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# Listening to the Promise of a Better You: Considering the Instructional Record

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# Listening to the Promise of a Better You

## *Considering the Instructional Record*

TIM J. ANDERSON

ABSTRACT

While this article makes explicit connections with forms such as karaoke, it also offers insight into other areas of sonic instruction such as dance, exercise and gaming. More important, it begins to develop an explicit theoretical foothold on questions of record production and reception where the listener is conceived in both the form of the recording and its accompanying narratives by focusing on how many of these instructional objects are designed around specific questions of record production and their accompanying paratextual elements.

Alongside the oft-assumed capacity of preservation, records contain promises of altering their listening subjects. For example, records can inspire listeners to move, memorize and remember. In this article, I will briefly address the promises of skill acquisition and personal uplift. To understand the promise it is not enough to listen to educational records. Instead, one has to focus on how many of these instructional objects are designed, particularly on a recording's sound design and accompanying paratextual elements (i.e. liner notes, booklets, posters, etc.). Through this we begin to discern the explicit ambitions of record producers to develop in listeners distinct attentions and intensities. Indeed, instructional records have connections with other audio-enabled practices such as karaoke, exercise and gaming, each of which is designed to demand specific insights, responses and developments from their audiences. This article is simply a beginning, a foothold upon which deeper histories and theoretical examinations of these objects and their listeners can be developed.

Whether it be tapes that teach phonics or a record on a phonograph employed by Professor Higgins to transform Eliza Doolittle from guttersnipe to lady, the popularity of these materials as educational aids have long held significant purchase as a modern part of daily life. To be sure, if a collective interest can be discerned by popular cultural ex-

pression, then from an American perspective there are few excuses for media scholars' general ignorance of instructional records given the seemingly ever-present amounts of evidence. However, the critical and historical literature that exists on instructional recordings is limited [1]. In the United States one can find instructional LPs and multitudes of CDs that offer audible guidance to physical education, meditation and motivation in many thrift-store bins. Many of these records assure listeners a modern means of language instruction. Writing in 1960 for *Billboard*, record critic Ren Grevatt noted that the business of educational albums had finally become mainstreamed as a substantial educational aid. Grevatt wrote about the Living Language label, a pioneer in the field that began 14 years earlier, offering shellac 78-rpm records with courses in French and Spanish [2]. In the same year at least one distributor, Joe Martin, head of Apex-Martin Distributors in Newark, NJ, was quoted as praising the commercial appeal of another educational label, Music Minus One. Martin explained that the label was an example of a disc producer that did not attend to the "glamour market" of performers and classic repertoire but still provided "steady repeat business" [3].

Still, somehow the importance of instructional records has, as Alan Dein recently noted in a *bbc.com* article, "slipped through the grooves of our audio social history, and out of sight" [4]. In some cases these records have been collected oddities, while some series garnered comic nods. For example, both the design and finale of Albert Brooks's 1973 *Comedy Minus One* album (Fig. 1) lampooned the instructional trope of scripted-listener interaction [5]. *Comedy Minus One* has become something of a cult favorite, and artist/humorist/blogger Drew Friedman notes that Co-Star records inspired Brooks's record [6]. Beginning in 1958 Co-Star, a subsidiary of Roulette Records, released 15 albums, each of which featured a famous actor and included a script for the listener's participation. Brooks's record also invokes the many instructional records of the Music Minus One (MMO) label, a unique independent label founded by Irv Kratka (who is still CEO and president). Since 1950 MMO has explicitly focused on music instruction, releasing close to 900 recordings

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See <[www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/lmj/-/26](http://www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/lmj/-/26)> for supplemental files associated with this issue.

[7]. MMO records typically include demonstrations of vocals and instrumentation by professional players with one specific track removed, i.e. the record is “minus one.” The resulting records engage an explicit developmental agenda that is serviced by an audible lack. It is this lack, the “minus one” that allows and instructs listeners to embed themselves into a second-person position through the aid of accompanying paratexts such as liner notes, gatefold sleeves and books of lyrics and music. Through repeated playings of the record and following the script, listeners may attain the promised skills. However, the promise rests on the condition that listeners repeatedly insert themselves into these fantastic moments of audible interpellation.

The “minus one” concept did not begin with the MMO label. One of the earliest mentions I found appears in a *New York Times* article in 1942: “A course in ensemble playing, in conjunction with recordings of ensemble music minus one part, will be conducted by Fritz Rothschild, a pioneer in this work, at the Julliard Summer School” [8]. Rothschild’s concept of recording Add-A-Part 78-rpm albums spread quickly. Writing for the literary magazine *Common Ground*, Isabel Lundgren noted that,

All over America, from player to player, the news is spreading. No longer need the solitary musician look in vain for someone to play with—someone good! He has only to put on an Add-A-Part record, and there, at the flick of a finger, is the Rothschild Quartet, ready at any hour of the day, to make, with whatever instrument he plays, a perfect ensemble [9].

