How to Wreck a Nice Beach: The Vocoder from World War II to Hip-Hop, The Machine Speaks

By Dave Tompkins

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The history of the vocoder: how popular music hijacked the Pentagon's speech scrambling weapon

The vocoder, invented by Bell Labs in 1928, once guarded phones from eavesdroppers during World War II; by the Vietnam War, it was repurposed as a voice-altering tool for musicians, and is now the ubiquitous voice of popular music.

In *How to Wreck a Nice Beach*—from a mis-hearing of the vocoder-rendered phrase "how to recognize speech"—music journalist Dave Tompkins traces the history of electronic voices from Nazi research labs to Stalin's gulags, from the 1939 World's Fair to Hiroshima, from artificial larynges to Auto-Tune.

We see the vocoder brush up against FDR, JFK, Stanley Kubrick, Stevie Wonder, Neil Young, Kraftwerk, the Cylons, Henry Kissinger, and Winston Churchill, who boomed, when vocoderized on V-E Day, "We must go off!" And now vocoder technology is a cell phone standard, allowing a digital replica of your voice to sound human.

From T-Mobile to T-Pain, *How to Wreck a Nice Beach* is a riveting saga of technology and culture, illuminating the work of some of music's most provocative innovators.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

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When first looking at this book, the initial question on most readers' minds might be: What the heck is a vocoder? Simply put, the vocoder (invented in the late 1920s) took human speech and broke it up into its constituent frequencies, thus allowing that voice to be transmitted electronically, and reassembled and synthesized at the other end, reproducing the words, if not the sound, of the original speech. The vocoder was developed as a means of encrypting speech, of protecting transmissions from prying ears. But, over time, it found other uses, in movies, television, and music (if you want to imagine what it sounds like, recall the Cylons from the original Battlestar Galactica). Eventually, what began its life as a tool for cryptology became a pop-culture icon. Tompkins tells the vocoder's story with great relish, as though he can't believe how mind-blowingly cool the device is, and it's impossible to read the book without being caught up in his enthusiasm. This one has cult audience written all over it. --David Pitt

Review
"It's unquestionably brilliant, not only one of the best music books of the year, but also one of the best music books ever written."
—*Los Angeles Times*

"Dave Tompkins is seven steps ahead of science and several leagues outside of time."
—**Sasha Frere-Jones, Pop Music Critic,** *The New Yorker*

"The best hip hop writer ever born."
—**Jeff Chang, author of** *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation***, winner of the American Book Award**

"One of the most bugged, brilliant guys I know."
—**Oliver Wang, NPR music critic**

"No one knows more about the vocoder than Dave Tompkins, not even the dude who invented it. [A]n awesome book about the vocoder and its cultural impact… read it immediately."
—*The Fader*

"*How to Wreck a Nice Beach* is much more than a labor of love: It's an intergalactic vision quest fueled by several thousand gallons of high-octane spiritual-intellectual lust. Outside of, say, William Vollmann, it's hard to think of an author so ravished by his subject... A hallucinatory stew of Rimbaud, Tom Wolfe, Lester Bangs, and Bootsy Collins."
—*New York*

"This one has cult audience written all over it."
—*Booklist*

From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author

Dave Tompkins, a former columnist for *The Wire*, writes frequently on about hip-hop and popular music. His work has appeared in *Vibe*, *The Village Voice*, *Wax Poetics*, and *The Believer*. Nearly a decade in the making, this is his first book.

From the Hardcover edition.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Albert Christensen:

As people who live in the actual modest era should be upgrade about what going on or details even knowledge to make these individuals keep up with the era that is always change and move ahead. Some of you maybe will certainly update themselves by examining books. It is a good choice for you personally but the problems coming to a person is you don't know which you should start with. This How to Wreck a Nice Beach: The Vocoder from World War II to Hip-Hop, The Machine Speaks is our recommendation to make you keep up with the world. Why, since this book serves what you want and wish in this era.

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