggests that “music had a huge breakthrough in the 20th century, (and) the invention of the recording studio . . . made an entirely new art form” (Eno 2009). Eno laments the fact that “in music we still pretend to have the same name for people sitting in a hall playing instruments” when, in reality, “we've got an entirely new art form called recording”. Eno emphatically calls for new nomenclature, stating that “we shouldn't call this music anymore, we should give it another name, we should accept that is requires different skills, different people, different ways of listening, different understandings” (Eno 2009). This ‘other name’ given to the person employing the specific skills, methods and understandings of the studio art of recording is ‘solo recordist’. The implications and connotations of the term are manifold, but the essence might be suggested by the notion that a recordist inhabits a creative space where virtuosity is irrelevant and the chicanery of alchemical studio processes is encouraged without reserve. The recordist uses the studio as an instrument in and of itself, not
purely as a documenting apparatus for the preservation of some authentic moment. As Carr (2011) suggests, the solo recordist resides as “a new class of creative worker. . . . One that can run an entire studio alone and make quality recordings virtually unaided. . .

. The new, flexible, specialised, and independent musical labourers of the twenty-first century” (p.32). The methods of ludic yūgen are available to any solo recordist, and are part of a philosophical approach to making musical recordings that encompasses a focus on the materiality of sound and the championing of improvised and idiosyncratic creativity. In the immortal formulation of Noel Gallagher, music is described as being “in your . . . bones, man; it’s under your fingernails; play one chord on the guitar and you’re a musician” (Griffiths 2004, p.97). Gallagher’s axiom is altered through the filter of ludic yūgen to become the idea that if you record the sound of one chord and play with that sound in an interesting way, you have become a ludic recordist, but that is but one part of the story.

The Ludic Approach to Music

The recording process is ludic in nature, playfulness being intrinsic to the work of many recording artists. The ludic recordist views music not solely in terms of notes or pitch or harmonic relationship but rather sees and hears music as textures and rhythms; frequencies, lines, tracks, blocks of sound to be played with and manipulated. Fun and joy are the keystones of the ludic approach to recording music. Brian Eno, the producer and recording artist, has said baldly that “nearly all the things I do that are of any merit at all start off as just being good fun” (Tamm 1995, 77). Good fun – play – is open to anyone with access to the toys and the impulse to play. Tamm (1995) suggests that “part of the meaning of the rock tradition . . . has been its refusal to let arbitrary technical standards of musicianship interfere with the music-making process” (p.47).
and the methods of ludic yūgen are in line with this liberation, whilst not wishing to be confined to being part of the ‘rock’ tradition. A recordist does not need a certificate or diploma conferred by others in order to record, nor does a recordist need to align themselves with any tradition, rock or otherwise, in order to playfully explore the recording studio.

The recording process of Brian Wilson, particularly on sessions for what eventually became the SMiLE album, has been described as “defiantly anti-intellectual and of-the-moment”, as representing “a return to the pre-grammatical, non-linear and analogical (as opposed to logical) thinking of early childhood” (Heiser 2012). Meares (2005) writes that “the language of the playing child . . . shows abbreviations, it jumps, and it is not grammatical. It moves by analogy, resemblance, and other associations” (Heiser 2012, p.38). The recording of SMiLE is child-like in that it is non-linear and guided by contrasting resemblances and intuitive analogies. Essentially, SMiLE’s many musical and lyrical modules “are artefacts of play” (Heiser 2012, p.7). Wilson’s ludic sensibility is evidenced by the combining of “instrumental and vocal elements that are widely varied with respect to timbre and pitch range” resulting in “a plethora of sound densities”, and the recording process is characterized by Heiser as “a somewhat naïve and playful ongoing search for novel ways of recombining elements” (Heiser 2012, p.5-6).

Another Californian group characterised as being “more about play and a kind of spontaneity of attitude than self-conscious stabs at artistry” (Scanlan 2012, p.108) were the hard rock band Van Halen. The band exhibited a “childlike artlessness that combined the immediacy of the everyday with the ‘no-mind’ of Zen” (ibid, p.108). In the recording of Radiohead’s Kid A, “every member took on the role of Brian Eno in
Roxy Music: a non-musician producer/catalyst, abandoning their designated instrumental function and grappling with unfamiliar sound generation devices as if they were toys, playing music through a child-like lens” (Reynolds 2001). Charles Thompson, principal songwriter for the American band Pixies stresses that for all the horror and dread of the lyrical content of his songs, “there is no point” to the semantic meaning of the tunes; Thompson says the idea is “to experience it, to enjoy it, to be entertained by it.” (Sisaro 2006, p.4). Indeed, the singer laments the fact that contemporary rock musicians, singing from their hearts about important subjects, are “all too serious. And people totally miss out. They totally miss the fun, Jabberwocky fun with language, fun with poetry” (Sisaro 2006, p.73). The ‘Jabberwocky fun with language and poetry’ is exemplified by the recording of Song 2 by British band Blur. Singer Damon Albarn, having “finally figured out how to stop making sense (and) learning to tell new stories with fragments . . . came up with the lyrics . . . by shouting out whatever ‘subconscious stuff’ came into his head as the tape rolled” (Schuftan 2012, p.293 – 294). The lyrics of Song 2, spontaneously uttered against the backing tracks in the studio, are nonsensical and sung with passion. The potency of the recording lies in its sense of immediacy, the musical tracks extracting from Albarn some inspired vocalese drawn from his unguarded mind, free from narrative concerns and linear framing, the rhythmic propulsion of the music liberating the voice. This improvised playing with language is central to the methods of ludic yūgen.

An important aspect of the rock tradition (among countless other tributaries of musical history) that adheres in the methods of ludic yūgen is the casting aside of traditional music theory as any part of the creative process. I am here referring to music theory as taught in school: the fundamentals of notation and the principles of harmony, counterpoint, and voice-leading found in the so called ‘common practice’ period of
music history, essentially referring to the high European culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If, as MacDonald (2008) posits, that in popular music “technical expertise tends to produce either songs of lifeless textbook correctness or kitsch exhibitions of decorative pseudo-classicism” (p. 11), it follows that “invariably the most original pop songs have been written by artists cleaving to their own private ideals of musico-lyrical design” (p.11). Ludic yūgen demands an artist explore their own ways of working in the development of their aesthetic. The constrictions of music theory might be seen as inimical to the creative process of the recordist using the methods of ludic yūgen.

The history of popular music is replete with creative recordists who benefited from lacking a traditional education in music theory. The most famous of these were the songwriters Lennon and McCartney, who “had a wry disregard for education and training, shunning technical knowledge in the fear that it would kill their spontaneity and tame them into sounding like everyone else” (MacDonald 2008, p.10). They were essentially “shaped by a cultivated element of self-surprise based on a lack of any ingrained sense of what ought to come next”, and significantly were not only “unable to read music, but firmly declined to learn” (ibid, 10). Lennon and McCartney were self-taught and relied on instinct to guide their creations. They sought to surprise themselves, and in doing so, surprised their audience. Their sonic career was one of constant invention and exploration and the engine of their innovation was this disregard for the theoretical rules and constraints of established music-making. It is noteworthy that they abandoned live performance and concentrated on studio recording for the latter part of their career, in the process revolutionising the art of recording popular music. Their creativity was best explored as a studio practice, rather than in the context of live performance. Lennon and McCartney are perhaps the most well-known auto-didacts in
popular music, but they are far from alone. Others of renown include Irving Berlin and Noel Coward, Jagger and Richards, Ray Davies, Pete Townsend and Syd Barrett.

Brian Eno famously declares himself a ‘non-musician’, partly due to his lack of education in music theory. On one occasion, when an interviewer asked him to confirm if he did or did not “know music theory and things of that sort,” Eno responded, “No, I don’t. Well, let’s say I know many theories about music, but I don’t know that particular one that has to do with notation” (Tamm 1995, p.44). Here Eno cuts to the heart of this archaic idea. Common practice notation and traditional music theory are but one theory among many that have to do with music, and in the realm of popular music and recording, the question of whether a musician can read and write dots on a staff is akin to asking if a river can read the clouds – it is neither here nor there. Many popular musicians do not read music. Noel Gallagher, the songwriter from English band Oasis, was once asked if he could read or write music. His reply was illuminating: “No, I couldn’t read music; I couldn’t write music. I don’t know anyone who does” (BBC TV 2012). The recordist does not require the skill of reading music notation for they record their work on hard disk drive, tape or portable device. Musical notation was originally used to defeat the ephemerality of musical performance and has since become a means of enshrining a composer’s instructions to the orchestra and string quartet. Recording technology enables the material inscription of sonic utterance and captures the moments that make up a recording without need of symbols or other abstractions.

Allied to ludic yūgen’s ignorance of notation is a de-emphasis on rigorous technique. The pursuit of technical excellence in playing of an instrument or the proper unfolding of harmonic development in a composition is of no relevance to the methods of ludic yūgen. Ludic yūgen demands an artist explore their own ways of working in the development of their aesthetic. Mistakes, limitations and happy accidents become part
of the aesthetic, as evidenced in the work of many musicians of recent history. Popular music is a realm where polished musical technique is not required and in fact might be a hindrance to innovation and excellence. At least one scholar has suggested that The Beatles thrived despite “limited, unexceptional technique”, being “rather ordinary multi-instrumentalists” (Tamm 1995, p.45). MacDonald argues that John Lennon’s “technical shortcomings were made irrelevant by – in fact to a very large extent actively fostered – the unique force of his imagination” (MacDonald 2008, 382). A lack of technique is integral to Brian Eno’s philosophy of making music, and this absence of virtuosity elicits creativity from a recordist because the artist must face their limitations and transcend them. Eno has stated

I’ve seen musicians stuck for an idea, and what they’ll do between takes is just diddle around, playing the blues or whatever, just to reassure themselves that, ‘Hey, I’m not useless. Look, I can do this.’ But I believe that to have that [technique] to fall back on is an illusion. It’s better to say, ‘I’m useless,’ and start from that position. I think the way technique gets in the way is by fooling you into thinking that you are doing something when you actually are not. (Tamm 1995, p.47)

The guitarist Robert Fripp, despite being a technically advanced player, concurs, stating that

For a good player to just play licks, running on automatic, there’s no music there. It only seems to be music. There is what we would call musical sound and forms of organization, but there’s no quality. It’s only mechanical. (Tamm 1995, p.48)
Eno and Fripp are not interested in the domain of the accomplished technician, that “middle territory of pointless displays of skill and obvious next moves” (p.48). For Eno, a “lack of instrumental and theoretical proficiency . . . can lead to results that a trained musician would have ruled out or might not have even considered” (p.48). A pertinent example of this occurrence is the recording work of Kelley Deal, guitarist with American rock group The Breeders. Deal is completely untrained in any real sense, without rudimentary knowledge of chord progressions and scales, and “didn’t play guitar the way it was meant to be played” (Schuftan 2012, p.160). Her lack of technique resulted in “outbursts of noise and off-kilter lead melodies (that) pushed the Breeders songs into strange new territory” (ibid, 160). Johnny Greenwood, Radiohead’s multi-instrumentalist, has endorsed the idea of abandoning the quest for technical excellence, which he calls “the Bernard Sumner approach. It's about not practicing. I like what Tom Waits said about only ever picking up an instrument if he's going to write a song” (Reynolds 2001).

Some of the most innovative and exhilarating recordings in the history of popular music were made by people who choose to privilege feeling over technical accomplishment. Eno baldly states that early rock music was, in a lot of cases, the product of incompetence, not competence. There’s a misconception that these people were brilliant musicians and they weren’t. They were brilliant musicians in the spiritual sense. They had terrific ideas…but they weren’t virtuosi. (Tamm 1995, p.46)

In the late 1980s, the production team The Bomb Squad, responsible for the revolutionary beatscapes behind Public Enemy and early Ice Cube, illustrated the possibilities of emphasising the “instinctual and immediate” over the technically
correct. The ethos of producer Hank Shocklee was ‘don't think it: feel it’, and this sometimes conflicted with the classically trained ears of Eric Sadler “when one of Hank’s layered tracks was out of key or rhythm”, but the philosophy of the Bomb Squad was to “fuck all that technical shit. Do what's funky. Do what feels good” (Weingarten 2010, p.24). The Bomb Squad would always go “with what felt good over what felt right” and in so doing managed to create blistering sonic documents of unrivalled innovation and historic resonance.

Ludic yūgen is philosophically at one with the Bomb Squad’s insistence on trusting the instictual over the technical in the process of playing and recording music. What feels right is what sounds right, and vice-versa. Virtuosity is virtual idiocy in terms of relevance to the methods of ludic yūgen. The technical skills required to play and record music correctly (i.e. according to some external standard of generally accepted excellence) do not concern the ludic recordist. In ludic yūgen, our philosophy is that these externally applied, universally accepted standards of excellence do not exist and the notion of correct technique is likewise illusory. In other realms of musical endeavor (the concert hall, Broadway musical or folk concert) the trope of ‘technically correct’ may hold some water. In the recording studios where the methods of ludic yūgen are practiced, correct technique is the refuge of the creatively bereft. It is the rickety rope bridge strung across the abyss of your own ignorance. With ludic yūgen, I ask the recordist to start from the ground and see where they end up.

The recordist utilising the methods of ludic yūgen usually does not preconceive a recording, there is no blueprint and thus no reliance on tried and true crowd-pleasing melodic and rhythmic arrangements. The ludic recordist is prone to experimentation and mistakes are inevitable. For the creative recordist, mistakes offer a potential
liberation. Popular music is an arena littered with the fortunate mistake, where a microphone inadvertently captures an unguarded moment of inspired spontaneity. Some recording artists strive to create these experiences in the studio, where sonic moments align to produce flawed yet exceptional recordings.

American recordists Guided By Voices are significant in this regard. Robert Pollard, the group’s songwriter, has stated that

A lot of times when you come up with something unique, it’s an accident. We called them ‘happy accidents’. You can try to get cool sounding things and sometimes you’re successful, but in recording over the last 20 years I have found that we get the coolest stuff accidentally. (Woodworth 2006, p.23)

In the recording world of Guided By Voices, there were “no rules. We could make mistakes and it was cool. There was always a sense of freedom” (p.32). Robert Pollard approached recording without patience or any sense of perfectionism. He was striving to capture the songs as they were being born, and birth is an organic and often messy process. Hoping to record the immediacy and spontaneity of the initial rush of creation, Pollard “learned to live with the mistakes and pretty soon . . . learnt to like them. Living with the mistakes became our aesthetic” (p.18). Guided By Voices are exemplars of the ludic yūgen approach to recording as they are artists who “elevate imagination above contrivance, the sublime over the willful, and prefer accident to control, the ugly over the pretty” (p.67–68). Artists using the methods of ludic yūgen are not aiming to produce a “competent radio-ready version of the music everyone else is making” and are not concerned with “a smooth, palatable kind of sound that listeners can simultaneously take in and ignore the first time they hear it” (p.119). Messy recordings
with definite ‘presence’ are one of the more likely by-products of the ludic yūgen process.

Radiohead’s frontman Thom Yorke spoke of the recording of the album Kid A as an explicit attempt to shape half formed ideas – sometimes just a beat or an interesting sound – into songs. “When we started doing the recording properly, I bought a new notebook and put at the front, Hoping for happy accidents, and that's basically what we were trying to do” (Lin 2010, p.25). Lin (2010) relates that Yorke was expecting “to stumble upon sonics rather than force them into existence” (p.25) and consciously sought the collusion of Chance, Fate and Desire in the forging of a recording environment in which fortunate mistakes – ‘happy accidents’– might take place. This might be framed as the technique of letting go of technique, or the manufacturing of conditions conducive to the marvelous. As Woodworth (2006) writes of the recording process of Guided By Voices, it is “a rare form of apprehending reality by means of art, an example of true being, even a kind of spiritual accomplishment” (p.119). This is a lofty claim for what might be dismissed as the unfinished sonic spasms of garage musicians with a tape recorder. It is the brevity and immanence of the work that allows such descriptions to stand. The improvisations of Robert Pollard and friends are spiritually-imbued with the joy of creativity and shimmer with authentic corporeal glee. Crucially, Woolworth suggests that the best aspect of the Guided By Voices album Bee Thousand is that “the recording process . . . serves to give life to the music rather than leeching life from it” (ibid, p.119).

Here in essence is a central pillar of the ludic yūgen philosophy, that the process of recording should enhance the vitality of the music, rather than embalm the sound in a sarcophagus of respectable studio perfectibility. Ludic yūgen seeks to capture the
moments of creation as they are happening, as opposed to crushing vitality through overwrought thought and grinding rehearsal. The ludic recordist does not torture sound to achieve some ideal sonic beauty, and sees no gain in obeying the dictates of the acoustic pedant that squats meticulously in the technical mind. In ludic yūgen, I unequivocally state that recording is not merely a branch of computer science, as the geek ascendant might have us believe. Recording is a living art, subject to all the complex ambiguity of that inexplicable designation.

As It Is Being Born: The Importance of the Natal Song

In the traditional process of writing and recording a song, a songwriter would have an idea and bring those half-formed chords and lyrics to their band. The piece would then be bent into an acceptable shape, and the crafted tune would then, and only then, be recorded. Recording was, for most, a rare and expensive experience and the notion of ‘fooling around’ in the studio in order to conjure up a song was viewed as indulgent and irresponsible. Ludic yūgen is philosophically inclined to concur with the many recording artists who, in seeking to give life to recording, extol the virtues of capturing the song as it is being born into existence. A most eloquent example of this comes from the recording artist Nick Cave.

I love the feeling of a song before you understand it, when we’re all playing deep inside the moment, the song feels wild and unbroken. . . . Soon it will become domesticated and we will drag it back to something familiar and compliant and we’ll put it in the stable with all the other songs, but there is a moment when the song is still in charge and you’re just clinging on for dear life and you’re hoping you don’t fall off and break your neck or something. . . . It is
that fleeting moment we chase in the studio” (Cave, 43.30 – 44.04 from 20,000 Days on Earth, directed by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard)

Cave’s description of the process of recording is powerfully relevant to how music is seen through the lens of ludic yūgen. The wildness of the song as it is being born is before (and beyond) understanding; in the palace of intuition, riding the ephemeral moment, subject to the lightning whims of mercurial creation. He is playing in the sandpit of yūgen. Cave acknowledges that eventually he and his band will tame the energies of the song, making it fit (and safe) for audience consumption. Those moments ‘when the song is still in charge’ is the alpha and omega of the ludic yūgen approach to recording. When Cave speaks of ‘domesticating’ the wildness of the song, he is referring to crafting the song to exploit those inspired moments that he “chases in the studio”.

