

Frank Ocean's Silent Aesthetic

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'IF I LISTEN CLOSELY.. I CAN HEAR THE SKY FALLING TOO.'

– Frank Ocean, Open Letter

Abstract This article contends that silence plays a central role in Frank Ocean's musical aesthetic. Arguing that the increased use of silence across his body of work comes about in response to his becoming a celebrity musician in our media-soaked 21st century, the piece uses his 2016 album *Blonde* as a case study to examine Ocean's silences as key events in a "situated aesthetics" (Manzotti; see also Born, Lewis and Straw), heavily dependent on the musical material and the media contexts in which they occur. Drawing on P. David Marshall's definition of the early 21st century as the age of "public intimacy," the article analyses Ocean's music in the light of selected musical precursors and contemporaries (from John Cage to Beyoncé) in order to better understand his uses of silence: to protect his private life from the media, to control his public image in dealings with the music industry, and to draw his listeners in when creating music, both in the studio and during Ocean's increasingly rare live performances.

Keywords silence, snare backbeat, public intimacy, *Blonde*, Beatles



Figure 1. Ocean performs at the Panorama Music Festival, New York, 28 July 2017, <https://mefeater.com/frank-ocean-statement-shirt/>.

On Friday 28 July 2017, Frank Ocean took to the stage at the Panorama Music Festival in New York for a rare public performance, wearing a white t-shirt that spoke volumes. Emblazoned across his chest in black capitals was the question “WHY BE RACIST, SEXIST, HOMOPHOBIC OR TRANSPHOBIC WHEN YOU COULD JUST BE QUIET?” First and foremost, this statement commands silence of those wishing to hurl abuse at people deemed to belong to an out-group. And it does so while the wearer says their piece, both musically and lyrically. As a Black American who declines to conform to heteronormative conventions around his sexual preferences, Ocean has had important things to say on racial discrimination, on homophobia and on social intolerance in the United States more broadly (see Dhaenens and De Ridder; Lewellyn-Taylor). What is more, the statement on the t-shirt speaks to the importance of silence in Ocean’s music itself. Take the opening lines of “Wiseman,” a 2012 single Ocean initially intended for *Django Unchained* (2012), Quentin Tarantino’s revisionist spaghetti Western which tells the story of an enslaved Black man slaying his way to freedom in the antebellum US South. Backed by a slow-paced two-stringed guitar riff subjected to heavy delay, Ocean opens:

Wiseman closed his mouth

Madman closed his fist

In a song originally intended for — but then never used in — a blood-soaked Western, silence is here presented as a positive entity in and of itself, as something that the wise reach for instead of violence (which is possibly why

Tarantino could not find a place for it in his story of violent revenge). Silence, as we shall see, can mean much more than just one thing.

In this article, I will contend that silence plays a key role in Ocean's aesthetic. Specifically, I will argue that the increased use of silence across his body of work comes about in response to Ocean becoming a celebrity musician in our media-soaked 21st century. In this way, I regard his aesthetics as "situated," following Riccardo Manzotti's definition of aesthetics as involving "subjects and their relations among themselves and with the world" (4; see also Born, Lewis and Straw). Using as my central case study Ocean's 2016 album *Blonde*, I will examine his silences as events that are highly context specific, depending on the fabric of the music in and around which they occur, and never achieving absolute absence of sound. More broadly, I consider Ocean's silences – both those occurring within his music and those in the public arena – as a response to what celebrity studies scholar P. David Marshall has called the age of "public intimacy," with technologies of social media resulting in "a social space closer to us than ever before," even as this social space is highly mediated (xi). In Marshall's account, parasocial relationships with celebrity artists make the audience "simultaneously close to the object of their gaze and affection yet obviously so distant" (xviii), a phenomenon which is immediately recognizable to anyone who has followed an artist's social media account or consumed any of their first-person promotional "content." In this world full of celebrity noise, created to commodify public intimacy, Frank Ocean's silences make his audience listen more closely. This article aims to explain why this is so, what these silences say, and how they function in his music.