A Jewish immigrant, Rothschild first produced these records with his quartet in 1937–1938 when they were invited to make 100 privately financed “Spiel Mit” sides at Berlin’s Telefunken Studios [10]. Designed to help develop “hearing

with the inner ear,” Rothschild believed this facility could be improved with a record and accompanying sheet music:

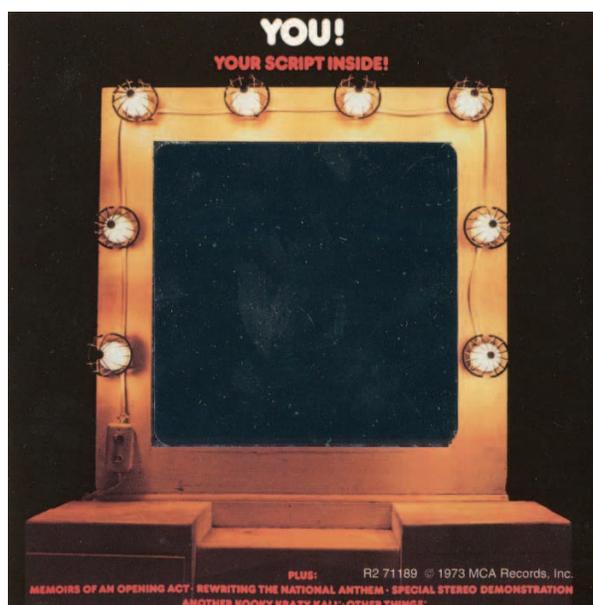
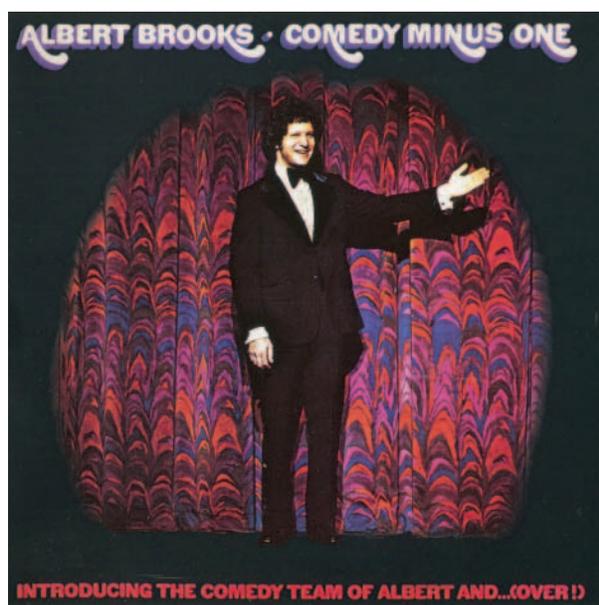
It is all there, in the music! If the musician does not hear what the others are playing, he can see it! For the first time, the music of an ensemble part is printed in two lines. In one you have the solo part, and above it, smaller, is the consonant line of the other instruments. You can see what they are playing, and then, if you go off, you have only to stop the record and go back [11].

By June 1941, 225 Add-A-Part records had been issued by Columbia, with the Rothschild group having to reach out to other musicians to supply a variety of musical demands [12]. By 1943 the Columbia Record Catalog claimed that

musicians, music teachers and critics everywhere are acclaiming Columbia’s Add-A-Part Records as the greatest advance made in chamber music education in many years. These records present a new and revolutionary approach to what has been a major problem in teaching and enjoying chamber music, namely: organizing well-matched ensembles so that players can learn as they play and listen.

Celebrating the ability of these records to provide musicians with skilled ensembles playing classics, the catalog continued to note that while playing “your part” you would learn the piece, its structure as a whole and also how to play in relation to other musicians. But unlike conductors and ensembles,

The record is always patient. Because you are able to play and re-play it at will, you learn as you play and listen. This is the simplest, quickest way to master the art, and enjoy the unending pleasure of playing—the world’s greatest chamber music in your own home [13].



**Fig. 1.** (left) *Comedy Minus One* (Albert Brooks, ABC Records, 1973) included a gatefold sleeve where the front side promises the comedy team of Albert Brooks and “you.” (right) On the backside of the sleeve is a framed foil dressing-room mirror that reflects “you,” the listener.



**Fig. 2.** Two of three Music Minus One records—*Bacharach for the Ladies* and *Bacharach Revisited*—released in 1969 to train musicians, in this case female and male singers, how to perform the songs of Burt Bacharach. Each record includes the same material with the same backing group (arranged and conducted by Jack Six) in different keys. The third album included the same material but was made for organists.

The emphasis on phonography underscores the modern element of the minus one concept and its promise to develop both a performer and listener through a record's ability to repeatedly display arrangements that address an imaginary "you." The emphasis on "you, the listener" is a reoccurring trope that grew with the rise of a more affordable and convenient record culture of the 1950s and 1960s. While Columbia's Add-A-Part record series made the transition to the long-play format, by the mid-1950s the series quickly lost its position in the marketplace as the premiere record series for musical instruction. Unlike Add-A-Part, the earliest MMO records were recorded to take advantage of the many improvements offered by the LP format. Better fidelity, cleaner recording surfaces and longer playback times allowed the label to conceive of discs that would possess longer passages and more repeatable playback. Referring to the release of two MMO discs that included a recording of Schubert's "Trout" Quintet, Harold Schonberg of the *New York Times* noted in 1954 that the quality of the records and the playing were excellent and heralded a bright future for the label. With a basic investment in a record player, you—the musician—could play a record and begin to slowly learn tough passages and make "your own music" [14].