This crafting is seen by Brian Eno as an unnecessary afterthought, an extraneous filter. As Tamm (1995) writes, Eno has expressed the belief that “I don’t think the craft of music is relevant to the art of music” (Tamm 1995, p.46) and views craft as those skills that “enable you to be successful when you’re not inspired” (Tamm, p.77). Craft will get you through a period of writer’s block and it allows an ersatz inspiration. However, no amount of plastic and silicon can fabricate a connection to the muse and this impossibility is respected by the ludic recordist. Pixies’ early producer, Gary Smith, is another champion of the inspired moment.

Sometimes the earliest fragments of songs are the most powerful and unmediated. . . . They come from somewhere else, whether they are from a higher plane or the subconscious. They are not subject to the same acts of will crafting a song involves. (Sisaro 2006, p.28)
Elsewhere, Smith elaborates on his approach to recording, revealing “a tendency to focus more on the naked spirit of what’s happening and do my best to get that spirit on tape” (Smith 2009).

Smith, Eno and Cave agree that the initial stirrings of the song are sharply distinct from the subsequent crafting of those original fragments. This distinction points to the different creative orientations and states of mind being experienced. The two processes involved here are characterized by Zak as “spontaneous intuitive expression — the moment of performance — and deliberate critical analysis” (Zak 2001, 132). This dichotomy is analogous to Nettl’s famous opposition of inspiration and gymnastics, through which “the concept of ‘divine inspiration’ (according to which music-making should be easy)” is contrasted with “the ‘athletic view’ of music (according to which music-making – composing, improvising, performing – must be difficult to be truly great)” (Nettl 1983, p.33). Specifically in regards to the processes of recording, recording artist Peter Gabriel characterizes this duality as a

Two-levels-of-energy system. . . . Energy Z is a sort of performance-inspired, red-light-on, pumping energy . . . involving ‘feel-based’ musical interpretation, improvisation, and spontaneous interactions. . . . The results of energy Z are then examined in minute detail using energy A, which is analytical energy . . . where you are able to zoom into decisions and really get involved in the microcosm. (Zak 2001, p.133)

Zak sees recording as the continuous alternation of these two levels of energy, the recording process ideally “balanced between technical craft and artistic intuition” (Zak, p.133). Zak acknowledges that “musical magic may come in momentary flashes of inspiration, improvised musings, or happy accidents” and therefore the analytical minds
of producers and engineers must have an “energy Z willingness to allow the dynamics of the process itself to take over” (Zak, p.134). Traditional producers must negotiate between “unpredictability, which may yield something extraordinary, and control, which keeps the project focused and on budget” (Zak, p.133).

Zak’s analysis comes from a place where the traditional recording roles of performer, producer and engineer are deemed distinct. In the contemporary moment, these distinctions have blurred and in some instances collapsed. Presently, most recordists perform and engineer recordings unfettered by budgets and limited only by imagination and time, and their creative practice lies somewhere on the spectrum of analysis and intuition. It may be redundant to elaborate as to where the methods of ludic yūgen lie on the spontaneity-control continuum of recording, but in service of clarity, let me state that the philosophy of ludic yūgen leans heavily towards the position of spontaneity. Ludic yūgen embraces the methods and qualities of inspiration and energy Z; intuition, feeling, improvisation, mystery and the unpredictable. The methods of ludic yūgen do not prohibit pre-recording/post-performance analysis but this consciousness is not mandatory. The stabling of Cave’s wild horses of song is not the primary objective of the recordist in ludic yūgen. An imagination running free is of more worth that any prize stallion tethered in the stalls. When recording using the methods of ludic yūgen, there will be stumbles, falls and accidents for rider and horse alike. It is a risky endeavor but the unequalled thrill of the gallop makes such foolhardiness worthwhile.
Music as Texture

In ludic yūgen, the absence of formal learning of notation and technique, along with the idiosyncrasies that accrue in the playing of the self-taught and the emphasis on spontaneity and play in recording combine to create an aesthetic where the most telling quality of the sound lies in its texture. The melodies, rhythms and vocals, together and alone, are created in the pursuit of compelling textures, and the categories of pitch and duration are of secondary import in the recordist’s creative intent. Ludic yūgen is a set of methods dealing with an aesthetic that privileges the materiality of a sound, rather than any abstractions concerning motivic development and the tension and resolution tropes of yore. Rather than privilege theoretical notions and constructions, recordists acknowledge the primacy of sonic materiality and the importance of texture in the making of popular music throughout history. The ludic recordist emphasises the material textures of sound largely as a natural consequence of the instrumentation and technology of popular music and recording, the artistic children of electricity. Gracyk (1996) sees the electric guitar as “the primary case of rock’s adherence to an aesthetic dominated by the possibilities of unorthodox timbres and techniques” (p.111 – 112). Rock’s traditional search for novel timbres and textures occurs in a creative environment in which “an electric guitarist creates and controls an electric signal by means of the instrument . . . generating and manipulating electronic sounds” (Gracyk, p.111-112). The electric guitar takes pride of place in a range of popular music for a strikingly simple reason. As Byrne explains, “the sounds you could get from an amplified instrument were almost limitless. Piano-like plunks, percussive scratchy chords, saxophone-like rasps, and gamelan-like bell tones. No other instrument could do all this” (Byrne 2012, p141-142). The variety of sonic expression the electrified guitar affords has been unmatched, and it was the sonic potentialities of the electric guitar that
altered the way in which music was made. The fact that “texture and tonal quality increasingly became part of composition” (Byrne 2012) was plainly due to the plethora of permutations available to the amplified guitarist, whose explorations of texture are integral to the rock aesthetic. Byrne has previously stated that “the texture a group of musicians arrives at . . . can be at least as important as the melody line or lyrics or whatever” (Flanagan 1987). In ludic yūgen, texture becomes the most important aspect of a recording, and the dominance of texture is in symbiosis with the aesthetic and its methods.

Akin to the contradictory rule that there are no rules, the traditional ethos of rock is to seek out the new, an eternal quest for fresh sonic expression that “extends to bass and keyboards and, through microphone amplification, to the voice as well” (Gracyk 1996, p.119). Each traditional ‘rock’ instrument – drums, bass, guitar and voice – is able to generate textural novelty and when combined may result in the sensation of a listener being unable to ascertain the instrumental origin of a sound. In much of his recording work, Eno prioritises “timbre/texture/chromatics over riffs and rhythm sections” (Reynolds 1994), working like a painter and exploring possibilities by engaging in the “partial or total abandonment of live performance as the model for recording . . . willing for music to be unrealistic, anti-naturalistic, a studio-spun figment” (Reynolds 2013). Recording the album Kid A, Radiohead’s vocalist Thom Yorke transformed “the voice into an instrumental texture, other-isng it via effects” (Reynolds 2001) and thereby escaping the weight of meaning his lyrics were expected to carry. Yorke “sought to alter the very colour of his voice . . . to dislocate his voice ad infinitum, to obscure its emotive signifiers and emphasise texture, to reposition it from a privileged status to just another instrument” (Lin 2010, p.21). On Kid A, “the use of effects like sustain and delay, in tandem with the signal-processing and disorientating
spatialisation potential of the mixing desk, is frequently so drastic that the guitars function as texture-generators” (Reynolds 2013). The guitar, much like Yorke’s voice, moves beyond a traditional role. It is not merely spelling out the notes and chords of a riff, but has in effect become a textural fount.

In the making of the album Low, David Bowie, orientated “towards sound as texture rather than chords and melody” has stated that “I got some extraordinary things out of Earl Slick. . . . I think I captured his imagination to make noises on guitar, and textures, rather than playing the right notes” (Wilcken 2005, p.5-6). In pursuit of original textures, Slick, a highly accomplished guitarist, plays some exceptional pieces because Bowie pushes him to think beyond playing the ‘right’ notes. The material sound of any recorded electric instrument is not merely the notes that are played: the entire apparatus of amplifier, instrument and performer must be taken into account. In this, there is an analogy to Barthes’ well-known formulation of the grain of the voice. Barthes “argued that what got you about a much-loved voice wasn’t what the singer did expressively, it was the stuff of the voice itself: its texture, its carnal thickness” (Reynolds 2011). Most relevant to the methods of ludic yūgen, Barthes revealed the simple fact that

an accomplished vocalist who’s adept at manipulating the conventional mannerisms of ‘good singing’ in order to emote, can actually be less moving than a stiff, unwieldy singer. The proficient vocalist suppresses ‘the grain of the voice’ by being too eloquent, too fluent in the language of singing. (Reynolds 2011)

This argument echoes many previously stated aspects of the philosophical underpinnings of ludic yūgen. The accomplished technician goes through the
gymnastic motions of musical excellence and the listener might feel very little, aside from admiration. In knowing too much, an artist is in danger of bleaching out the colour from their expressive palette, and in following the time-worn dictates of conventional musical training, the very suchness of an artist’s singularity is ironed out and made uniform, the technically good being the enemy of the texturally great. As it goes for the grain of the voice, so it goes for the intrinsic qualities of guitar, bass and drums. The primacy of texture in ludic yūgen means that the correct sequence of notes, most pleasing chord progression and accurately timed rhythms are not heavily factored into the artist’s formulations or performance. In ludic yūgen, I am with Bowie, whose fascination with the Brücke artists (and Expressionism in general) led to him creating in an “art form that mirrored life not by event but by mood” (Wilcken 2005, p.108–109). I am with anyone who insists that timbre is the primary carrier of musical meaning (Watson 2005). The cliché regarding how something is said being more important than what is said resonates strongly in the studios of ludic yūgen. Recordists playing with the methods of ludic yūgen are highly conscious of texture and delight in the perpetual search for the new. It is traditional in the circles of ludic yūgen.

The Studio as the Place of Creative Work

Popular music, since the era of the wireless radio and the vinyl record, is primarily a recording art form. As Gracyk (1996) states,

rock music is not especially a performing art, however much time rock musicians spent practicing on their instruments or playing live. And while I do not say that it is essentially a recording art, I do contend that recording is the most characteristic medium of rock. (1996, p.74–75)
For our purposes, rock and popular are interchangeable terms. It follows that the studio becomes the place where the creative work is truly done. The record/tour cycle of the commercially successful band indicates the primacy of recording in the machinations of the popular music industry. Some popular music has become completely hermetic, occurring solely as recorded performance(s) in studios and then again when replayed on playback equipment. Some performers never play ‘live’, in the sense of generating musical sound in the moment for an audience in real time.

There is a certain dogma that insists that the only authentic musical performance occurs in real time, in front of an audience who can witness for themselves the spectacle of corporeal skill and creative exertion. Advocates for this point of view include Eric Clapton, who

sees the stage as a forum for playing that can be ‘uninhibited and completely without direction. That can’t be put on record, there is no way.’ Such music ‘belongs to the concert hall and the audience and should remain that way. And for the gods’. (Gracyk 1996, p.79-80)

This insistence on actually seeing performers emote, sweat and hopefully bleed springs from a distrust of technology (and the deeply buried archaic desire to witness the artist burst into flames in cultural sacrifice to Clapton’s ‘gods’). Computer technology is viewed as making musical excellence far too simple to achieve. The refrain heard from advocates of live performance is that the digital tools available to the studio recordist allow anyone to sound good, and therefore the only real standard by which to judge a musician is by what the musician can perform live, unaided by the corrective enhancements of technology.
This argument for the live event being the true litmus test of musical creativity is spurious on many fronts. Most obviously, the live performances these acolytes of authenticity crave are often heavily mediated by supporting technology, though the gestures of the musicians may distract from the click tracks, pre-recorded pieces and digital signal processing that all make such spectacles of the ‘real’ possible. Secondly, this criterion for authenticity, if applied strictly, means that the only true music we can experience as player and audience is that which takes place within our sight. Our proximity to areas with live venues and a pool of musicians dictate that, for many of us, by this criterion, authentic musical experiences are rare, when they are available. If the argument for the singular validity of the ‘live’ musical experience is extended to its illogical end, we might decide that the only people who can have an authentic musical experience are the very musicians who are playing with other musicians in real time in front of a group of listeners. Such absurd elitist notions must be rejected, or musicians may find themselves limited to listening to their own performances on acoustic instruments in pursuit of a specious authenticity.

Ludic yūgen is a studio-based art. There is performance involved, but it a piece of the whole, not the totality itself. In privileging studio creation over live performance, ludic yūgen is part of a tradition in popular music that peaks in the late 1960s, when, according to Perry (2004),

in the wake of Sgt. Pepper and Pet Sounds, everyone . . . began to view stage and studio as two entirely separate worlds. In this new model, the studio was a place where you created innovative sounds impossible to achieve onstage. Merely reproducing your live sound was considered an unimaginative misuse of
the new technology, and the studio came to be viewed as the more important creative environment, the place where the real work was done. (2004, p.9)

The Beatles had abandoned the stage in 1966 and began recording their mature works. Liberated from ‘live’ performance, they produced their most creative and resonant music of the era as a studio-based unit. The reason given for the band’s decision to quit playing live was that the sheer volume of screaming audiences made their live performances untenable, as they couldn’t hear themselves play. It might also be argued that it had become difficult for them to maintain requisite enthusiasm towards playing live. Other performers have admitted to experiencing the touring grind of live performance in support of an album as a dull chore. John Cougar Mellencamp, in comparing a song to a sketch, states

I enjoy the process of painting. I don’t care if the paintings turn out. Now, when you’re making records, it’s the same way. . . . But going on stage is not a creative process after you’ve done at three or four times. It’s just repetitive work. (Gracyk 1996, p.81)

For Mellencamp, ‘live’ performance is not a peak experience of unbounded creativity flowing from performer to audience, it is no Dionysian mystery rite; it is ‘repetitive work’. It is not called the ‘music industry’ for nothing.

As Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain noted at the time of his demise, “Sometimes I feel as if I should have a punch-in time clock before I walk out on stage” (Schuftan 2012, p.185). Momentous fame and the accompanying demands to perform and maximise his success and record company profits made Cobain feel like Mellencamp, trapped on a treadmill of ‘repetitive work’, caught in the hamster wheel, exploiting his
gift for melody. Mellencamp “sees rock creativity in the studio process, not in the performing art which translates the finished music to live presentation”. Robert Plant likewise views the studio recording as the ‘original’ work and the live performance of the work as the facsimile (Gracyk 1996, p.79-80). Interestingly, there is a widely held notion that to earn the designation ‘musician’, an artist must be able to accurately reproduce a performance on demand. From the time that the recording studio began to be creatively employed as an instrument in its own right, an artist was no longer required to replay performances until a satisfactory take was produced. Such ‘repetitive work’ was integral to the era when the documentary function of the studio was ascendant. This period gave way to the creative use of the studio as a meta-instrument that comprised the instruments, performances and recording technologies of the moment. The studio as meta-instrument became a site of unbridled imaginative audio exploration, as the “process started having a direct influence on the content”. (Wilcken 2004, p.61) Reproducing a group’s ‘live’ sound was not the aim – the goal was to navigate uncharted musical landscapes and return with recordings evidencing the journey. Further explorations of studio ethnography conducted by Wilson (2014) and Meintjes (2003) are illuminating in this regard.

However, there is some danger in adhering to the idea of the studio as a meta-instrument that renders all other sites and ways of music-making, at the very least ineffectual and, at worst, obsolete. It was Brian Eno who pinpointed the flaw in the idea of the hermetic digital studio containing all answers to the problem of creative music-making. In an interview in 1995, Eno was discussing Africa. He stated that

  Africa is everything that something like classical music isn't. Classical music is so digital, so cut up, rhythmically, pitch-wise and in terms of the roles of the
musicians. It's all in little boxes . . . a world of discontinuous, parcelled-up possibilities. And the fact that orchestras play the same thing over and over bothers me. Classical music is music without Africa. It represents old-fashioned hierarchical structures, ranking, all the levels of control. (Kelly 1995)

Eno is basically characterising the rigid structures of orchestral music as the anti-thesis to the “peculiar mixtures of independence and interdependence, and the oscillation between them” (Kelly 1995) that he sees as being integral to West African drumming patterns. Eno then goes on to say “the problem with computers is that there is not enough Africa in them. This is why I can't use them for very long” (Kelly 1995). Here Eno argues that the computer is not flexible enough to accommodate the organic interplay he finds in West African drumming, for the rigidity of the orchestra is mirrored in the digital world. The floating free-form manifestations of Africa are not accommodated by the strict binaries of the digital.

In ludic yūgen, I would argue that Eno was partly correct, but he failed to foresee the modular nature of many contemporary studios and the improvisatory capabilities of some software. The digital audio workstation may be central to the modern recording studio but beyond that requirement, a recordist can assemble any combination of acoustic and electric instruments, digital tools and organic techniques as they are able to gather in the same space. Computers may lack Africa but the computer is but one aspect of the ludic yūgen studio. Ludic yūgen has room for the sinew of a vocal cord, the programmed rhythms of the sampler and the strangulated musings of scorched guitar. The co-existence of the archaic and the futuristic is encouraged in moments of recording. The true danger of placing computing at the centre of the recording studio is in encouraging the process of recording music to be viewed through
the prism Eno refers to above, that “world of discontinuous, parceled-up possibilities”. Others have warned of this technophile orientation. Cunningham, in his history of record production, writes that

Technology . . . should be put into perspective. It is not as important as the music. Unless we grasp this very important point, there is every possibility that future generations of musicians and producers will be no more than computer programmers with the musical sensitivity of robots” (1998, p.384).

In the studio, computers are powerful tools for catching and manipulating sonic performances. The Digital Audio Workstation (abbreviated as DAW) is an amalgamation of the traditional mixing desk with amplification and manipulation devices, encased in the convenient form of an often portable digital environment. The vast potentialities and remarkable power of the DAW do not hide the fact that essentially a DAW is a means of recording music. Creative performance and arrangements are still necessary if music is to take place in the DAW environment. The recording studio, whilst totally dependent on technology, is not the true home of the tone-deaf boffin or the rhythmically challenged circuit board wizard. This harks back to an earlier characteristic of the ludic yūgen approach to recording. Technique alone will not produce an artful recording – if reliant on technique and technology alone, an artist will going through the motions of making music but the final recording will only have the appearance of music, not the substance. The sinew and grain of performance, the ‘Africa’ of Eno’s imagination, does not reside in the black plastic boxes of the DAW and the ever-pressing search for the blemish-free sonic artefact. I must thank Eric Clapton for laying down the challenge to all recordists working with the methods of ludic yūgen. In stating that playing that is “uninhibited and completely without direction
can’t be put on record, there is no way” (Gracyk 1996, p.79-80), Clapton encapsulates the ludic recordist’s task, that being to prove him wrong.