Silence as Hermeneutic, Marketing Tool and Heuristic

For guitarist Rick Peckham, silence in an improvised solo is just as important as sound: "Our silence," he contends, "is identical to the one used by Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong, John Coltrane or any of the greats."¹ In his book on US writers who have spent long periods of their career not publishing anything at all, Myles Weber goes even further, contending that silence can itself be read and interpreted as a text:

In twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America, unproductive writers have been able to command serious critical attention and remain literary celebrities by offering the public volumes of silence, which have been read and interpreted like any other text. (1)

In both these instances, silence provides the opportunity for interpretation – whether positive (in Peckham's description of silence as part of an inherited improvisational toolkit that draws the listener in) – or negative (as an unearned publicity strategy for Weber's "unproductive writers"). But silence's fluidity means that its hermeneutic and affective reach often extends far beyond the specific instance of silence in question. Historian Diarmuid MacCulloch opens *Silence: A Christian History* with a reflection on how his life as a young gay man in 1960s Britain trained him in the key scholarly skill of listening to what is unsaid:

In the Britain of half a century ago, gay teenagers were keenly aware of what could not be said; of when to be silent and of how to convey messages in other ways. In much of the rest of the world, depressingly, those skills are still necessary. I was lucky to be able to face up to this challenge early on, was able to live life as I wished, and have enjoyed life much more as a result, but this life-experience has left me alert to the ambiguities and multiple meanings of texts, and to the ambiguities and multiple meanings in the behaviour of people around me. I have become attuned to listening to silence and to finding within it the keys to understanding many situations, far beyond anything to do with sexuality.

Alongside Peckham's description of silence as an aesthetic tool for improvisors and Weber's critique of it as a marketing opportunity, silence in MacCulloch's account becomes the impetus for a lived heuristic, which – if paid sufficient attention – can open up interpretative possibilities far beyond the field in which it is experienced. It is between these three definitions of silence – as hermeneutic, as marketing tool and as heuristic – that this article will move, in order to explore how silence makes musical meaning in a world of "public intimacy." This will involve exploring how Ocean uses strategic silences to protect his private life from the media, to control his public image in dealings with the music industry and to draw his listeners in when creating music, both onstage and in the studio.

Public Silences

Frank Ocean's public life has been defined by a series of silences. From starting off in the background as a songwriter for other singers, his career as a solo artist was only made possible by careful maneuvering in order to avoid being silenced by his record label, Island Def Jam, who did not want to promote, release or support his work after signing him in 2009 (Caramanica). By releasing his first album, *Nostalgia, ULTRA* (2011), as an independently produced mixtape, Ocean forced his record label into supporting his next album, the studio debut *Channel Orange* (2012), which garnered widespread critical acclaim and two Grammy awards. Up until this point, Ocean had been a frequent user of social media platforms, and had released *Nostalgia, ULTRA* for free online. However, in the build-up to his next album, his online activity dropped off. From 2014 onwards, he withdrew from live performance to focus on studio work. He began to curate his own statements, choosing when and how he would speak in public. As we will see, this strategic use of silence has become something of a trademark for the artist.

Of course, Frank Ocean is by no means the first musician to forge a career through silence. When Christopher Edwin Breau changed his name to Francis Christopher Ocean, he based his new forename on that of Frank Sinatra, and his surname on Sinatra's character (Danny Ocean) in the Rat Pack movie *Ocean's Eleven* (1960). The trailer for this movie describes Sinatra's character as "the quiet guy in the middle of it all," leading a group of ex-paratroopers to perform a heist on Las Vegas casinos. Presenting the Rat Pack as the "exemplary capitalist stage-act of 1950s/1960s," Chris Rojek argues that such onscreen business acumen was mirrored by Sinatra's behind-the-scenes deal-making (142). Supported by Sinatra's financing, the group used movies like *Ocean's Eleven* to increase their artistic independence in an era when the Hollywood studio system made it extremely difficult to do so. Such deal-making was only possible because of Sinatra's innovative use of silence in his music. Due to developments in microphone technology, Sinatra was able to make his singing more intimate, more conversational than the powerful vocalists of the early twentieth century. Whereas earlier recording stars such as Enrico Caruso and John McCormack

projected their voices to the world – a result of their experience performing live in large opera halls – Sinatra talks to his audience as if they are beside him onstage. Sinatra himself described the microphone as his instrument (Granata 23), and he used it to create an intimate singing style that played an important role in ushering in an age of public intimacy for vocal performers. Famously retiring in 1971, just over halfway through his career, Sinatra returned with a bang after just 16 months, declaring through the title of a new album and TV show: *Ol' Blue Eyes Is Back* (Williams). In these uses of silence, first as an aesthetic tool, then as a marketing tool, Sinatra set a template of public taciturnity for other celebrity musicians to follow.