The focus on "your own music" became evident in the popularity of the series among musicians, both amateur and professional. Talking about his label, Irv Kratka noted that in 1955 he got "most requests for piano, violin, cello and clarinet disks" [15]. In 1956 Kratka informed *Billboard* that while his biggest outlet was record shops, "[musical instrument] stores [had become] increasingly important" as a retailer for his disks and had the potential of equaling sales in record stores for his label [16]. By 1957 MMO was issuing discs with the "would-be jazz musician" in mind, providing a "group of records for jazz performers." However, instead of simply omitting one instrument from a piece, MMO's early jazz se-

ries provided rhythm section accompaniments with which any instrument could play over and improvise or be used by singers or dancers [17] (Fig. 2).

The unambiguous promise of a formative education that these records contain also provides us another insight into the efforts that design human guidance and behavioral development. And just as Professor Higgins lifts Eliza into ladyhood with the instrumental assistance of his phonograph, these records and their intents pose significant questions about the dynamics of listening and how the listener may learn how to perform around the demands of race, class, gender and genre. In this sense, we should, as Matt Sakakeeny reminds us, heed the thoughts of anthropologist John Blacking. Drawing from Varèse's definition of music as an activity grounded in human behavior, Blacking describes "the relationship of sound structure and social structure as one between 'humanly organized sound' and 'soundly organized humanity.'" As Sakakeeny points out, "there are always more questions and qualifications [such as] when does 'organized' become 'disorganized' and who are the arbiters of organization?" [18] In at least this case these records provide portals into some of these decisions about what producers would like audiences to listen to and why they believe it is important. We should recognize these instructional records for the clues about listening, both actual and idealized, that they are. They teach us how listening can instruct our attention and how we might listen to records to develop ourselves. With this we may begin to realize the potencies of arranging recordings. As Peter Szendy points out, "the history of arrangement—due to the fact that an arranger is a listener who signs and writes his listening—does indeed open up the possibility of a history of listening *in music*" [19]. What it means to teach listeners to identify and develop their self-potentials with reference to a track—even if that track only exists in absence—is a question for future research and theorization.

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## References and Notes

- 1 Although he does not address records or labels per se, throughout Patrick Feaster's excellent dissertation he makes the case that early American phonography often contained promises of educational uplift. See Patrick Feaster, "The Following Record": Making Sense of Phonographic Performance, 1877–1908 (dissertation, Indiana University, 2007) pp. 7–12. Also, in his book, *Spoken Word*, Jacob Smith specifically addresses records marketed to children, housewives and couples for instruction in reading, cultural uplift and sexual therapy, respectively. See, Jacob Smith, *Spoken Word: Postwar American Phonograph Cultures* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2011).
- 2 Ren Grevatt, "Album Education Kick Grows; Indie Companies Lead Way," *Billboard*, November 21, 1960, p. 4.
- 3 Anon., "A Distributor Speaks: Wide Opportunity for Newcomers, Says Martin," *Billboard*, May 9, 1960, p. 5.
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- 7 Anon., "About Us—Music Minus One" (2015) <<http://musicminusone.com/about-us>>, accessed 1 November 2015.
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- 9 Isabel Lundberg, "The Story of Add-a-Part Records," *Common Ground*, Autumn 1941, p. 69.
- 10 Lundberg [9] pp. 69–70.
- 11 Lundberg [9] p. 71.
- 12 Lundberg [11].
- 13 *Columbia Record Catalog*, 1943 Edition; p. 392, cited in S. Hopper, "Columbia 'S' Series," in *The Columbia Masterworks 78rpm Album Discography*, ed. by S. Hopper, <[www.78rpmcommunity.com/columbia-masterworks/columbia-s-series/](http://www.78rpmcommunity.com/columbia-masterworks/columbia-s-series/)>.
- 14 Harold C. Schonberg, "Records: 'Music Minus One' Additions," *The New York Times*, 4 April 1954, p. X9.
- 15 Anon., "News Notes: Music Minus One Plans Some Ambitious Items," *The New York Times*, 1 May 1955, p. X14.
- 16 Anon., "Take a Chorus: Mmo Debs Two More LP Vols.," *Billboard*, 24 November 1956, p. 30.
- 17 John S. Wilson, "Records: Jazz, Do-It-Yourself Recording Offers Rhythm Section Accompaniment," *The New York Times*, 23 June 1957, p. X9.
- 18 Matt Sakakeeny, "Music," in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. by Matt Sakakeeny and David Novak (Durham, North Carolina: Duke Univ. Press, 2015) p. 112.
- 19 Peter Szendy, *Listen: A History of Our Ears* (Bronx, NY, U.S.A.: Fordham Univ. Press, 2007) p. 102.

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