**Humour in Ludic Yūgen**

Ludic yūgen as a set of methods does not seek to proscribe or elicit any reaction from an audience. It is focused on the process of creative recording. However, there is an attitude that a recordist can bring to their practice that might best be summed up as having a sense of humour about the whole enterprise. I might say that humour, notoriously subjective and intrinsically personal, is the atmosphere in which a recordist works and an orientation taken towards life. It is different for each artist, but there can be seen a common thread amongst recordists who operate using some of the methods of ludic yūgen.

As previously mentioned, the Pixies’ Charles Thompson, upon surveying the musical landscape of recent times, observed a tendency for people (to) pursue rock music, and they go, ‘I have something important to say, and here's what it is. And oh, I'm singing it from my heart too’. . . . And it's all too serious. And people totally miss out. They totally miss the fun, Jabberwocky fun with language, fun with poetry. (Sisaro 2006, 73)

Thompson is not alone amongst recording artists in stressing the importance of humour in creating music, and in highlighting the dire situation of singers mired in earnest seriousness. In an interview with The Cramps, singer Lux Interi or bemoaned “all these boring Northern California folk singers moaning about their feelings”, implying true expression was more to do with “people . . . screaming, all nervous and crazy and horny and everything” (Juno 1994 , p.8). Lux championed “this insane emotional expression
(that) came from within; it was a completely unfettered expression of passion. . . . They were just singin’ wild” (Juno, p. 12). Cramps’ guitarist Ivy Rorschach commented that

It’s weird today that popular music vocalists, even if they’re singing about sex and love, are wallowing in their feelings, not glorifying something outside of themselves. It’s ‘I feel like this’ rather than ‘Wow – look at her!’ whereas a lot of ‘50s rock’n’roll is just celebrating things – celebrating a girl, not making sure that the world understands how ‘I feel’. (Juno, p.13)

In the worlds of ludic yūgen, the hysterical rockabilly of the Cramps is more likely to accurately express how an artist feels about a girl or about the world than the jazz-bruised bleating of fey singer-songwriters, the coke-addled down-home bonhomie of country rock, or the bloated complexities of prog-rock, all genres which the Cramps felt alienated from and in opposition to. In their elemental honesty of expression, the Cramps shared a philosophy with cartoon minimalists the Ramones, whose first album revealed

a deep sense of humour and recognition of the fundamental absurdity of life. In America, this punk high mark was directly rooted in the rejection of what was perceived as hippie sincerity . . . rejection of the progressive rock establishment and its own ironic embrace of ‘feelings’ and ‘relationships’ and pseudo – and macho – posturing” (Rombes 2005, p.20).

The Ramones were playing with the “artifice of pop culture, while simultaneously glorying in it. This was, in fact, punk’s most radical gesture, because at its most dangerous it pierced the whole mythology of rock ‘n’ roll” (Rombes 2005, p.83). Reveling in the artful nature of rock’n’roll, the Pixies, Cramps and Ramones
paradoxically gave weight to their music by not indulging in the pretence that rock is a serious art form containing canonical works deserving of textual analysis and respect. Their offhanded lightness of touch is not reverent and seeks not to lay bare the secret core of emotional truth in musical form, whilst the brevity of their songs gives them an intensity that belies the ludic aspect of their creation.

There is a sense in which humour might be seen as an inevitable by-product of the processes of the playful mind. Some musicians go as far as to believe humour to be a pre-requisite to any artistic endeavor. Composer Gershon Kingsley sees humour as indispensable, stating unequivocally that “you cannot be a great artist without humour being part of your personality. You have to have a certain distance from yourself, and humour can provide that” (Juno 1994, p.88). Mickey McGowan laments that

When we grew up, we were taught that there are five senses. But there is a sixth one that’s missing in most records: the sense of humour! See-hear-smell-touch-taste are the ones we take for granted, but this is the one we need the most” (Juno, p.120-121).

Similarly, Jean-Jacques Perrey sees humour as necessary for salvation, stating that ‘I always deliberately introduce humour into my creations: I sincerely think that humour will help save humanity from the swamp into which it is sinking” (Juno, p.97). These are lofty claims made in favour of humour, from being essential to the creative practice of any art form to existing as our potential salvation. These musicians seem to agree that humour is absent from the current mainstream of recording artists. Ludic yūgen and its methods might go some way towards orientating recording practice in the direction of a celebratory sense of humour, taking advantage of the contradictory
principle that in treating the recording of music with a ludic mischief, a recordist can produce enduring work.

**The Artist’s Unique Way**

As stated earlier, an artist must explore their own unique techniques and ways of working in a medium or with a form in order to reveal even a hint of the yūgen aesthetic. The playfulness of the recordist’s work in popular music must be seen as highly significant in this light. I have discussed the child-like insistence on fun and the non-linear pre-linguistic mind in the worlds of Eno, Wilson and others; the disregard for traditional notation and notions of proper technique, exemplified by Lennon and McCartney and endemic in popular music; the quest for happy accidents and the embracing of mistakes in the aesthetic of Guided By Voices and The Bomb Squad, and the focus on the natal song in the recording process, in the work of Cave, Eno and Pixies. These are some of the implications of the philosophies underlying the methods of ludic yūgen. Taken together, these facets of ludic yūgen are imperative in allowing a recordist to discover their own voice and facilitate the unique contribution they might make to the world of popular music. Importantly, it must be said that the employment of the methods of ludic yūgen by a recordist is no guarantee of producing original work. One might take a smorgasbord approach, taking what appeals and leaving the rest. Slavish duplication of another recordist’s idiosyncrasies is not in the spirit of ludic yūgen, as it is the unique mold of a recordist’s singular strengths, limitations and quirks that allow the aesthetic of yūgen to be implied.

In reference to Guided By Voices’ *Bee Thousand*, Woodworth (2006) asserts that “it takes a mature artist willing to disregard the idea of an audience and instead listen only to himself to come to such an understanding of his medium” (p.67–68). This
notion is fully in keeping with the spirit of ludic yūgen, which requires a recording artist to forge their own path. It is tempting, when faced with the enormous repository of recorded popular music, to follow those innovators who succeeded commercially. However, it requires no bravery to emulate the alchemical formulae of the contemporary or historical pop moment, and in search of one’s own voice, such epigonal tracings may prove futile. There are many, like composer Gershon Kingsley, who believe that

there are no easy ways of doing something in the arts . . . you find that nobody can teach you how to compose because you develop your own system. . . . I strongly believe in the power of the individual creative personalities that will always emerge. (Juno 1994, p.82).

This sentiment is echoed by MacDonald, who goes so far as to state that “invariably the most original pop songs have been written by artists cleaving to their own private ideals of musico-lyrical design” (MacDonald 2008, p.11). The field of recorded popular music appears as a multi-faceted cultural landscape in which the methods of ludic yūgen have thrived. It is an endeavor in which the artist seeking to inscribe their singular contribution to the art form might be rewarded for pursuing the divergent aspects of their creative practice. These rewards may not be monetary, nor the recognition of one’s peers. In ludic yūgen, a more intangible prize is offered; the chance to play, and in the playing of chance, a recordist might come close to the mystery at the heart of things. I now move on to examine how the particular methods of ludic yūgen have been used by recording artists over time in their creative practice.
Miegakure (hide and reveal)

The artistic technique of miegakure, particularly as practiced in the design of landscape gardens of Japan, is an essential foundation to the philosophy and methods of ludic yūgen. In the art of Japanese landscape design, a walk through a garden is guided by the idea of miegakure; the notion that as you walk, the whole or parts of the garden are hidden from you, and then an aspect is revealed to you, then it is hidden again, and so forth.

Philosophically, miegakure (translated as ‘hidden and seen’) is intrinsic to the art of recording itself. As Gracyk (1996) states, “in rock music, the musical instruments are almost always several steps removed from the audience” (p.74 – 75), and “the electric guitarist creates and controls an electric signal, the sounds produced dependent on the capacities/interactions of microphones/preamplifier/amplifier, the instrument becoming a means of generating and manipulating electronic sounds” (p.111 – 112). The original acoustic signal of the guitar is hidden but its effect is revealed and magnified; in recording, the instrument is hidden and revealed simultaneously, and this simple notion reveals recording, in its essence, as an art of miegakure. The process of multi-tracking and mixing is also an art of miegakure, of hiding and revealing, with the addition of each new track hiding some of the preceding track and yet revealing new relationships between tracks. The shape within the song is hidden but reveals itself when the vocal improvisation carves out a lyrical etching on the instrumental tracks. This is the paradox of multitrack recording, as each new track added to the mix, rather than obscuring the shape of a piece, can actually reveals its true nature. Recording also offers the possibility of adopting the miegakure method in the sequential arrangement of elements of the piece, hidden and then revealed in the mix, along the linear tracks of the tune. This is a dull and literal reading of miegakure. At the core of recording, built-in
to the art itself, is the idea of the original musical event simultaneously hidden and revealed. Not so much hidden then revealed, but rather hidden and revealed. The technology of recording (microphones and amplification) hides and reveals the original signal, the instruments, the gestures of the musician, the space of performance, the capturing technology itself; all are hidden and revealed in playback of a recording. Recording is an art of miegakure.

Recording artists are familiar with this idea. In speaking of Radiohead’s album Kid A, Reynolds adjudges that “it's often impossible to tell where a sound originated - it could be from guitars, or keyboards/synths, or orchestral /acoustic instruments, or from digital effects/samples/mixing board malarkey” (Reynolds 2013). Radiohead multi-instrumentalist Johnny Greenwood has talked of

the whole artifice of recording. I see it like this: a voice into a microphone onto a tape, onto your CD, through your speakers is all as illusory and fake as any synthesizer - it doesn't put Thom in your front room. But one is perceived as 'real', the other somehow 'unreal'. (Reynolds 2001)

In Greenwood’s formulation, the recorded voice is as artificial as the synthesizer, and therefore just as real. This is a fine example of recording’s innate sense of miegakure, the acoustic voice hidden and revealed in playback. On the album Kid A, Radiohead’s singer actively

sought to alter the very colour of his voice . . . to dislocate his voice ad infinitum, to obscure its emotive signifiers and emphasise texture, to reposition
it from a privileged status to just another instrument, to, as Thom put it, ‘do anything frankly to not sound like me’. (Lin 2011, p.21-22)

Yorke was hiding the semantic dimensions of the vocal under the textures wrought by studio manipulations, privileging “aural sound rather than oral meaning” (Lin 2011) and simultaneously revealing “contemporary feelings of dislocation, dispossession, numbness, impotence, paralysis” (Lin 2011). Thom Yorke’s vocal performance on Kid A is a significant example of miegakure in the art of recording.

Another singer who manifested miegakure was David Bowie. On the album Low, Bowie was concerned with “language – the deflection of it, the refusal of, the stripping of it of sense, the attempt to get past it” (Wilcken 2005, p.133). In seeking to transcend language, there is a sense of Bowie hiding from meaning, and yet the album is a highly potent revelation of the artist’s journey, rendered through attitude rather than incident, emotion trumping meaning. Miegakure is also evident in the performance of Television’s singer Tom Verlaine. Musician and critic Peter Laughner said of Verlaine’s singing

I couldn’t understand a single word of Verlaine’s strangled vocals, but the feelings came on like razors and Methedrine. His singing voice has this marvellous quality of slurring all dictions into what become distortions of actual lines, so that without a lyric sheet you can come away with a whole other song. (Waterman 2011, p.161)
Verlaine’s unfathomable vocals do not preclude meaning – this is beside the point – their very indecipherability enhances the depth of their reception by an audience. Finer semantic points are hidden but emotions are heightened and revealed by individual interpretations of the blurred poesy. The ambiguity Laugher remarks on is amplified by Verlaine’s approach to writing lyrics, summed up by his declaration that “you don’t have to say what you mean to get across” (Waterman 2011, p.161). Verlaine is conscious that in hiding what one means, one’s true intention can be revealed. As Throbbing Gristle vocalist Genesis P-Orridge says, “Words are trying to push me to reveal or hide, to camouflage certain things that need to be discussed” (Daniels 2013, p.146 – 147).

Miegakure is integral to the art of recording as recording simultaneously hides and reveals the acoustic sounds of instruments and the studio apparatus of recording and manipulation. The additive process of multi-tracking hides previous work and yet reveals new relationships between tracks and the final shape of a tune. The examples above of Bowie, Yorke and Verlaine suggest that vocalists are the most conscious users of miegakure in privileging texture over literal meaning in vocal performance, but vocalists are only the most obvious manifestation of miegakure in the art of recording. In ludic yūgen, recording artists are intimately engaged in the acts of hiding and revealing at each level of the artistic process.
Improvisation

One of the methods of ludic yūgen that is central to the process of creative recording is improvisation. Improvisation lacks pre-meditation, is absent of any overall plan and gives primacy to ‘in-the-moment’ play. The actions and reactions of the improvising recordist are an example of sublime ludicity, as tracks are layered upon each other in the creation of a piece of music, each interaction being a sequence of moments of play captured as they happen. Vocalist David Thomas, of Pere Ubu and associated projects, states that improvisation “in its idealised form amounts to standing on stage with no preconceptions, responding and reacting in the moment to immediate internal and external stimuli, and making sound happen accordingly” (Thomas 2013, p.33-34). Thomas is referring specifically to live performance, but his definition is in line with how I think of improvisation in the studios of ludic yūgen. It is important to underline that improvisation in ludic yūgen is different from the improvising tradition in jazz, which is “very intellectual and is based on a quite complicated and sophisticated musical language and conceptions and talents” (Daniel 2008, p.43). The ludic recordist is more likely to embrace the approach of Peter Christopherson, from Throbbing Gristle, who characterised his practice of improvisation as “a more direct, intellect-free connection of the subconscious to the sound. . . . More like a stream-of-consciousness. . . . The sound was just a kind of spontaneous expression of emotion and the way that we were feeling in that second” (Daniel 2008, p.43).

David Thomas’ experience with improvisation led him to the realization that “a song is often at its best as it is played into existence, before Error can manifest” (Thomas 2013, p.33-34). This notion is completely aligned with ludic yūgen’s emphasis on capturing the song as it is being born. Thomas (2013) offers standard
insights gleaned from his experience with improvisation, stating that during improvisation, “the musicians are focused on The Moment, cooperating to bring order to chaos, to coax Meaning out of the shapelessness of Nothing” (p.20-21). His analysis becomes significant in his emphasis on the ‘Unexpected’, which he sees as “a natural event that enlightens the experience. It reveals possibilities. . . . There are no mistakes. Vistas open. Idea fireworks erupt” (Thomas 2013, p.21). Thomas’ (2013) reading of improvisation as a deeply fruitful creative method aligns with the philosophies of ludic yūgen. He writes that “most importantly, the Unexpected counteracts artifice. A simulacrum of the Real World is forced on the process via accident and unforeseen circumstance. . . . The hitherto secret rules of a peculiar space-time universe reveal themselves in the moment of their creation” (p.21). The Unexpected, those moments that take players by surprise when improvising, are against the ersatz. The Unexpected gives life to the music by astonishing the players, who make audible the tacit and voice that which was buried. Improvisation is a method that lies at the core of ludic yūgen.

Improvisation in ludic yūgen extends to recording techniques, revealed by the guitarist Keith Richards, who states that “if I am using a certain sound, a certain amp and guitar, on one track, I’ll deliberately break that all down and set something else for the next track” (Gracyk 1996, p.121). Richards is seeking to discover new timbres by rebuilding his signal chain anew for each track. In a sense, he is forgetting what he knows in hope of encountering the Unexpected, like Thomas and Christopherson.

In the studios of ludic yūgen, improvisation often takes the form of working to capture songs as they come into being. Robert Pollard has admitted that he is impatient. We wouldn’t rehearse. There’d be no practice at all. . . . It was important to me that we capture a song in the least amount of time from when I
conceived it to when we put it on tape. That’s the best way to capture the purest essence of a song. . . Some of the best music is recorded exactly the way that it is conceived and created, it’s all happening simultaneously. (Woodworth 2006, p.21)

The creation of the song is the recording of the song, and vice-versa. This is the truest sense of improvisation as it is conducted in the studios of ludic yūgen. There is a philosophical underpinning to the focus on improvisation in ludic yūgen. As Woodworth (2006) surmises, “the kind of impatience we hear in the songs comes from the knowledge that you can’t hold on to real energy – you’ve got to give it away and find it again each time so that it’s fresh and real” (p.156). Pollard and cohorts create quickly, with an impatience borne from an acute awareness of the mercurial nature of true energy and real creativity. Improvisation in the ludic yūgen studio is an acknowledgement of the importance of the ‘fresh and real’, and the futility of trying to grasp and hold on to the energy that adheres in creative work. As Nick Cave has said, “There is a moment when the song is still in charge and you’re just clinging on for dear life and you’re hoping you don’t fall off and break your neck or something” (20,000 Days on Earth, directed by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard). If, as Cave describes, “the song is still in charge”, the ludic recordist might, like Pollard and Guided By Voices, “set up song after song to see if any of them would be struck by lightning” (Woodworth 2006, p.120). Any recordist improvising in the spirit of ludic yūgen would do well to recognise that when Beck Hansen recorded with the Dust Brothers, it was the low-key setup (that) facilitated . . . spontaneous invention. . . . The control room was also the live room (and) any inspired moment of goofing off could
immediately be captured for posterity, without the often fatal delay that falls between an idea and the proper recording of an idea. (Schuftan 2012, p.277)

Schuftan (2012) warns of the deadly effect of failing to capture a song’s birth on a recording. The intensity of the moment is lost and subsequent attempts to fabricate or re-engineer the illusion of spontaneous creation are doomed to producing pale facsimiles of deep creation. In the studios of ludic yūgen, the idea is the recording and the recording is the idea; there is not a great deal of concern with the ‘proper’ recording of a song, as Schuftan would have it. In ludic yūgen, I am more focused on the ethos of people like producer Craig Leon, whose experience has led him to believe that “getting a performance down on a recorded medium quickly helps duplicate the sense of being in the room when it was being made” (Rombes 2005, p.73). In ludic yūgen, I live stream from the birthing room.

Improvisation is integral to the methods of ludic yūgen, in which the recording studio is used in such a manner as to capture the creative act as it occurs. In this, ludic yūgen is aligned with the philosophies of recording artists such as avant-guitarist Sir Richard Bishop, who states that “I’ve never been one to practice anything. It’s difficult to practice things which haven’t been created yet” (Copon 2014). Similarly, ludic yūgen concurs with Eno’s maxim that “you can’t specify an organic thing in advance” (Tamm 1995, p.66). Tamm characterises Eno’s improvisational methods in this way:

The empirical in-studio composer gets hold of a few bricks and maybe some mud, and just starts building a hut by trial and error, guided by no particular plan but by his evolving sense of what the result might be like. (1995, p.67)
In the doing is the making, and the recording artist who improvises in the spirit of ludic yūgen is guided by intuition and a willingness to be mystified by the unfolding of the unknown. The results cannot be prescribed and the methods of ludic yūgen demand an acknowledgement of potency of improvisation as the ground of the creative act.