Private Silences

Curating your public image means controlling access to your private life. In 2012, just before the release of *Channel Orange*, Ocean published an Open Letter on his *Tumblr* blog, originally designed as a list of “thank you’s” to appear with the album, now released early to get ahead of gossip concerning his sexuality at a recent music industry listening party for the album (Sanders):

4 SUMMERS AGO, I MET SOMEBODY. I WAS 19 YEARS OLD. HE WAS TOO. WE SPENT THAT SUMMER, AND THE SUMMER AFTER, TOGETHER. EVERYDAY ALMOST. AND ON THE DAYS WE WERE TOGETHER, TIME WOULD GLIDE. MOST OF THE DAY I'D SEE HIM, AND HIS SMILE. I'D HEAR HIS CONVERSATION AND HIS SILENCE..

Ocean goes on to relate that when he told his friend how he felt about him, this man patted him on the back, “SAID KIND THINGS” and left the car they were in to return to his girlfriend. This heartfelt Open Letter, speaking publicly about a relationship with another man for the first time, would lead to widespread support among Ocean's peers, and contributed to a broader conversation about sexual norms in the music industry. But Ocean did not want information about his sexual orientation to become just another label. When asked following the publication of the Open Letter if he was bisexual, Ocean replied:

You can move to the next question. I'll respectfully say that life is dynamic and comes along with dynamic experiences, and the same sentiment that I have towards genres of music, I have towards a lot of labels and boxes and shit. I'm in this business to be creative – I'll even diminish it and say to be a content

provider. One of the pieces of content that I'm for fuck sure not giving is porn videos. I'm not a centerfold. I'm not trying to sell you sex. (Wallace)

While taking care not to collapse them into one another, Ocean's strategic use of silence here connects the freedom to lead his personal life as he chooses, and to present himself to the public as he wishes, with the genre-fluidity of his music. Such overlap is yet again evident in his tribute to Prince after he passed away on 16 April 2016. In the wake of his death, Ocean declared the following on his *Tumblr* page:

He was a straight black man who played his first televised set in bikini bottoms and knee high heeled boots, epic. He made me feel more comfortable with how I identify sexually simply by his display of freedom from and irreverence for obviously archaic ideas like gender conformity etc. He moved me to be more daring and intuitive with my own work by his demonstration – his denial of the prevailing model...his fight for his intellectual property – “slave” written across the forehead, name changed to a symbol... an all out rebellion against exploitation.

Referencing Prince's battle with Warner Bros to gain control of his music, Ocean here demonstrates a belief that musical, personal and commercial freedoms – while distinct – are closely intertwined for the modern celebrity musician. Prince refused to be silenced by his record label, who wanted him to release fewer albums than he was producing. While Ocean does not have the same relentless release rate as Prince, the latter stands as an important precursor both in his opposition to being silenced by the music industry, and in presenting himself to the public on his own terms.

Silent Music: Endless and Blonde

In May 2013, Ocean posted on his *Tumblr* page a *YouTube* video of Armin Fuchs performing John Cage's 4'33." Cage's piece, in which ambient sounds fill the gap left by musicians who do not play any notes for a set period of time, stands as the compositional expression of his well-known statement that “there is no such thing as silence” (*Silence* 51, 191). Cage's observation arose from his visit to an anechoic chamber in Harvard University, where he continued to hear sounds in this room designed to omit any echoes – the first was his nervous system, he was told; the second his bloodstream (*Silence* 8). Discussing Cage's visit to this room, and his reported inability to hear silence there, performance scholar John Lutterbie contends: “Silence

[...] is not something we can experience and our understanding of it can only occur through approximations, through a continual process of negation” (13). Scholarship on musical silence has largely followed Cage’s lead, with Jennifer Judkins pointing out that “musical silences are charged with meaning by the tonal and rhythmic material surrounding them” (52) and Erik Andersen positing the concept of “*local* silences in the form of absences of particular sounds or kinds of sounds” as opposed to absolute silence, which can never be achieved (2; emphasis in original). In the following account of Ocean’s musical craft, I am not going to describe an artist experimenting with absolute silence. Rather, what I will explore is Ocean’s negation of one of the foundational elements in postwar popular music – the snare backbeat.