A Dialectic Aesthetic: Beyond light and dark

The aesthetic of yūgen has been described as being principally concerned with the dialectic of light and dark. I must add the dialectic of clarity and obscurity as another defining aspect of the yūgen aesthetic through history. Within the studios of ludic yūgen, I will go further and suggest that ludic yūgen is an aesthetic of dialectics. Recording artists have often been drawn to working methods that acknowledge the power of oppositions in tension and the interplay of polar ideas and forces in the creative act. Playing with dialectics, binaries and oppositions, utilising paradox, juxtaposition and contrast are all methods integral to ludic yūgen.

A telling example of the use of dialectic in recording comes from the recording of the seminal album *Pet Sounds*, written and produced by Beach Boy auteur Brian Wilson. During the sessions,

engineer Chuck Britz challenged Brian's ear, suggesting the vocals were sour. Brian told him to wait until additional vocal overdubs were added. The discordant notes were essential to the overall sound, he said. In all that plushness, that perfection, Brian wanted an undercurrent that suggested something was wrong. (Fusilli 2005, p.22)

Wilson, employing the sweet/sour dialectic, was using the tension between the discordant and the consonant to bring depth to the music and to hint that monsters
lurked in the shadows of the Californian dream. The dialectic of dissonance and consonance is perennial in music, and as Kingsley suggests, “dissonance is a very philosophical concept – one man’s dissonance is another man’s consonance”. (Juno 1994, p.91) For some, the sugary layered vocals of the Beach Boys were themselves disturbing harbingers of the demonic flipside of the summer of love, the Manson family prophetically rendered in flawed harmony.

In the studios of ludic yūgen, the recording artist is inevitably dealing with the dialectic of consonance and dissonance. As Gracyk writes,

when one is interested in exploring texture, timbre, and rhythmic values – hallmarks of rock – amplification and the electronic mixing of sounds, allow far more ‘noise’ into the mix. The result is not noise in the sense of unpitched sound, indeterminate pitch, or disruptive sound. As Russolo notes, ‘every noise has a pitch’. (1996, p.115)

Gracyk is suggesting that there is a musicality to the inevitable noises of rock and the studio art of recording. Noise need not be dissonance, and consonance is not necessarily music. The tension between signal and noise, between the pure acoustic sound and its’ distortion, is fundamental to the methods of ludic yūgen. Producer Butch Vig baldly clarifies his preference for this dialectic when he says that “I love hooks messed up with noise . . . that dichotomy of noise and melody blended together” (Schuftenan 2012, p.234). The mix of recognizable melodic shapes with the blurred fuzz of noise can be seen as an expression of other dialectical pairings; the known with the unknown, foreground and background, clarity and obscurity. There are many ways I can describe this dialectic that is essential to the art of recording using the methods of ludic yūgen.
Other artists utilise paradox and contrast as guiding techniques for recording. Robert Pollard has revealed that

If I thought song was too creamy or poppy, then I would fuck it up. We’d put a drone through it or drench it in feedback. Add a track of somebody snoring. . . . Or you can fuck things up in the opposite way by giving a pretty, lilting lyric to a song that’s otherwise heavy or abrasive. (Woodworth 2006, p.32)

Pollard’s pretty/ugly dialectic is analogous to the noise/melody dichotomy Vig enthuses about. What is important to understand in the context of ludic yūgen is that the qualities on either end of an aesthetic spectrum are never unadulterated, never purely existent in the recording. The process of multitrack recording allows textures, timbres, melodies and rhythms to be mixed together, and in doing so, the tensions inherent in any dialectic relationship are intensified and magnified. There is no pure affect with the dialectic, as it is a situation of evolving continua, where any tendency to extremity is tempered by the interplay of opposites.

Eno has expressed his preference for a dialectical approach to recording, stating that “I think it’s a thrill to hear the contrast between the expressionless and grid-like with a beautiful voice over it” (Turner 2015). He is not alone in enjoying and employing the organic/synthetic dialectic, envisaged by Reynolds as “some kind of interface between real time, hands-on playing and the use of digital effects and enhancement” (Reynolds 2007, p.192). Recording artist Kevin Martin stresses that “it's the connection between 'Techno' and 'Animal' that's interesting” (p.193). Trent Reznor has revealed that the album “Pretty Hate Machine was about juxtaposing human imperfections against very cold, sterile arrangements” (Schuftan 2012, p.198), a creative technique David Bowie was using during the making of Low, “welding R&B beats to
electronic soundscapes” (Wilcken 2005, p.33). In the sessions, Bowie was playing with
the guitarist Carlos Alomar, whose approach to music was relatively straight forward.
As Alomar said, “I’m interested in what’s commercial, what’s funky and what’s going
to make people dance!” (Wilcken 2005, p.68). This “creative tension between
(Alomar’s) traditionalist approach and Eno’s experimentalism” (Wilcken 2005) was
crucial in producing the startling evocations on the album, and serves as evidence for
Eno’s belief that “the interesting place is not chaos, and it’s not total coherence. It’s
somewhere on the cusp of those two” (Wilcken 2005, p.68). This is firmly aligned to
ludic yūgen’s employment of the dialectic in order to foster the complexity of tensions,
rather than indulging in the simplicity of extremes.

In ludic yūgen, the dialectic is not restricted to dark/light, clarity/obscurity and
organic/synthetic pairings. The dialectics available to the recording artist are limited
only by imagination. The playful ethos of ludic yūgen encourages all combinations and
tensions between opposites to exist. In such a context, a recording such as the
Minutemen album Double Nickels on the Dime is vitally important. “The Minutemen’s
juxtapositions . . . were so jarringly original . . . mixing improbable genres. . . . (Their)
unorthodox habit of putting anything with anything recurs throughout the record”
(Fournier 2007, p.21). The Minutemen were intentionally mixing opposites, throwing
genres against each other to see what happened, to feel the sparks of friction a simply
because they could. They were playing with dialectics, without regard for the heavy
hand of the genre police, whose taxonomies were integral to the artifice of authenticity
rampant in rockist and punk circles.

Ludic yūgen has room for all dialectics, including Robert Pollard’s formulation
of the opposition between “what was mythology and what was reality . . . what’s true
internally and what’s important externally” (Woodworth 2006, 35). Musical creation
can be seen as the pursuit of rendering the internal truth of an emotion as a sonic reality. The musical and performance aesthetic of the Ramones, sprouting from subterranean 70’s New York, came to embody “the very contradictions of punk itself – was it funny or scary? Absurd or nihilistic? Art or trash? Anti-mainstream or pop? ‘Stoopid’ or smart? Ironic or sincere?” (Rombes 2005, p.32). The Ramones were a cartoon of dialectics, breakneck three chord trash entwined with bubblegum vocal melodies, all tensions reflected poignantly in the personal animosity between a left-wing intellectual singer and a fascistic guitarist. Some recording artists see their work as inescapably dialectic, Genesis P.Orridge stating “it’s the job of the artist to reflect their times and hopefully illuminate some of the dark shadow side of society’s guilt and fear, and expose that hypocrisy for the danger that represents” (Daniel 2008, p.126–127). Similarly, composer Gershon Kingsley believes that “only when we become conscious of our evil side – when we realise this is part of our own personality – can we control it” (Juno 1994, p.85). Kingsley goes further into the dialectical realm when he posits that “all creation involves destruction; it comes out of destruction and chaos. . . . I feel that the most interesting things in life are caused by their opposites” (Juno 1994, p.88-90).

In ludic yūgen, I am making conscious use of the dialectic in the creative process. When multi-tracking a piece, I am inevitably working with tensions and contrasts, with sonic forces that oppose and meld, mix and bind. Carr (2011) writes that “one of the projects of being human is making sense of nothingness” (p.13). In the studios of ludic yūgen, the emptiness - the void - at the heart of yūgen is acknowledged, and through our playful recordings we make some sense of the world and our non-extant selves. We are neither here nor there, yet definitively everywhere.
Omission

Omission is fundamental to every creative art, because to create means to choose, and in the very act of choosing there is omission, as the choice of A omits B to Z. That which is not chosen is omitted. The art of recording involves working with moments and fragments, transforming parts and events in the editing of the whole. Recording software allows for the manipulation of tracks as fragments of the performed totality. In the process of mixing tracks, pieces of recorded music are omitted in creating the final balance of the overall musical work. Omission is essential to the art of recording.

In ludic yūgen, there are more conscious applications of the method of omission. Principal among these applications is the deliberate omission of the elements of the structured popular song; verse, chorus and bridge. By omission of all or part of that traditional structure, the recordist is working in the spirit of ludic yūgen. In ludic yūgen, the creation of a piece is not guided by the folk model of song structure as it is accepted in the realm of popular music. The narrative thrust of much popular song lyricism is of little concern in ludic yūgen. A story might take shape during an improvisation, but this is an accidental result of the creative process. The approach of ludic yūgen towards the song format is expressed well by Brian Eno, who has said “I find songs such a tired format, I’m always trying to find new things that you can do with them” (Turner 2015). The thoughts of songwriter Jimmy Webb align with Eno’s call for new ways of structuring song. Webb says

I can see a lot of things to be done with the songs that haven’t been done with them. We haven’t seen a lot of songs written in free verse. We haven’t seen a lot
of songs written in a chain of consciousness with no particular verses, choruses or bridges. (Griffiths 2004, p.23)

Eno and Webb are expressing a desire to see the song form move beyond the pop template of verse, chorus and bridge, and calling for an approach to songwriting that embraces the playful subversions of ludic yūgen. In ludic yūgen, artists are asked to think differently regarding song form, to omit the tradition of verse, chorus and bridge, to playfully conceive of the parts of song as “a setting, a statement, and a shift in scale” (Thomas 2013, p.36), as the base, plateau and summit of a jagged mountain, as the steps of a recipe being prepared in a ghost’s kitchen.

The technique of omission, when employed, can provoke an active listening response from an audience. In omitting parts of a song, in refusing to spoon-feed an audience narrative clarity, the ludic recordist is, consciously or not, asking the listener to cohere a sense of meaning to a work. The lyrics of the Ramones “are really a sort of loosely linked chain of phrases that suggest or imply a larger story that the listener can fill in” (Rombes 2005, p.92), and similarly, Schuftan (2012) has described the songs on Beck Hansen’s album ‘Odelay’ as the result of “a way of composing by cutting rather than writing”, an example of “what Beck called ‘pure deconstruction’ – the singer tried to leave things unfinished so that listening became an active rather than passive pursuit” (p.279). Omission demands more of an audience, as the ‘missing’ pieces of a song’s architecture, the gaps in narrative comprehension, create the conditions where a listener will provide their own interpretation of the piece in order to have that satisfaction that is self-wrought understanding. The listener will colour in the outline and finish the sentences, this urge to make sense being intrinsic to the human condition.
In the deliberate omission of pieces of the popular song – verse, chorus and bridge – ludic yūgen plays with time, often resulting in pieces of shorter duration than is typical in the recording tradition of popular song. The ludic recordist working in the spirit of yūgen has abandoned the construction of three-minute recordings, favouring more direct and truncated forms. As repetition of verse and chorus is deemed a failure of imagination in ludic yūgen, a recordist is more likely to improvise a form having its own logic. In regards to the brevity of the ludic song, Byrne (2012) has stated that “shortness shouldn’t matter anymore . . . length doesn’t matter anymore” (p.181), and his position is exemplified by the early work of Guided by Voices, memorably described as “30 second songwriting . . . pop song concentrate” (Woodworth 2006, p.3).

The short pieces of ludic song could even be seen as a return to the era in which rock and roll music was born.

In a telling exchange, American rockabilly revivalists The Cramps are listening to an early rock and roll record during an interview. The record finishes, and the interviewer says “that one ends too soon; I wish that would have continued” (Juno 1994, p.26). Cramps guitarist Poison Ivy Rorschach responds:

That’s something people don’t say much anymore: ‘I wish that could have continued’. . . . I think a lot of these records were designed to make you go, ‘Put it on again!’ It’s been a long time since I’ve heard anything contemporary that I felt that way about. (Juno 1994, p.26)

Poison Ivy posits that early recording artists intentionally truncated their songs in an attempt for an audience to repeatedly play the recording. In the practice of ludic yūgen, one would not specifically aim for such listener reaction, as the focus is on process, not reception. The brevity of tunes in the ludic yūgen studio is the result of an aesthetic that
desires to leave something to the imagination of the listener. In ludic yūgen, the repetitions of the chorus and the obligatory guitar solo bridge are discarded and the improvisations of the moment are exalted.

The role of the recorded vocal in ludic yūgen reveals another applied method of omission. In ludic yūgen, the recording of the voice is often the final track added to the project. The drums, bass and guitar have been stacked against each other and the voice comes in to garnish the created textures as it threads through the rhythmic and melodic forest of the instrumental tracks. The vocal is most often doing this as an improvised response to the previously recorded music, and is embellishing the story that the music tells, rather than telling a straightforward narrative itself. What this means is that the voice, in extemporising melodic and lyrical fragments, is omitting the narrative task that the voice is often asked to undertake in popular song. The semantic content of the lyric/vocal is omitted. This approach to creative vocalising has been employed by Radiohead’s Thom Yorke, particularly on the albums *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, and those that have followed. Yorke’s use of “studio technology and unusual vocal technique are both applied to dyslexify his already oblique, fragmented words” and in preparation for recording *Kid A*, Yorke "got really into the idea of my voice being another one of the instruments, rather than this precious, focus thing all the time" (Reynolds 2001). Yorke managed to escape the semantic claws of language by altering the voice with technology, in the process “turning the voice into an instrumental texture, Other-is-ing it via effects” (ibid.). He created a performance that rendered the voice as blurred sonic image, limiting the listener’s aural gaze on his voice, the voice bleeding into the other instruments and losing its place of eminence as carrier of meaning for the recording. As Lin recounts, “with new sequencers, new recording software and a new frame of mind, Thom was able to dislocate his voice ad infinitum, to obscure its emotive signifiers and
emphasise texture, to reposition it from a privileged status to just another instrument” (Lin 2011, p.21).

Yorke is not the first recording vocalist to seek ways in which the voice can be used as an instrument, rather than a generator of literal meaning. David Bowie, on the album *Low*, created recordings in which the “lyric was as much texture as voice intonation or instrumental background – to the point that the words in ‘Warszawa’ are literally in an imaginary language” (Wilcken 2005, p.68-69). As Wilcken (2005) suggests, “the refusal of language is also the refusal of narrative” (p.133), and Bowie credits Brian Eno with steering him away from the writing of songs as stories, towards “the idea of processing, to the abstract of the journey of the artist” (p.133). Wilcken characterises *Low* as representing a “mapless, backwards journey to the blind, pre-lingual world that will remain forever mysterious” (Wilcken 2005, p.136), and Bowie’s abandonment of narrative is crucial in engendering the sense of yūgen that Wilcken’s description alludes to.

The vocalist who refuses to tell a story is operating in the ludic yūgen tradition. The recordist who abandons the hoary structures of popular song – verse, chorus and bridge – is an artist in the ludic yūgen vein. The omission of sense and structure is indicative that the methods of ludic yūgen are in effect. It is what is not there, what is omitted, that defines any recordist as belonging to the lineage of ludic yūgen. The music of the Minutemen, a Californian trio of the 1980s, was described as “in a different language (having) no specific reference to any spot on the rock spectrum”, as they employed no “fat guitars, no power chords, no mouthfeel!” (Fournier 2007, p.3). The band’s music omitted the standard vocabulary of rock music, and those omissions created “completely original and brave music”, sui generis. The example of the
Minutemen serves to illustrate the value of omission as a method available to the recordist in the studios of ludic yūgen.

**Limitations – Spare means**

In the studios of ludic yūgen, limitation is a familiar method employed by the recordist, for at its heart yūgen is an acknowledgement of the limits of knowledge and understanding. Yūgen deals with the overwhelming scale of the universe and traffics in the unspoken and the unspeakable. Philosophically, yūgen is an aesthetic borne of limitation, and in artistic practice, a recordist engages with materials with an aim of producing works of depth from sparse means. Aside from the philosophic, there is a practical consideration for recordists in their use of limitation. Limitation, the use of sparse means, can be seen as a pre-requisite to the work of recording itself. Without limitation, nothing gets done. This reality was best expressed by recordist Brian Eno, in an address he gave at an Italian art school in 2009. Eno laid out the problem, asking

> Given billions of options, where do I start with computers? There's too much to do . . . Options mean the number of choices you have available to you. It's very difficult to have a relationship with an absolutely unlimited set of possibilities.

(Eno 2009)

Most recordists work with a digital audio workstation, incorporating a sequencer offering hundreds of tracks and hundreds (if not thousands) of plug-ins and software instruments and samples. It is an environment in which potential options for creative choice are unlimited and such choice, as Eno suggests, can be overwhelming and ultimately paralysing. Martyn Ware, best known for his work with The Human League, warns of the danger of the modern studio, where there are “so many possibilities, such
incredible resources. But the danger is that you get option paralysis: you look at all these banks and banks of possibilities, and wonder what on earth they all do” (Cook 2009, p.78). Ware recalls the earlier period of his recording career as a time when “the limitations of what was available to us then, compared to today’s technology . . . actually made for a more spicy creative environment” (Cook 2009, p.77). Ware’s experience of “the entire gamut of recording possibilities over the last thirty years or more, from the most meagre resources back at the start, through to eighty-piece orchestras” has resulted in his belief “that if you have a limited palette you end up with something that is more focused and more direct” (Cook 2009, p.77).

Gracyk (1996) states that “one’s options at any point in recording are virtually unlimited. The opportunity of retakes and editing generates different criteria for success” (p.79–80). Recording is a field of vast choice, but more is not necessarily better. Pioneering recording artists such as Jimi Hendrix have acknowledged the benefits of limitation. In an interview with Beat International, Hendrix once stated that “Who needs 16 tracks? You need only 4, really” (Perry 2004, p.13). Hendrix built his own studio with the latest technology, yet knew that the endless permutations that a studio offers can become a trap to the artist. One of the results of the technological revolution in recording is that

computers and editing systems have presented artists and producers with a new range of possibilities – one of which is perfection. More than ever, perfect tempo, pitch and general performance can be achieved, even though it is often at the expense of soul. (Cunningham 1998, p.357)

Cunningham (1998) points to a danger inherent in the technophilic corners of recording. The pursuit of perfection, whatever it may be, is a potentially Dantesque cul-de-sac for
any obsessive recordist. The temptation to correct the minor flaws that occur in performance, to ensure that the rhythms align to a precise grid, is strong. The recording technology allows for all these forms of correction and enhancement, and it is imperative that a recordist ask themselves if it is desirable to pursue the mirage of perfection merely because the technology permits such futility.

Some see the notion of perfection as flawed in itself, and indeed have expressed preference for the limited, for the unsophisticated, for the technically inferior, these flaws being more revelatory in expressing the human condition. The critic Simon Reynolds notes that while “the octave-spanning acrobatics and mannered idiosyncrasies of consummate singers like Tim Buckley can astound and enthral, fill you with awe . . . a weak or limited voice can be more heart-quaking” (Reynolds 2007, p.172). Recording artist and polymath David Byrne, in the concert film Stop Making Sense, says that “The better the singer's voice is, the harder it is to believe what they're saying. So I turn my weaknesses into strengths” (Byrne, from self-interview, Stop Making Sense). Pixies guitarist Joey Santiago, speaking to the unique nature of his playing, has admitted that "part of that style, where I'm coming from, is probably lack of technique. I can't really do anything else but what I do” (Sisaro 2006, p.86). The foregoing thoughts of Reynolds, Byrne and Santiago are illustrative that the technical limitations of an artist’s ability can enhance the potency of a recorded performance. An artist employing a sparse palette is able to conjure an elemental force that contains more depth and resonance than all the mannered, tutored nuances of the tasteful virtuoso. Artist Yoko Ono, in an interview with the Wire magazine in 1996, expressed succinctly the virtue of simplicity and limitation. She said “In classical music, people were doing very complex things, for the sake of being complex. I learned that rock, with two simple chords, can bring an incredible communication of the spirit” (Ono 1996).
In ludic yūgen, limitation is a valuable method of creation. Crucially, limitation allows a recording artist to navigate the infinite combinations of the digital audio workstation. By limiting the instrumentation, number of tracks or complexity of signal processing, a recordist can produce powerful work without becoming ensnared in the labyrinth of possibilities inherent in the modern digital studio. Less is not only more in this instance; less is actually a pre-condition of creation. Limitation is also integral in the studios of ludic yūgen as a method leading to the discovery and embrace of technical shortcomings in the development of a unique artistic voice. The limits of technique give an artist a signature expression. In ludic yūgen, it is the less technically proficient artist who often comes up with work that is new and bold, because it is all they know. Working within limitations can produce strong work; it may lack the range of the trained, but has the depth of the true original.

**Shadows and darkness**

As established earlier, yūgen as an aesthetic is concerned with shadows and darkness. In the visual arts, theatre and poetry, this emphasis on the deep and hidden is achieved through the use of lighting, shading and the connotations of vocabulary. In ludic yūgen, I am dealing with music and the art of recording. In this realm of sound, shadows and darkness are created through the use of various techniques and technologies. Shadows of sound can be conjured by echo, “a post factum imitation of an initial sound . . . often referred to as delay” (Zak 2001, p.70), and others are created by ambience, also known as reverberation, described as a process whereby “multiple echoes produced by sound reflecting randomly off of surfaces in an enclosed space accumulate to form an aural image” (Zak 2001, p.76).
Delay and reverb are therefore concerned with the aural image of a recording, and in particular are the generators of the shadows of sound so integral to the aesthetic of ludic yūgen. Playing with delay and reverb is compulsory to any recordist working in the studios of ludic yūgen. Recording studios, in the analog days, were dependent on the ambient quality of the live room, and the delay effect has been integral to the sonic vocabulary of popular music since the beginning.

Echo conjures “mirror, memory, shadow, doppelganger, color, mask, ghost, projection, hallucination, hiccup, ricochet, quiver, and pulse” (Zak 2001, p.76), while Ambience (or reverb) is a mediating force that gives form and character to the sound world of the recording. . . . It draws the listener into an aural world whose shape, dimensions, lighting, and perspective it helps to define. . . . It provides the illusion that the recording exists in some unique place, the true world of the disembodied voice. (Zak 2001, p.77)

Echo and ambience (delay and reverb) place sound in space, and in playing with the sound and the space, I am dealing with reflections, extensions, elongations, manipulations, disguises and masks. The shadow aesthetic of yūgen is conjured in the audio realm through the use of echo and ambience.

Vocalist Thom Yorke attests to the potency of delay and reverb, stating that the effect changes the way people play. They'll play to it. And that's really inspiring, because it's like having a new instrument. If you've got an incredibly cool reverb or something on your voice, suddenly you're really excited about what you're doing again. (Reynolds 2001)

In recording, Yorke points to how a delay or reverb effect actually changes a performance, how the vocalist or instrumentalist will ‘play to it’, navigating through the
shadows of sound the effect produces and modulating their own expression to make best use of the sonic character of the affected space.

Recording has always been an art of sound moving through space, and recordists have always sought to create unique sonic environments for performances to be captured in. With the advent of digital recording, reverb became remarkably malleable, and this allowed for the use of spaces from elsewhere and nowhere. No longer was a recordist limited to using the ambience of their studio space. Digital reverb meant that the sonic ambience of a space could be captured as an impulse response, and an approximation of that space could be generated in a software environment. A vocalist could (technically) record using the ambience of the Taj Mahal or Abbey Road Studio 3. Digital reverb can also conjure the impossible spaces of the imagination, creating Escher-like reverbs for a performer to explore.

Martyn Ware, from the Human League, suggested that the possibilities of digital reverb “opened up a pathway to using the best expression of acoustic instruments and then electronically mutating them” (Cunningham 1998, p.293) and this is a potentially potent use of reverb in the digital studio. Yorke’s use of the effect in the moment is another creative use of reverb in the studio. Recordists operating in the studios of ludic yūgen have always recognised the potential of delay and reverb to give shadows and depth to any performance and the playful use of these technologies remains essential to the art of recording.

Yūgen is literally concerned with darkness. In the transformation of the yūgen aesthetic into the methods of ludic yūgen described earlier in this thesis, there is an emphasis on the positive connotations of darkness. There is a sense in which the ecstasy of darkness can be embraced. Sonically, this darkness is often created by the use of distortion. Distortion, in relation to sound, is defined as the overpowering of an
amplification device. The most obvious use of distortion in the world of recorded popular music is the overdriven guitar sound of countless rock, metal and blues artists, where the electric guitar signal is boosted and magnified. It is a sound on steroids.

In the studios of ludic yūgen, distortion refers to any manipulation of a signal until it is bent out of its original shape. Ludic recording artists are wont to play around with effects, and this means that they do not restrict their distortions to an overdriven signal. Certainly, overdrive may be part of a signal chain, but it is often combined with other effects that create a more complex texture. The use of distortion, as a method of ludic yūgen, is intimately allied to the search for novel textures, and texture lies at the heart of the sonic machinations engineered in the studios of the contemporary ludic recordist.

There are recording artists whose whole aesthetic approach to sound is tied up with the joy of distortion. Cramps’ vocalist Lux Interior, in describing the difference between tube and transistor amplifiers, illustrates how important the sound of distortion is to some artists, when he says that

With tubes, the sound you make gets turned into fire, then the fire gets turned back into music that comes out of a speaker. But with transistors, your sounds go into a little piece of cold clay before they get turned into music again. It might have less distortion, but it lacks the excitement that a tube with fire generates. Engineers today kill themselves to get rid of every bit of excitement; they have no idea of what it is that’s exciting in music. (Juno 1994, p.18)

Lux Interior laments the clean sonic sheen that is exceedingly simple to achieve in the digital recording environment. For Lux, and many others, it is distorted sound that gives music character and generates excitement. In the words of The Surfaris, “most
experts generally agree that when the music gets too good and too polished, it isn’t considered the real thing” (Juno 1994, p.64). The Surfaris are not only referring to authenticity here, but rather to the inherently stimulating nature of interestingly distorted sound. I will go so far as to say that distortion is excitement, and this equation is continually explored in the studios of ludic yūgen. To reiterate, distortion in the studios of ludic yūgen refers to any manipulation that bends an original signal out of shape. It can also refer more widely to an overall approach to the playing and recording of music.

In the ludic yūgen tradition, hip-hop pioneers Public Enemy “jammed in the studio like James Brown's band, creating natural tensions and queasiness when things didn’t line up perfectly, a push and pull that by comparison made most hip-hop sound clinical and safe” (Weingarten 2010, p.11). Public Enemy eschewed perfection, seeking instead to capture the eldritch energy of slight misalignment, and in the process making other artists of the time sound tame. Trent Reznor’s use of “breaths, whispers and screams” (Carr 2011, p.34) in vocal performance was a distortion of the trained singer’s art, but the inclusion of these sonic utterances gave sinew and weight to his aural dioramas of trauma and angst. No bravura bel canto technique would have carried his stark self-loathing as well as did the vocal detritus and gesticulations on his album *Pretty Hate Machine*.

Byrne (2012) posits an interesting idea when he suggests that “the fuzziness and ambiguity inherent in low quality signals and reproductions might actually be a factor that gives the viewer or listener a way in . . . an intimacy and involvement becomes possible that perfection might have kept at bay” (p.173-174). Here Byrne casts distortion as an imperfection that allows the listener to slip into the sound. Distortion is not only excitement, it is in effect an invitation into the music.
Since the beginning of rock and roll, recording artists have sought to create shadows and darkness in sound. Echo, ambience and distortion are all essential methods by which a recordist hopes to arrive at novel textures and contribute to the recording of compelling creative artefacts. The studios of ludic yūgen are sites where shadows and darkness are tools an artist uses in the pursuit of illuminating the new.

Conclusion

The use of the creative methods described here reveals that studio recordists of the rock tradition have established a lineage of praxis that I call ludic yūgen. Philosophically, this entails a playful approach to the material of sound, coupled with a disregard for common practice theory and technical virtuosity. There is an emphasis on capturing songs as they come into being, a method which recognizes the potency of the natal song captured in recording. Ludic recordists privilege experimentation with texture, this quality being ascendant in the aesthetic hierarchy of rock’s sonic art. Allied with this is a tendency towards humour, as regards the role of the ‘serious’ in musical creativity.

This lineage also reveals the utter significance of possessing a unique artistic vision, the lack of which negates any recording artist the chance of belonging to the ludic yūgen tradition. Artists creatively engaged with the methods of miegakure, improvisation, dialectic combination, omission, limitation and the use of shadows and darkness constitute the lineage of ludic recordists explored here. In tracing this lineage of recording artists working with these methods, weight and depth is given to the explication of the translation of the aesthetic of yūgen into the methods of ludic yūgen. Simultaneously, my own praxis as a ludic recordist is situated within an historic creative current.
CHAPTER 3

AN ACCOUNT OF PROCESS

The final part of the written complement is the exegesis, an account of the creative process and an honest description of my creative journey as a ludic recordist. I have been keeping a chronological record of my recording practice and intellectual ideas around the creative work. I first started this exegesis in 2009 and have been adding to it ever since. The exegesis as it appears before you is an edited account of key moments in the creative practice. The writing of the exegesis has in some sense slowed down since I discovered the methods of ludic yūgen, as I’ve been applying those methods in the studio.
The research originally focused on the practice of detournement in sonic art. Detournement, a Situationist term, refers in the broadest sense to the use of existing media in a new context. French theorists/artists, most notably Guy Debord (1977), popularised the term, and for them it took various forms – the simplest of which was the appropriation of a comic strip and the replacement of the existing speech bubbles with gleanings from the sloganeering and polemic of the Situationist writers. Their detournement had the subversive intent of undermining notions of the autonomy of fine art: in any event, they seemed more interested in theory than the production of artwork – or, more accurately, their focus was on theory as artwork.

Early in the research, I coined the term ‘Sonoplastica’ to designate the territory of audio exploration. However, my initial practice was not confined to the sonic realm. I found that creating sound for found video footage was an interesting method to produce powerful work. The manner by which sound and image inform each other has been a constant fascination throughout the research. With sonic detournement as my focus, I proceeded to branch out and investigate other areas of interest.

These included:

Shamanism and sound healing – archaic sonic knowledge – overtones, Gaian philosophy and chant, Cymatics and the effect of sound on matter.
Noise – the co-option of noise, noise as disgust, noise as necessity in the face of muzak, noise as doubt

Sound as weapon – the potential of constructing sonic self-defence system for a besieged populace

Improvisation – rhizomatic composition / comprovisation, immanence, lack of structure as structure

The Gothic Sonic – the low material, the abject, the uncanny voice, monstrosity

The Singing Cyborg – the laptop/voice hybrid, extended vocal instruments, post-human music, glossolalia into glitcholalia, multiple voices reflecting the unstable mutable self, vocally controlling software.

 Outsider Performance – construction of authenticity, biography as marketing, forgery, multiple identities of performers, who qualifies and why, who judges, why is there a market for this?

Burroughs – the electronic revolution, cut-up reveals truth/future, language as virus

Ritual as theatre – exorcist music, rituals of atonement, performance as prayer (Keiji Haino), performance as spiritual practice, as acknowledgement of ancestors.

Laptop production – the circumstances of who makes the machine – the material reality of laptop as instrument

During this time, detournement remained the guiding idea, and I was searching for a field to flesh out the notion of detournement. In hindsight, I was looking for some specific intention for the method, and a particular field from which I was intending to detourn.
Two events lured me away from detournement as the main topic of focus. The first occurred while watching the Alfonso Cuaron film ‘Children of Men’, in which there is a scene where Jasper (Michael Caine) asks his friend Theo (Clive Owen), “Are you feeling relaxed? Good. How about some Zen Music?” and proceeds to play pulsating distorted electronic music and dance like a shaman. The second event was my reading Marc Masters’ history of No Wave, the post-punk scene of late 70’s New York, and coming across Glenn Branca talking about his initial artistic intentions: “This music was intended to challenge the audience, because when I went to a gig I wanted to be challenged. . . . I wanted somebody to kick me in the face, metaphorically” (Masters, 2008).

The first allowed me to see Zen music as a vivid description for interesting music. More importantly, Branca’s idea sparked the thought of Zen music as sonic koans – slaps to the face, to awaken the listener/performer. I had encountered writings on Zen much earlier in life and had an affinity for what I perceive as Zen notions - the transcendence of binaries and opposites, the remembrance of the Oneness of things, the abandonment of conceptual differences and a focus on the unmediated intuition of reality. As we know, the philosophies of Zen applied to musical composition and performance have been investigated by Cage (though not with distorted guitars); he explored the notion of detaching the self from the compositional process, audience perception as the primary locus of artistic work and an emphasis on process rather than product. Zen music could therefore be seen as part of the broader art music tradition and a legitimate field of research. My enthusiasm for detournement as a thesis topic began to wane as the idea of Zen music loomed large in my thoughts. My challenge was to find a way into some aspect of Zen that could inform my artistic practice, which
remained the composition of audio-visual pieces; I was looking for a more specific, and personal, focus for the research.

After many detours (some listed above), my readings led me to the subject of medieval Japanese aesthetics. Here was a philosophy of art that grew from a culture steeped in Mahayana Buddhism, Shinto animism and Zen. I had already considered detouring the haiku form and butoh dance, and had found the aesthetics of wabi-sabi appealing. However, the wabi-sabi aesthetic has been thoroughly explored in recent times and I wished not to retread that particular path. Were there any other notions from medieval Japanese aesthetics that attracted me? The concept of yūgen (mystery and depth) struck me immediately. To some, it indicates a quality of profound mystery: others see it as aesthetic of shadows, an aesthetic bound up with the dialectic of light and dark. No one quite seems to agree on a definition for the word, and this lack of clarity is immensely appealing to me. This is not to say that the word means whatever you wish it to mean; there is an unyielding emphasis on mystery at the core of the yūgen ideal. Yūgen is an aesthetic ideal, a principle. It is a complex notion and, as used originally in the Noh theatre, stresses the practice of artistic detachment with an emphasis on refinement and elegance. The performer and the play must have yūgen for the audience to experience yūgen. By most accounts, yūgen is a rare occurrence in any art form.

Simultaneous with my yūgen epiphany, my concentration on audio-visual composition transformed into a focus on the creation of ethnopsychedelic performance. I had rediscovered my voice and became eager to experiment with the processing and distortion of vocals. Having sung in bands since teenage years, this constituted a
homecoming, of sorts. The research now reached the point where I could crystallize the
topic into one phrase: ethnopsychedelic performance as the embodiment of ludic yūgen.
But what would guide the construction of the performance?

It was while experimenting with an image one day that I produced a garish, mandala-type scene on the monitor. It had a close resemblance to a heruka, a wrathful deity from the Vajrayana Buddhist iconographic pantheon. It was striking and bewitching, and within memory an association formed with the Mahayana tradition’s figure of the Bodhisattva – the enlightened beings who turn back from nirvanic bliss to help the rest of us who are not yet liberated. Further reading revealed a Bodhisattva could be born into any of the Six Realms and could take any form whatsoever. This fired my imagination and I had the thematic framework for my performance. The challenge is to embody ludic yūgen in ethnopsychedelic performances depicting a Bodhisattva’s journey through the Six Realms. The research requires an investigation of yūgen, its history and how it has evolved. Importantly, I will endeavour to give an expanded reading of the concept as embracing a playful ethos, to aid in the evolution of ludic yūgen as an aesthetic principle. The practice of ethnopsychedelic performance is an attempt to conjure this quality in the artwork, its audience and myself.

This attempt to embody ludic yūgen through ethnopsychedelic performance recognizes that some art cannot be explained – it does not need to clarify, it retains aura through mystery, a mystery that is unlocked by the subjectivity of those who are open to it. My research is, in this sense, a re-mystification of artistic practice; however, it remains a journey that can be described. Knowledge arising from the research will be manifest in the ethnopsychedelic performance and my elucidation of ludic yūgen.
December 2011

In my construction of the aesthetic of ludic yūgen, several techniques and artistic strategies loomed large in the research. There was a focus on improvisation and the technique of miegakure, translated as hide-and-reveal. There is an emphasis on the use of shadows and darkness, the phenomena of appearance and disappearance, notions of clarity and obscurity.

It is interesting that ludicity (play) and yūgen come from a similar place – that of unknowing, of experimentation for its own sake. The ethnopsychedelic voice is a fascinating notion, but one I believe can be expanded to the electro-mythic voice. This is in part due to the narrative theme of the practice – the Bodhisattva in the Six Worlds – being mythically derived and an immense field of possibility. I prefer electro-mythic as it is closer to what the practice is involved in – the electronic, digital emulation of mythic space and the placing of the voice in those spaces. The use of impulse responses – recordings of the acoustic signature of a space – allows one to vocalize in any number of mythic spaces in constructing mythic voices. Electro-mythic also refers to two ideas that form the core of the sonic practice.

Firstly, there are the live improvised performances with voice and guitar, processed by laptop, which can be seen as being in the tradition of the singer-songwriter, and can be traced further back to the troubadours of medieval Europe and
the Middle East. This figure is loaded with cultural mythology but in using digital technology to distort and play with voice and guitar, an electro-mythic singer-songwriter is presented that is an extension of the acoustic possibilities of the role. The resulting improvisations are not instantly recognisable as songs, and the authenticity of the acoustically pure singer with his humble guitar is undermined. The nature of the vocalisations further reduces the clarity of the singer-songwriter cliché, being as they are glossolalic and sung in constructed invented languages. There is a paradox in using this pre-linguistic style with advanced technological processing, which I have called archaic cyborg music. In performing these improvisations, the setting will be important. I plan to create video for screening during the performance to evoke the various worlds. I can research the characteristics of these worlds, starting with a survey of translations of Buddhist texts that deal specifically with these realms. However, as I am treating the Six Realms as a metaphorical framework for human experience, it is possible and advisable to investigate other sources. These may include accounts of psychedelic experiences achieved via the use of psychoactive substances such as ayahuasca, DMT and LSD. Researchers such as Terence McKenna and Daniel Pinchbeck have detailed their journeys in psycho-nautical space and could prove useful in constructing some idea as to the characteristics of the Six Realms.

Secondly, I plan to create a faux record label to distribute recorded pieces of work. This label will specifically cater to the showcasing of outsider artists whose biographies and identities I will create. The musical recordings will be my own creations, but I shall create a mythology for each work and its invented performers. This is a parody of the marketing of the outsider artist, and I am dealing with authenticity and its cultural importance in the framing of the marginal artist. The practice also allows for an
acknowledgement of the restriction of the single self-identity, and can be seen as a protest for the acceptance of the multiple identities we each contain. The invention of alter-egos playing in the fields of faux primitive exotica has many cultural precedents, recording artists often releasing work complete with anthropological linear notes, and prominent among these is the late guitarist John Fahey, who created a character known as Blind Joe Death to present some of his finger-picking tunes.

Both the live improvisations and the alter-ego recordings have as their organizing theme and narrative thrust a single story: A Bodhisattva journeys through the six worlds of rebirth. This idea can be taken literally, and millions do believe in these realms and the Bodhisattva who journeys through them. However, the Six Worlds have also been seen as metaphors for psychological states of being in which humans may find themselves at various times. The creative challenge is to construct sonic works that reflect and evoke these worlds, through the use of voice, guitar and laptop processing. The research question then becomes how do I evoke these worlds in sound, in improvised performance or constructed recording? What spaces in this world can be acoustically captured and used as mythic realms in which to sing and play? What form (improvised performance or embellished recording) is best for the expression of the Bodhisattva-in-the-Six-Realms narrative?

July 2012

My current practice is the recording of short songs – ranging from 30 seconds to just over 2 minutes in length – featuring haiku-like lyrical structures. The drums are programmed, using MIDI, in the computer and I add improvised performances with
bass, guitar and voice. Shaping the piece during the mixing process is next, trying to create a sonic space for each instrument and the overall mix. This is a departure for me artistically as these songs are very accessible, compared to the more obscure improvisations usually undertaken. I find the recording and editing of these performances into a finished piece to be the most challenging and satisfying creative practice of the entire research period to date.

In multitrack recording, you build upon previously recorded tracks. My method is to program the drums, then improvise and record the bass line, then improvise and record the guitar, and finally add the vocal/lyric. After programming the drums (which are essentially created out of nothing in that they are a response to silence), at each stage, you are responding to the previous sound recording. The bass responds to the drums – the guitar responds to the bass and drums- and the vocal is a response to the drums, bass and guitar. At each stage of recording, the artist is responding to sonic material – and providing context. The drums are the foundational element of the sonic edifice – the bass contextualizes the drums, the guitar is framed by the bass and drums, and the vocal is the final and most obvious sonic layer that realises the penultimate context of the work. The listener is then the provider of the ultimate meaning for the work.

This change in direction began when I paused to ask myself what sounds I actually liked listening to and playing with. In recollecting my sonic life, I realized that I favour the sound of guitars, bass, drums and voice; in preferring this instrumentation, I am subscribing to the ‘rockist’ mythology that surrounds the power trio. The irony lies in that by using the ultimate rock instruments, one can create work far beyond the genre. With the software available to the sound artist today, an unlimited sonic palette is
available using these four instrumental elements. Digital signal processing and the emulation of spaces can create vivid sound worlds. In preferring standard rock instrumentation, I could be seen as returning to a more primitive state of sonic expression. I am perhaps a victim of retromania, Simon Reynolds’ term for the nostalgia infecting the contemporary musical landscape. In any event, the immediacy and simplicity of the resulting work appeal to me enormously. Additionally, my practice has become more fruitful due to the narrower focus on these instruments - it is as if the restriction has allowed for greater creative activity.

This current practice raises several vital questions in terms of the overall research project. Firstly, how do these short pieces relate to the ludic yūgen aesthetic, and, in particular, how is the recording process reflective of ludic yūgen? Secondly, what is electro-mythic about the process and product of these recordings? Is recording itself a process imbued with mythic resonance? How can I further (electro)mythologise these pieces in the context of the a journey in the six realms? What is the best use of these recordings in the presentation of the ‘six realms’ narrative? I shall be working on these questions in the near future.

I have outlined below the overall structure of the piece and how the individual tracks fit into that structure, as it stands now.
The overall structure of the work comes from an idea taken from Buddhist cosmology.

**THE SIX REALMS OF REBIRTH**

**Deva or 'God' Realm** - Defined by bliss and pleasurable states of all types, this realm is reminiscent of Greek myths about the realm of the gods. But in Buddhism, this is not an immortal state, and also not the ideal one for attaining liberation.

**Asura or 'Demi-God' Realm** - Also pleasurable, this realm is nevertheless defined by jealousy and competitiveness. Theravada teachings generally do not recognize this as a realm separate from the Deva realm.

**Human Realm** - A middle realm, our human existence is defined by our ability and free will to experience any state, from blissful to hellish.

**Animal Realm** - Within Buddhist cosmology, the animal realm is defined by ignorance, and an inability to think for oneself.

**Preta or 'Hungry Ghost' Realm** - This realm is defined by constant desire and greed.

**Naraka or 'Hell' Realm** - This realm is defined by hatred and rage, and by defining all other beings as enemies.

TRUNGPA – Qualities of the Six Realms

**God Realm** - eternity/emptiness; meditation/clear light

**Jealous God** realm - speed/stillness; birth

**Human realm** - real/unreal; illusory body

**Animal realm** - asleep/awake; dream

**Hungry Ghost realm** - grasp/let go; existence/becoming

**Hell realm** - pain/pleasure destroy/create
The work has the narrative structure of a journey through these six worlds of rebirth. These worlds can be taken literally as places of rebirth or can be viewed as metaphors for emotional and psychic states of the human experience. I am choosing the latter option. With a little imagination, any event, image, fact, moods can be seen as belonging to one or more of the realms of rebirth.

My intention at this stage is to structure the work as a traversal of the six realms. I might start with tracks from the deva realm and descend through to the hell realm, and then ascend back up to the deva realm, taking in each realm on the way. In this fashion, I might cycle through the realms by sequencing tracks according to the realm they represent and the direction I am going. However, the sequencing of the tracks is a process that demands experimentation and is not, at this stage, set in stone.

The individual works produced - how they are beginning to integrate with the proposed structure as a whole.

The following survey includes the title, lyric and world(s) of each sonic work.

YEARS AT TABLE – A night at the tables for a year it’s all good – I walk the miles, my shoes in the soot – hell

40 DAYS - Hit the town and see the light, my debt, my death – deva

BANKER LAMENT – Take your fucking war machine and fuck off, we all know that you sit upon a pile of corpses, and I can’t wait until we fill your sordid body with arrows and cut off your head, fuck off – hell, hungry ghost, human
BIG TREE - Caterpillar crawls upon the earth and gives birth to the butterfly – animal

BORN AGAIN – Times are a changing, days they are waiting to be born, you can’t stop it it’s out of the bottle, they will come back, and we know now that the future is ours - human

BRIEFCASE KILLA - As he opened the case, caught the shadow run across his face, and he signed in the blood running through his pen – preta/hungry ghost

COME SEPTEMBER – Come September, we’re going to chase, our kiss will heal the race - deva

COOCHIE - Eyes bright, eyes open wide, today is the day that the sky is gonna hear us cry, they’re gonna watch us die, for today is the day that the sun is gonna hear us cry, can you hear us cry? – human, asura

DILDO BUGOUT – If you want to make it in this world, get your hands in the bloody dirt, I can feel my fate, if someone’s not free then no one can be, not yet – human/preta

GOD DUST – How can you speak with a mouth full of dust? We’re coming now we’re coming back, how can you speak with a mouth full of dust? – human/deva

GONE TO FRESNO - Make me want to holler, baby I love your colour, don’t go changing, stay away from the bleach, it’s going to wash you away, stay away from the bleach, stay away – human/hell

GRINGO WITH A KILO – Gringo with the kilo, what can I say? He’s hooked up with the CIA, gonna set you up for life - Preta

HOARSE CODE – Don’t go changing, don’t go, makes you want to cry - human

HULLABALOO – You fade in you fade out, what’s all the hullabaloo, you god and the devil too, you fade in you fade out - Deva, hell, human
KLAN DENTIST – The deeper you go the darker it gets, so now that you know, it’s on with the show, you don’t want to know, the deeper you go the darker it gets – human/hell.

KOHL MYNAAH – I sit alone and I sit in mourning - human

LAZY LITTLE ELEPHANT DAYS – No matter how many flags you wrap yourself in, I can see right through your murderous skin, pray for us who don’t know heaven - preta

LION OF BUDDHA - I wear the dharma like a crown, can’t let no body get me down, I come from yesterday, be gone tomorrow, but I’m here today – deva/asura

LOSERVILLE – It’s your turn to sing, open your ears let the colours in, I don’t mind because I was never playing that game - human

LUDIC CROSS – I don’t envy the dead I don’t envy the rich, for the rich are the dead in the life that we live and they wrap us up in cages of their bones, I don’t want to be free – hell/human

MESOPOTAMIA – Say what you will about the end of days, say what you will – human/deva

METTANATURE – I can’t fight, stand up, stand up, I got sand in my toes, second-hand clothes - human

MILES TO GO - Let me go, let me go – animal/human/hell

MUTANGO – Howdy doodle motherfucker, howdy doodle motherfucker, listen here, it’s gonna take more than a rope from a chopper, Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper - hell

NECROFREE PLASMA – Sit yourself down, chillax, just going to tattoo this barcode on your face – hell/human/deva
ON TIC IN THE BURG - Gets kinda slinky as it goes along, we take our time ‘cause we love the sound, rub you up and rub you down, twist it in and slip it around, ahhhh, yeahhh – human/preta

PLEASE DON’T YOU - Please don’t you take my nothing away – human/asura

RASPBERRY HEPBURN - All this beauty and it goes to waste, and then I saw your face - human

RAVITY – Made our way through the streets, dancing all the way, I fly the flag of the free, don’t you be pointing that at me, I left my body, dancing all the way – human/deva

RUNWAY GOD – Gave you all I had, so when it comes down, everyone wants to be, you know I don’t sit where the sun don’t go but it ain’t shining shit on me, and when you know you know you know you know, you don’t know - human

SHIP SHOP - You hold it in your hand, people won’t you understand, got to let it go to get it back, you hold it in your hand - human

SLEEP WELL - Oh this machismo - asura

SO VISCIOUS - ah, fruity girl you’re so viscous so juicy, come on, let me take you to the seaside – human/preta

TIL JUPITER BREAKS - Slip away now, your work here is done, one day we’ll all be free, one day – deva/human

TOO BEAT TO WORK ON - My hands hurt, I’m fit to burst, another angel in captivity – hell/preta/human

UNDER THE SAND - Say no it don’t matter, hey hey it don’t matter, no it don’t matter it’s under the sand, hold on matter, no it don’t matter, corpse in my tank and the bodies they’re rank, they don’t matter now it’s under the sand, you got sand in your eye, sand in your toe, you got nowhere to go, never say never, go home – preta/human/animal/hell
UPDRAGGER - Sing sing sing like you know the words, there ain’t no tunes in the back of a hearse, but a dream – deva/human

WAZZCOOL - Hazy days Hazy days Hazy days - human

WILLIE THE SHEIKH - My problem is I don’t trust people, wasn’t it Willie the Sheikh that said man who doesn’t enjoy music has something wrong with his heart – human/deva

The process of categorizing the tracks as belonging to one or other of the six realms provided the following insights into the research. The realm into which each sonic work belongs is not necessarily decided by lyrical content, although this can be a decisive factor. The lyric/vocal improvisations are responses to the recorded sonic environment ie. in the recording process, the vocal is performed and recorded last, the lyric/vocal is a response to the sounds already recorded – drums, bass, guitar. My contention is that the timbre, ambience and textures of the instrumental tracks are the primary inspiration of the vocal performance and of the thematic concerns explored in the lyric. Take, for example, the track SO VISCOUS – the bass and guitar sounds are carnal and lascivious, and the vocal, with its exaggerated sleaze and pornographic exhortations, is a response to those sounds. The sounds of the drums, bass and guitar create a frame for the vocal and the lyric. To paraphrase Frank Zappa, the timbre of a piece tells you what it is about. The process of translating the timbre and ambience of the drum/bass/guitar tracks into vocal/lyrical expression is one of the more mysterious aspects of this creative process.
David Thomas, from his lecture ‘The Geography of Sound’:

Sound . . . forces questions and confusions, doubts and mysteries, accidents and the unexpected . . . forces ambiguities . . . undermines contrivance and artifice . . . creates a puzzle . . . asks questions - a who, what, where, when and how encoded directly into sound itself. . . . (Sound) forces the human consciousness to create a context, a solution, an explanation. The explanation comes not in words but in vision, not in a logical sequence of linear thoughts but a collage of hieroglyphic sensations. It forces the engagement of the imagination. It forces the listener to free associate, to translate, to personalize. It changes the nature of the listening experience. And here we find the power of rock music, in particular, to express the thing beyond words and logic. It is vision and intuition.

(Thomas 1996)

Thomas’ description of the process of producing and listening to sound is crucial to this creative research. The artistic practice deals with how the vocalist responds to the sounds he is recording with, against, for. Sound demands a context, and the human voice is the most accessible and natural tool to provide that context. The vocal/lyric response is a “collage of hieroglyphic sensations” that arises from “vision and intuition”. In turn, this vocal and lyric provokes further questions and forces the engagement of imagination on the part of the listener.
When listening back to the tracks in the attempt to decide which of the six realms they might belong to, I was struck by how many of the tracks could fit into two or more of the six realms. This is perhaps due to the porous categories of the six realms and my metaphorical take on them. It could also be due to the ability of sound to trigger the imagination in multiform ways. The six realms, sonically manifested, might need to be demarcated more thoroughly if this taxonomy is to be useful in sequencing the final artistic output. Alternatively, the narrative journey could be an omni-directional or rhizomatic journey, rather than one of ascending or descending the six realms in sequential order. The sequencing of the tracks could be random or even based on subjective whim – vision and intuition. Perhaps the six worlds are best used as inspirations, as metaphors, to be used in the recording process. I’m asking questions here, as a part of the research process.

The work is in the spirit of ludic yūgen, which is about playful mystery, and the ecstasy of darkness. As such, certainty and strict parameters of analysis and categorization are not the point of the artistic research. This exegesis should reflect that reality and concentrate on the insights and knowledge to be gained from the creative process of improvisation and recording.

I am seeking to elucidate possible strategies for the practice of recording in the spirit of ludic yūgen. The digital processing of the audio signal in performance and recording reveals itself to be a fecund field for the evocation of yūgen through the application of ludic approaches to the yūgen aesthetic.

- Miegakure – hide and reveal – distortion, voice hidden, glitch, interrupted signal, omission
- Shadows and darkness– reverb and delay, reflections of sound, distortion as darkness, sound in space
- Improvisation – wandering with no thought of return, ludicity in ignorance
- Mask – distortion and magnification/amplification as mask
- Clarity – obscurity – penetration – beyond dualism and simple distortion

Speed – technology – diversity (Suzuki)

Playing with sound in time and space – the ludicity of processing and recording sound

October 2012

Another way at looking at, or understanding ludic yūgen, is in the sense of dark humour – playful darkness… the treating of mortality and suffering in a light way, with sarcasm and satire, as I approach the oblivion and emptiness of the void, represented by darkness, with a smile, bitter or benign. With this in mind, I have begun to entertain the idea of using spoken word pieces between the songs as transitions and illustrations of the particular realm of rebirth we are entering in any particular track. The spoken word pieces could include skits, parodies, poetry, rants and vitriol, the mutterings of alien races and mock radio announcements. This use of spoken word allows for a breaking up of the flow of songs and the exercise of a different creative muscle. The juxtaposition of musical pieces with spoken word pieces would provide an interesting listening experience for an audience and act as a method for the narrative of the piece, a journey in the six realms of rebirth, to be revealed in a playful way.
The delivery/exhibition of the creative work was to have been on gifted MP3 players, on which was engraved an image depicting one of the six realms …due to considerations of cost and difficulties in the use of holy amulets, I have abandoned that idea and am now concentrating on the production of CDs, which will be gifted or exhibited in spaces to be determined. Another factor in this decision was that the MP3 player has only a small area which could be used for an image, but a CD has far greater space on which to use imagery to depict the six realms. A CD case can contain many planes on which to put imagery: a 4 page booklet inside the front cover, the back cover image and an image on the CD itself. Six images, one each for the six realms of rebirth.

December 2012

Ludic yūgen is an aesthetic I am using to generate methods for use in recording music that tells the story of a Bodhisattva’s journey in the Six Realms. The research theme of the electro-mythic voice has fallen by the wayside as ludic yūgen has loomed larger in the research. Recording is confirmed as the central creative practice, to the extent I have applied to present a paper at the 8th Annual Art of Record Production Conference in Canada next year (unsuccessfully, it turns out).

The aesthetic of ludic yūgen still stands as the bedrock and context for the work – the songs are still dealing with the narrative of a journey through the Six Realms of Rebirth. I’ve not changed my mind on those central pillars of the research. It is how the creative work is finally presented to an audience that is a source of doubts for me – for logistic, cultural and financial reasons I’ll explain. I have been listening to my work on an MP3 player, rectangular in shape. The back of the player is a metal plate and I
had the thought of attaching or engraving an image onto the MP3 player and distributing them as the final artwork.

In Thailand, many people wear amulets – holy objects depicting Buddhas and monks in various poses. These amulets are most often made from metal or clay. My initial thought was to glue these amulets to the MP3 player – they are the appropriate size and shape. However, on reflection after some research, I decided that there were misgivings regarding the propriety of such an act. The Thai people regard amulets as possessing sacred power and to glue them onto an MP3 player would very likely be seen as disrespectful. I then moved to thinking about having an artist create some images which could be engraved on the back of the MP3 player. These images were to be drawn from the Six Realms of Rebirth. I was, however, unable to locate any local artists after several months of searching.

The MP3 player/amulet combination is a good idea - in theory. In addition to the obstacles outlined above, there is the problem of money – these mp3 players are $30 each and I’m thinking of distributing 90 of them. That’s $2700 that I don’t have, and there are no guarantees the university will fund such a purchase, along with the cost of commissioning artists to engrave an image on each player. I was taking those issues into consideration when I thought that perhaps I should work with video. DVDs are cheap to buy and distribute. I also reconsidered the use of video because I was having doubts about the ability of the MP3 delivery system being adequate to the task of telling the story of the journey in the Six Realms of Rebirth. Maybe the audience won’t get it. But if I put the songs to video, then I could spell out the stages of the journey in the Six Realms and make it obvious when we are transitioning form one world to another and
clarifying precisely which world we’re in at a given time. My thinking was that if I were to explain the journey with video, it might go some way towards giving the listener the context for a deeper understanding of the narrative of the work. I wanted to make sure that the narrative of the work was understood. This was a mistake, a moment of self-doubt and ignorance.

Most galling to me, though, was the realisation that I didn’t even understand my own research. This was a CRUCIAL moment in the research process. Let me explain.

At the core of this research - the aesthetic of yūgen and the methods of ludic yūgen, a large part of which is concerned with mystery, shadows, vagary and suggestion – lies the ineffable, those things beyond conceptual knowledge. I realised it doesn’t matter if the audience understands the narrative of the work; to be blunt, understanding doesn’t really come into it. If I’m to be true to ludic yūgen, I should not be hung up on insisting the work be easily digestible and comprehended - indeed, such a desire is the Anti-Yūgen.

In going to the heart of the aesthetic of yūgen and the ludic yūgen method, I’ve decided that the creative work does not necessarily need to be presented with elaborate explanation or in a broader context, such as that which video imagery could provide. There is no need for videos to go with the songs, no need for spoon feeding of meaning or context to the audience. It’s a little like Hemingway’s Theory of Omission, also known as the Iceberg Theory. Hemingway would write a story but never really tell the reader what it was really about – the meat of the narrative was hidden. This is the use of miegakure, a key technique in ludic yūgen.
I’ve also just had a thought about presenting the work – maybe just use CDs with different images on each. The advantage of CDs are obvious – cheap to buy and easy to distribute. The sound is superior to MP3. And unlike the MP3 players, the audience can’t just wipe 4 years of work and put on “Gangnam Style” instead. The CD is a more appropriate medium for this content and context. I’m still interested on the gift method of distributing the work and CDs are ideal for that. CDs also allow for a gallery event, if that is desired. I’m still working on how to present the work.

In thinking about the presentation of the creative work, the earlier mandala-like images I crested using video have been at the back of my mind. Currently, I’m envisaging an exhibition/performance event where the music is played from a sound system located at the centre of a space – I’m thinking here of the School of Art Gallery. The sound is the focus of the event – however, I also have still images and text on the walls of the gallery. I’m aiming for 90 musical pieces in total – approximately 90-100 minutes of sound. For each discrete musical piece, there will be one corresponding image, with a short text – drawn from lyrics improvised during my recording practice and other writings, such as poems I’ve written or aphorisms I find meaningful. At the entry point for the exhibition will be a short explanation of the methods of ludic yūgen and the narrative journey of a Bodhisattva in the Six Worlds. This makes the event somewhat interactive as sounds and images will be juxtaposed – random, unintended connections will be experienced by the audience as they circulate around the gallery.

On a different tangent, I’ve been thinking about the role of voice in the creative practice. Some of the musical works seem to demand a vocal track, while other pieces
can stand alone as instrumentals. Does each piece need a vocal for a cohesive sonic experience? Or will the mixture of vocal pieces and instrumental works provide much needed variety to the listening experience? I’m still undecided about this question, but am leaning towards including instrumental-only works to give the listener a rest from the vocal. A further and related thought on voice; can I include spoken-word pieces as part of the flow of sound? Short improvised monologues and skits to create further variety for the listener? I like this idea, but have yet to record anything in this vein. As the practice proceeds, pieces of this nature might arise and then I can see how they work in the context of the musical content.

Another theme that the practice has brought up is that of operating from a place of untrained musicianship, or, if you’d prefer, playful ignorance. I am an autodidact musically: I do not know my major from my minor – the concept of key signatures baffles me. Traditional musical notation is intimidating nonsense to me. I write this not to exalt myself as some primitive savant but merely to point out that when I improvise, I am totally reliant on what a piece sounds like – there is no theory behind the playing, it is based on feeling and intuition alone. I have developed personal tunings for the bass and electric guitar, and these are also based on what sounds right to me. Perhaps this ignorance is the motivation for the birth of the ludic yūgen aesthetic-as-method approach. Just a thought.

A further thought on presentation – I am intrigued by the possibilities of the invention of artists – the making of biographies – the alter-ego (eg. John Martyn and “Blind Joe Death”) and the exchanging of self for others (Speed, Shinki and Glue and their appropriated photographs) – perhaps the imagery in the exhibition could be of invented personas of an artist – one for each song – perhaps not only of the artists but of
beings encountered during this traversal of the Six Realms. Perhaps even artists as 
beings encountered in the Six Realms.

Ludic Yūgen – an aesthetic of darkness and shadows – shadows need contrast –  
sonically, I am using contrasting textures – vocally I experiment with pitch-shifting to  
make the low voice lower and the higher voicings higher – the bass and the guitar  
provide contrasting frequencies and in processing the instruments, there is textural  
contrast.

The importance of omission – Keene posits that "to achieve (yūgen), words were  
sometimes omitted from poems, even words necessary for comprehension, and the  
difficulty of the poem that resulted justified in terms of the elusive depths hinted at by  
the ambiguity." (Wilson. R.D. 2011)

Each musical piece, each song, is a scene or a picture. By taking a still from a  
moving image, I am mirroring the capturing of a moment - as the aesthetic of ludic  
yūgen suggests.

January 2013

I have recently been experimenting with asynchronous recording. This a  
process in which separate tracks is recorded without reference to each other. The usual  
method of multitrack recording entails listening to previous tracks and playing at the  
same time. It is synchronous. The drums are recorded (or, in my case, programmed),  
then the bass is added whilst listening to the drums, and then the guitar is added whilst
listening to the recordings of the bass and drums together. Then it is customary to add the vocal whilst listening to the whole instrumental piece; drums, bass and guitar at the same time.

In my recent experimentations, I have taken to recording vocals in isolation from the other tracks. I have many pieces of work where the three instrumental tracks are finished but I am yet to add vocals to them. In recording vocal tracks without listening to the instrumental tracks, and then adding that recorded vocal to the three instrumental tracks, surprising and unusual sonorities result. Recording the vocals in isolation also allows me to experiment with processing the voice in highly creative ways. The process forces me to extend my vocalizing in new directions. When I add the vocal track to the instrumental piece, it is like a meeting of parallel worlds which somehow seem to mesh. The vocal and instruments merge together and produce mysterious sound worlds that are close to the ideals of the yūgen aesthetic. This asynchronous method of recording also reflects the playful nature of the ludic sensibility – I am playing with time.

February 1 2013

Today I went to the School of Art Gallery with some speakers, an amplifier and a CD player to experience my work in a gallery setting. It was gratifying to hear the work at loud volume and I learnt several significant lessons.

Firstly, it is very important to sequence the tracks with care – I need juxtaposition, contradiction, timbral variety and paradox for the listener to have a rich auditory experience. To evoke the six realms of rebirth, the tracks must be sequenced in
an order that conveys movement (ascension/descension) and the departure and arrival in each realm.

Secondly, and most importantly, the gallery is not, for me, the ideal site of this experience. It is too impersonal and not designed for sound art. Unless the space is completely blacked out and people are forced to use their imaginations with no visual fabrications for guidance, I do not see the gallery as an appropriate space for the exhibition/playback of this work.

I’m interested in the idea of the mind as gallery – the images listeners receive while listening to the work – this truly intrigues me. The process is like sending an image by telepathy. I imagine a world, an image, a scene. I then translate that image/world/scene into music/sound. The listener then hears the work and makes their own image in their mind – this could be a fascinating area of the research. What I’m thinking of here is the discrepancies between what I envisage and translate into sound, and the images that are evoked by these sounds in listeners. How I would research that is certainly worth exploring.

March 2013

In my practice, I have returned briefly to the live improvisations using pitch to midi software which enables using voice or an instrument to control electronic sounds and software. Where previously I had performed this work in the studio, it had been as an experiment and was not recorded. Now, having started to record this improvisations, they strike me as interesting pieces to use in contrast to the more accessible work I have
been recording. I envisage these recorded improvisations of pitch-to-MIDI pieces as transitions between the more formalized pieces (these are also improvisations but come out more structure and song-like than the pitch-to-MIDI pieces). The p2m pieces could be valuable in sequencing the piece as a whole as they provide timbral variety and act as a contrast in that their sonic palette is more extreme. My song pieces are based on rock instrumentation whereas the p2m pieces can use any sounds I can conjure up.

March 2013

A while ago I was attempting to delete files from my MP3 player and as a result some files became mixed up, spliced in unusual ways. Some files contained music and audio / spoken word from other files that had somehow become entwined - it made for interesting listening. What interested me most was the random nature of the splicing/editing – some music would be heard and then a random word from a file previously stored on my MP3 player. The results struck me as creating a compelling listening experience and one I could not arrive at by conscious effort. It was as if the machine was dictating the editing and this produced such random beauty as to be firmly in the tradition of ludic yūgen. This is something to think about.

June 2013

Having listened to the playback of the work on a regular basis, I am thoroughly convinced that the key to the production of an interesting artifact lies in the sequencing of the tracks created. Whether randomized by a faulty MP3 player or deliberated over
and designed to match the sonic qualities of adjoining tracks, or a bit of both. I fancy
the idea of sequencing the tracks based on the contrast of textures, these juxtapositions
creating friction and variety for the listener. However, this might be a little simplistic
and could result in a jarring discontinuity for the auditor.

In my practice, I have had as a guiding theme the narrative of a journey through
the six realms of Rebirth, taken from Buddhist cosmology (Trungpa 1992).

These Six Realms are:

**Deva or 'God' Realm** - Defined by bliss and pleasurable states of all types, this realm
is reminiscent of Greek myths about the realm of the gods. But in Buddhism, this is not
an immortal state, and also not the ideal one for attaining liberation.

**Asura or 'Demi-God' Realm** - Also pleasurable, this realm is nevertheless defined by
jealousy and competitiveness. Theravada teachings generally do not recognize this as a
realm separate from the Deva realm.

**Human Realm** - A middle realm, our human existence is defined by our ability and
free will to experience any state, from blissful to hellish.

**Animal Realm** - Within Buddhist cosmology, the animal realm is defined by ignorance,
and an inability to think for oneself.

**Preta or 'Hungry Ghost' Realm** - This realm is defined by constant desire and greed.
**Naraka or 'Hell' Realm** This realm is defined by hatred and rage, and by defining all other beings as enemies.

This has proved somewhat useful as inspiration for writing tracks and for thinking about a final structure for the piece. However, the taxonomy of the Six Worlds does suffer from a nebulous, arbitrary quality; the idea is perhaps better used as a metaphor. Each world has its characteristics but these are hard to pin down and translate when thinking about how a particular track fits into a particular world. Some tracks are obviously of a certain realm, whilst others seem to exist in multiple realms and some tracks do not fit anywhere, in an obvious way. How to classify a track as belonging to a realm is also problematic – do I judge based on the lyrical subject matter, the texture of the processed guitar, the kinetic urge generated by the rhythm of the drum track or a totality grounded in the emotional responses engendered by the track?

So with these misgivings in mind, I would like to entertain the possibility of using other themes and frameworks for the sequencing of the tracks. I am not abandoning the idea of the Six Realms as a framework for sequencing tracks – in fact, I would like to use it but as one framework/metaphor/taxonomy amongst many. This is of course contingent on whether I can generate enough frameworks/metaphors/taxonomies/narratives to use in sequencing the tracks. I must qualify this idea by stating that a major concern for me in all this is the idea that the product of my improvisations and recordings are to be shoehorned into categories that may not hold them, might not be appropriate for the work. Perhaps there is no need for a narrative framework or theme by which the work is to be sequenced. Perhaps the sequencing can be related to more prosaic criteria, i.e. what sounds good. I can sequence
the tracks by intuition, by trial and error. I can sequence the tracks by applying the methods of ludic yūgen that have been used in the improvisation and recording. Perhaps it is fitting that the journey through the six realms acts as a hidden guide to the work and its sequencing. It would be in the spirit of ludic yūgen to obscure, omit and ignore the six realms as an obvious reference through which to understand the work; that way, the six realms (as translated through the aesthetic of yūgen), act as an invisible frame, adding mystery to the final work.

An intriguing article on sequencing and creation generally is “SMiLE: Brian Wilson’s Musical Mosaic” (Heiser 2012), in which Wilson’s masterpiece is discussed. Heiser’s article is illuminating in that the process he describes Wilson engaged in - the recording of small modules of sound to be combined playfully (sequenced) - is essentially the method I am using in my practice. It is interesting that Heiser makes a case that much creative endeavour is to an extent based on ‘combinatorial play’, and emphasises that the digital audio workstation makes this method of play accessible to many contemporary recordists.

Wilson’s difficulties in sequencing the many fragments he had recorded resonate with my own search for a method to arrive at the best sequence of tracks that provides an exhilarating listening experience. Each piece I have recorded does exist for itself, in a sense: each track is a scene, it is an aesthetic world of itself, but it is in how these pieces stand together, are strung together, that the process of sequencing potentially becomes a process of intense creative exploration and a challenge. I can use narrative structures (such as the Six Worlds or Wilson’s journey through American history) to suggest a guide for the sequencing of tracks.
Reading Pete Townsend’s autobiography “Who I Am” (Townsend 2012) recently has been interesting – he talks about his process of composition and how the two rock operas/song cycles (Tommy and Quadrophrenia) came about.

Townsend says

There’s nothing I admire more than a collection of straightforward songs, linked in mood and theme only by a common, unspecific artistic thesis. . . . After Tommy every collection of songs I submitted for a Who album was inspired by an idea, a story or concept that had some kind of dramatic shape and form, not always evident, but always there. (Townsend 2012)

What is intriguing about this is the “unspecific”, “not always evident” nature of the themes. It leads me back to thinking that my earlier idea of fitting the tracks into the structure of a narrative journey through the Six Realms is too literal, perhaps inflexible. As previously noted, the Six Worlds might best work as a metaphor, an “unspecified artistic thesis”, and it could work as one amongst many themes or forms. Also of interest is the chronology of the process: Townsend often wrote tracks with the theme or dramatic form in mind, as an inspiration to the recording process. It was pre-sequencing i.e. he records tracks with the theme in mind, but he then might sequence the tracks to bring out the story with more clarity: “I was still hanging on to the frail hope that I could sequence the Lifehouse songs to reveal the meaning of the story behind them.” The question arises – how much clarity, in terms of revealing the theme, narrative and story, does the artist want, or the audience need? Remember Townsend’s previous statement that he likes nothing more than “a collection of straightforward songs, linked in mood and theme only by a common, unspecific artistic thesis”. Another problematic area is evidenced by the following recollection:
After a couple of weeks we had enough tracks ready to start thinking about the shape of the album. I presented Glyn with my ideas for sequencing. It was then that I came up against his intransigence. Sequencing the album to serve a story would undermine one of Glyn’s greatest strengths, which was to sequence an album to best serve the music. (Townsend 2012)

“Sequencing an album to serve the story” seems to be at odds with the desire to “sequence an album to serve the music”. It is a tension worth exploring.

January 2015

In a moment of clarity, the challenge of sequencing became simpler - I could use the three stages of yūgen (analogous to the process of shikan meditation in the Tendai tradition) to structure the recordings. The answer was staring me in face all along; a simple and elegant guide to sequencing the recorded pieces of music.

Clarity - Obscurity - Penetration (non-duality) from Thornbill (1997)

Phenomenal – Void – the Middle (ke - kū - chū) from Shikan meditation

However, the difficult task remains to as to how exactly I will determine which tracks belong in each camp. What are the sonic characteristics that make up the designations of clarity, obscurity and penetration? A superficial attempt at such taxonomy is below:

Clarity – brightness, spaciousness, intelligibility, obviousness, directness, confrontational, unapologetic, revealed, near

Obscurity – darkness, dense, intense, confusing, subtle, suggestion, hidden, masked, far

Penetration - inner brilliance, non-duality, cohesion, conjoined, wholeness, holistic.
I then remembered a yin-yang diagram I had used previously. The characteristics of yin and yang might help flesh out the clarity/obscurity/penetration categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Yin</strong></th>
<th><strong>Yang</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Darkness</td>
<td>Light</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moon</td>
<td>Sun</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>Masculine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shade</td>
<td>Brightness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rest</td>
<td>Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>Heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat (like Earth)</td>
<td>Round (like Heaven)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Matter</td>
<td>Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More material/dense</td>
<td>Non-material, rarefied</td>
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<tr>
<td>Produces form</td>
<td>Produces energy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grows</td>
<td>Generates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Substantial</td>
<td>Non-substantial</td>
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<tr>
<td>Matter</td>
<td>Energy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contraction</td>
<td>Expansion</td>
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<td>Descending</td>
<td>Rising</td>
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<td>Below</td>
<td>Above</td>
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<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Fire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intuitive</td>
<td>Logical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cold</td>
<td>Hot</td>
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<td>Soft</td>
<td>Hard</td>
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It might be reductive and too convenient by half, but on reading through the preceding list of characteristics of yin and yang, it immediately springs to mind that the following equivalences can be drawn:

Clarity = Yang

Obscurity = Yin

Penetration = Yin and Yang

Instrumentation:

Bass = Yin

Drums = Yang

Guitar = Both/ Either

April 2015

While writing the practice review / location in a lineage section of the thesis, I came across the quote below:

Despite my higher education pounding ‘rationalization’ and ‘logic’ into me encouraging me to demystify the power of music by situating it within socio-political contexts I’ve yet to fully shake these moments of transcendence. They still seem to come out of nowhere, occurring at virtually any time and in any context, and no amount of musical analysis or intellectualism has dissolved these life defining moments. In fact, what I find especially seductive about transcendence is how non-academic it is; how it's dependent on our perceptions and not our conceptions; however it resist the ideological control and “rationalization” upon which modern capitalism thrives. (Lin 2011, p.6)
Lin is discussing his experience of transcendence, experienced during listening to music, fuelled by music. These moments of transcendence leave the socio-political contextualisations of music in the dust – his emotional response to music escapes the academic mind’s attempts to demystify. In searching for a way to break up the musical flow of the tracks I have recorded, a thought came to me: what if I play with the social/political/theoretical aspects of musical analysis, in a mockingly affectionate way, and intersperse these satiric voice pieces throughout the music? I’m particularly interested in toying with “rock’s preoccupations with authenticity and the construct of the artist” (Lin 2011, p. 21-22).

This idea is truly exciting to me, as it is very much in the spirit of ludic yūgen. Ludic yūgen is focused on the materiality of music and the mystery at the heart of things, and the idea of satirizing attempts to explain the inexplicable, and contrasting this playful mockery against the music itself is an excellent opportunity to enact the methods of ludic yūgen at a deep level. At this moment, I feel as if the final piece of the puzzle that is the creative core of the practice as research is falling into place.

October 28, 2015

Having returned from Kyoto, I have edited some field recordings and these might provide useful in sequencing the tracks, to add variety and contrast to the flow of musical pieces. These field recordings mainly comprise sounds from temples and gardens but also include guitar improvisations and the sound of an empty hotel room, which essentially function as drones, as the sound of the cleaning staff outside and the hum of the refrigerator and air conditioner: these recordings are eerie and could prove useful in the evocation of the yūgen aesthetic, as the mystery of an empty hotel room is intriguing on some level.
I have also revisited some earlier recordings made some years ago, before my practice became more focused on the methods of ludic yūgen. These musical pieces offer an opportunity to sequence the tracks with more contrast, as they are of a more obscure character. Combined with the field recordings, these could make a valuable addition to the available material. I now must try to sequence the recorded works using the methods of ludic yūgen.

**February 2016**

Sequencing of 2 CDs – 60 minutes each – accomplished by playfully using clarity-obscurity-interpenetration taxonomy translated through the tables of qualities for yin-yang. At this stage, have not managed to create any spoken word, though the idea still appeals. At present, I’m waiting on feedback and advice from my supervisor regarding the creative work.

**May-December 2016**

Sequencing begins and continues, based upon the qualities of yin and yang as described in the tables above. The process involves repeated listening and classification depended upon my immediate reaction to the track as it plays and the qualities that reveal themselves as I listen. When qualities from yin and yang are detected, the track is classified as belonging to both groups. When all tracks are classified, sequencing is undertaken with a regard for playfully employing contrast between tracks exhibiting qualities of yin/yang/both, and the establishment of a sense of flow. This requires tinkering with the sequence and repeated listening in order to reach an optimal sense of contrast and arrangement.

The following tables detail each track of both CDs, their main qualities drawn from the yin-yang tables above, and their classification and place in the sequence.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRACK</th>
<th>QUALITIES</th>
<th>CLASSIFICATION</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: 40 days</td>
<td>Darkness, shade, sunset</td>
<td>YIN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: blood of time</td>
<td>Energy, expansion, light</td>
<td>YANG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: burninsonoplastica</td>
<td>Masculine, logical, descending, intuitive</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: please don't u take new</td>
<td>Brightness, fire rising</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<tr>
<td>5: flowin' blue</td>
<td>Rarefied, grows, water</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
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<td>6: eternal trash</td>
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<td>YIN</td>
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<tr>
<td>7: declare the capsule</td>
<td>Heaven, above, brightness</td>
<td>YANG</td>
</tr>
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<td>8: ship shop</td>
<td>Flat, round, soft</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
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<td>9: mudlarker</td>
<td>Matter, descending, rising</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
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<td>10: skank john</td>
<td>Sunrise, energy, rising</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<td>11: million dollar suit</td>
<td>Round, below, brightness</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
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<tr>
<td>12: cazzjat</td>
<td>Intuitive, feminine, dense</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<td>13: where oh where</td>
<td>Round, rising, light</td>
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<td>14: dirty lil soul</td>
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<td>15: koh mynaah</td>
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<td>YIN</td>
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<td>16: look and sit</td>
<td>Moon, expansion, dense</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
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<td>17: salop salai</td>
<td>Shade, grows, below</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<td>18: stolen nation</td>
<td>Cold, intuitive, contraction</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<tr>
<td>19: come september</td>
<td>Brightness, activity, sun</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<tr>
<td>20: briefcase killa</td>
<td>Grows, energy, darkness</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
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<tr>
<td>21: gazia fridge</td>
<td>Dense, fire, rising</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
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<tr>
<td>22: in the boot of the car</td>
<td>Flat, contraction, below</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<td>23: sheer jingo</td>
<td>Brightness, rising, hot</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<td>24: yesoo</td>
<td>Activity, round, non-substantial</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<td>25: dusty knave</td>
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<td>26: who sent u</td>
<td>Fire, intuitive, light</td>
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<td>27: ravity</td>
<td>Shade, darkness, feminine</td>
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<td>28: updragger</td>
<td>Logical, round, light</td>
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<td>29: hootin' tool</td>
<td>Hard, grows, earth</td>
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<td>30: choychoy</td>
<td>Substantial, darkness, feminine</td>
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<td>31: ladder up</td>
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<td>32: under the sand</td>
<td>Flat, rising, cold</td>
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<tr>
<td>33: give me back my body</td>
<td>Below, intuitive, darkness</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<td>34: coochie</td>
<td>Masculine, expansion, activity</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<td>35: miss lonely</td>
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<td>36: on tic</td>
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<td>37: sleep well</td>
<td>Round, brightness, sun</td>
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<td>38: kalya prey</td>
<td>Flat, darkness, substantial</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<td>39: chillplain</td>
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<td>40: too beat to work on</td>
<td>Hot, logical, fire</td>
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<td>41: ysongree</td>
<td>Dense, water, moon</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<td>42: runway god</td>
<td>Round, activity, rising</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<tr>
<td>43: castor gate</td>
<td>Grows, darkness, cold</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<tr>
<td>44: banker's lament</td>
<td>Light, fire, heaven</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<tr>
<td>TRACK</td>
<td>QUALITIES</td>
<td>CLASSIFICATION</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: ah well</td>
<td>Dense, matter, darkness</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<tr>
<td>2: big tree</td>
<td>Round, rarefied, logical</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<td>3: as a whole</td>
<td>Hard, non-substantial, sunrise</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<td>4: I shall walk free</td>
<td>Grows, rest, cold</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<td>5: justify your self</td>
<td>Matter, dense intuitive</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<tr>
<td>6: hullabaloo</td>
<td>Activity, brightness, hot</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<td>7: ludic cross</td>
<td>Shade, energy, logical</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
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<td>8: the yukon</td>
<td>Flat, darkness, grows</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<td>9: drift net dream</td>
<td>Sunrise, rising, brightness</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<td>10: gay ali</td>
<td>Matter, energy, fire</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
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<td>11: god dust</td>
<td>Activity, energy, light</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<tr>
<td>12: me no likee speakee</td>
<td>Substantial, cold, intuitive</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<td>13: winter brave</td>
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<td>YIN</td>
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<td>14: klan dentist</td>
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<td>Light, round, rising</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<td>16: so u say</td>
<td>Dense, shade, cold</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<td>17: because of everything</td>
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<td>YANG</td>
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<td>18: hollis</td>
<td>Flat, grows, cold</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<td>19: feed em sugar</td>
<td>Darkness, contraction, below</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<tr>
<td>20: gringo</td>
<td>Round, logical, expansion</td>
<td>YANG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21: kindless</td>
<td>Substantial, flat, shade</td>
<td>YIN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22: high priest</td>
<td>Fire, cold, energy below</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
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<tr>
<td>23: iconick</td>
<td>Rest, grows, intuitive</td>
<td>YIN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24: terra beauty</td>
<td>Cold, soft, flat</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<tr>
<td>25: oh me oh my</td>
<td>Brightness, light, rising</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<tr>
<td>26: swoonwalk</td>
<td>Feminine, soft, flat</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<tr>
<td>27: gone to fresno</td>
<td>Activity, hard, energy</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<tr>
<td>28: lion of buddha</td>
<td>Light, grows, matter, energy</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
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<td>29: archimedes</td>
<td>Darkness, contraction, below</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<td>30: strut yo</td>
<td>Expansion, rising, fire</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<td>31: on my wings</td>
<td>Dense, below, cold</td>
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<tr>
<td>32: loserville fade</td>
<td>Energy brightness, fire</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<tr>
<td>33: clone drown</td>
<td>Dense, intuitive, darkness</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<tr>
<td>34: smilegiver</td>
<td>Light, logical, hot</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<tr>
<td>35: mr jackal</td>
<td>Darkness, below, cold</td>
<td>YIN</td>
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<td>36: happy as</td>
<td>Rising, above, light</td>
<td>YANG</td>
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<tr>
<td>37: years at table</td>
<td>Flat, round below, above</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38: mutango three</td>
<td>Intuitive, hard, grows, masculine</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39: lazy little elephant</td>
<td>Round, energy, brightness</td>
<td>YANG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40: the onside rule</td>
<td>Shade, darkness, dense</td>
<td>YIN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41: willie the sheik</td>
<td>Light, expansion, activity</td>
<td>YANG</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summation and Reflections

As this exegesis reaches a conclusion, it is timely to detail how the methods of ludic yūgen have been used in the recording process that is the creative heart of this research.

What follows is an explication of each method as practiced in the ludic yūgen studio and the reader is pointed to specific tracks that illustrate the use of a particular method. It is vital to bear in mind when reading these descriptions that each method is employed playfully, and therefore the reversals, abandonments, embellishments, exaggerations, tensions and contrasts of the play sphere are applicable to each method i.e. a method may be fully embraced, discarded or deliberately used against itself.

Recording is the hiding and revealing of sound, and in this practice, sources of sounds (the acoustic instruments) are processed until hidden, the signal itself becoming lost beneath effects but somehow revealing properties of itself in the process. Vocally, the semantic content of lyrics has often been submerged beneath other sounds, revealing nuances of meaning through what is not expressed. This method is strikingly evident on the tracks in the boot of a car (CD 1, Track 22), choychoy (CD 1, Track 30) and so u say (CD 2, Track 16). Similarly, the melodic lines of the bass and guitar are like sunlight peeking through clouds, filtering through a forest of rhythmic clusters, or like water running over patterned stones, blurred yet distinct.

Distortion in ludic yūgen is defined as any alteration to the signal, and therefore the method of applying distortion is absolutely intrinsic to the creative practice. In applying this method, the challenge lies in application in a relevant context and in service of the creation of a novel, interesting texture. Overpowering the signal is brutal and simplistic, whilst too little alteration of the sound signal can lead to dull textural
soundscapes. In all of the creative practice, I have endeavoured to balance on the continuum between clarity and obscurity, playfully. ysongree (CD 1, Track 41), eternal trash (CD 1, Track 6) and high priest (CD 2, Track 22) are pieces where the use of distortion results in textural innovations that exemplify the efficacy of this method.

Ludic yūgen is naturally concerned with the reflections of sound, the ambience and echo of a sound being crucial to the creation of texture and time/space in which to play. In multi-track recording, each track exists in the shadow of the other – creating in effect a layered picture of shadows. blood of time (CD 1, Track 2), give me back my body (CD 1, Track 33) and on my wings (CD 2, track 31) are clear examples of pieces where the ludic application of delay and reverb is put to good effect.

More importantly, there is a philosophy at play in ludic yūgen, a methodic approach that dwells in an ignorance/darkness born of the absence of preconceptions. The recordist navigates a path through the unknown as it is presented at each stage of multi-track recording. The subject matter of the improvised lyric (its inspiration) is unknown until voiced. The only exceptions to this are ladder up (CD 1, Track 31) and burninsonoplastica (CD 1, Track 3), where pre-existing lyrics where employed.

Improvisation, extemporaneous musical creativity, has been the method at the heart of the entire project. In this practice, the recordist reacts to the sounds as they are layered, an approach to creation which is in Zen tradition of first thought, best thought, as the moment allows; each track is created without forethought, rehearsal or mapping out of a melody. All tracks on both CDs are the fruit of this method.

The practice requires an abandonment of song structures, the omission of lyrical meaning and forethought, the laborious editing of tracks – all these techniques are open to use and may also be ignored and abused. I have omitted logic, rules and any sense of
decorum (good taste being the enemy of true art). Instrumentally, I use the rockist arsenal of drums, bass, guitar and vocals, but not all these instruments are used on every track. *on tic* (CD 1, Track 36) has only bass and drums: *blood of time* (CD 1, Track 1) is just guitar and vocal, as is *terra beauty* (CD 2, Track 24). In the DAW, I attempt to restrict the processing of the signal to a minimum. The tools for sound-shaping in the DAW are so extensive and powerful that it only takes a little to yield a lot. The pieces are mostly around 1 minute in length. With the sparseness of instrumentation and processing, a gigantic fullness can be achieved, as *banker’s lament* (CD 1, Track 44) and *ah well* (Cd 2, Track 1) evince.

More a philosophy rather than a method per se, in the studio of the ludic yūgen recordist, it is important we are experiencing clarity, obscurity and interpenetration simultaneously (consciously or not). Each moment of creation and recording contains that potential for the melding of the obscure and the clear, and the recordist operates in such a field of awareness. *angel chatter* (CD 2, Track 15) and *the yukon* (CD 2, Track 8) exemplify this nexus of the clear and the obscure.

In this practice, the admixture of bright and dark sounds is an essential method – as in *iconick* (CD 2, Track 23) - as is the placing of sounds in a space that suggests depth or the shallows – *where oh where* (CD 1, Track 13) and *justify your self* (CD 2, Track 5) reveal the use of these methods. The recordist has explored other dialectical binaries such as low and high frequencies in *stolen nation* (CD 1, Track 18) and short /long intervals and melodic/rhythmic lines, as on *years at table* (CD 2, Track 37). The voice is often altered to higher pitches – as on *Me no like speakee* (CD 2, Track 12) - and melodies are stretched to create backgrounds over which short staccato lines are played. In all instances, these ideas are applied experimentally and extemporarily. In some instances, the rhythmic background is treated as a wall on which the guitar and
voice etch graffito, as heard on *kindless* (CD 2, Track 21) and *who sent u* (CD 1, Track 26). Another metaphor that has proved useful is the sense of the percussion creating a frame, or acting as a whole block of wood or stone, with the other instruments drawing lines across the space, carving out new shapes from the existing sound materials.

The ludic recordist plays beyond convention, relying on intuition, playing with the material of music, not aware of any final destination, guided only by the momentum of the matrix the recordist is in. The decision to play certain parts is taken in the moment without regard to how the harmonies will coalesce. This is due to an ignorance of the rules of common practice and a desire to create new textures, for, if nothing else, ludic yūgen is an elemental search for textural novelty that relies on barely conscious intention and the recognition of listening as the prime field of possibility, the sound of the music being the only arbiter of the next creative decision.

Anti-production is not only a method of ludic yūgen but can be seen, somewhat grandiosely, as an approach to living, centred around the notion that process is all that matters. In this practice, I have disregarded the traditional templates of sonic clarity and the endless thirst for the newest technological innovations that the DAW makes possible. Instrumentation consists of:

- an obscure Italian electric guitar (Rosetti brand), found in a friend’s garage:
- An Ashton small sized bass guitar, purchased from a pawn shop for $100:
- Drum tracks come from software and midi files, as well as tracks performed live using the Ashton EDP, an inexpensive set of drum pads with inbuilt samples that can be played in a variety of configurations,
much like a traditional kit. The Ashton EDP also can be used to trigger software drum modules and makes possible the playing of historic percussion sound samples:

- Vocally, two microphones are used: a generic brand, purchased for $50 and an Electro-Voice microphone, purchased with a grant from the ANU.
- The mixer – a Mackie VLZ1202 - was a gift from a fellow musician.

These tools have been assembled over time and constitute the core of the ludic yūgen studio as used in this practice. The DAW consists of Cubase running on a second-hand desktop computer and various plug-ins. The practice for this research has taken place in what is best described as a low budget home studio. The recordist operating with the methods of ludic yūgen suffers no prescriptive restrictions regarding choice of their studio equipment. In the spirit of ludic yūgen, each recordist is encouraged to assemble a studio that best reflects their idiosyncrasies while offering a broad canvas for sonic play.

**Conclusion**

The recorded material submitted for this doctorate consists of two CDs, each containing 60 minutes of music. CD 1 has 44 tracks, while CD 2 has 41 tracks. Despite having lived with, and listened to, these recordings for some time now, it is difficult to be objective regarding their quality as musical works of art. It might even be suggested that in ludic yūgen, such notions are sorely missing the point. Any judgment regarding the strengths and limitations of the work is best left to the listener.
However, I am satisfied that the recordings are representative of my research. They evidence the methods of ludic yūgen as I have used them in the studio, and are a true document of this particular filament of the art of recording. As to the propensity of the work to evoke the feeling of yūgen in others, it is impossible to say. For the author, the mysteries of music, creativity and life itself were precursors to the creation of the methods of ludic yūgen, as an essentially playful response to the universe. I can report that during the process of undertaking praxis and research for this doctorate, this recordist often felt deeply the mystery of the creative act and the universe in which we take part. The aesthetic of yūgen inspired the recorded work, but the recordings in turn cannot be guaranteed to inspire yūgen in an audience.

A more fruitful approach to reflecting upon the effect of the recordings would be to elucidate what exactly was revealed to the author of this thesis when listening to the work. It is noticeable that the rock, hip-hop and pop music that I have listened to throughout my musical life have had a profound influence on the recordings. It suggests that one’s history of listening is revealed by the fruits of improvisation, and that the methods of ludic yūgen will show an artist’s predilections in the unmediated nakedness of their choices in the creative moment. A final revelation is that the methods of ludic yūgen produce recordings that vary greatly in character. The process of employing these methods results in work that spans genres and encompasses a universe of melodic invention, rhythmic variations and sonic textures. Ludic yūgen is a set of methods that invites the creation of a range of musical expression, and validates play as the guiding principle at the heart of this research and praxis.
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**DVD**

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VIDEO