In August 2016, after a four-year, hype-inducing hiatus from his debut studio album *Channel Orange*, Ocean released two albums in the space of two days. The first was a video album entitled *Endless*, designed to fulfill his contract obligations with Island Def Jam. The second was *Blonde*, released on Ocean’s own label Boys Don’t Cry. This double release was the defining move in what the singer described as a “seven-year chess game” (Caramanica): following the example of Prince, he had already bought back his master recordings from his record label, as well as changing his management, lawyer and publicist; releasing the albums both fulfilled his obligations to Def Jam and produced a new work (*Blonde* was by far the more popular of the two) which cemented his artistic and financial independence, with Ocean now declining to submit his new music for consideration to the Grammys. What I want to focus on here is how Ocean’s public silences map onto the silences in the music he released in 2016.

What is striking on first hearing *Blonde* and *Endless* is the space within the grooves. Much of the material contains no drum accompaniment, a stark contrast to Ocean’s previous album releases, as well as the many backbeat-driven tunes he wrote for artists such as John Legend, Brandy, Beyoncé, Justin Bieber, Kanye West and Jay-Z earlier on in his career.

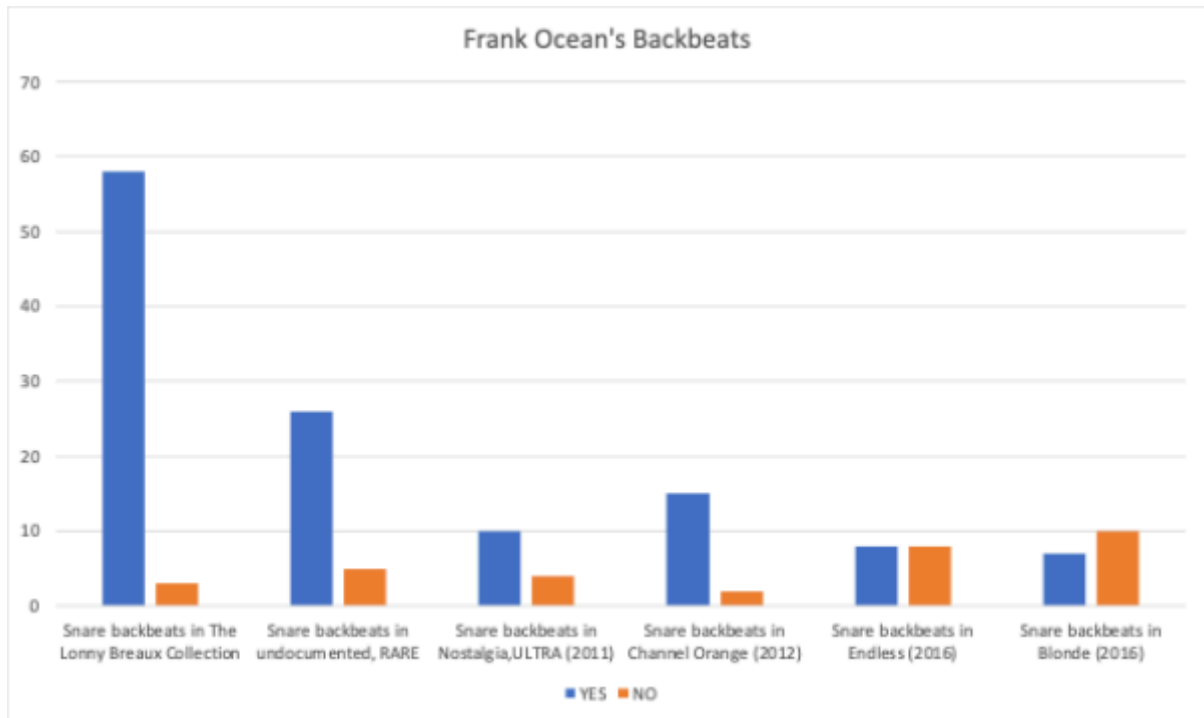


Figure 2. Chart of snare backbeats in Frank Ocean songs.

In the chart above, you can see the number of songs featuring backbeats in Ocean’s work, ranging from two collections of those tunes he wrote for other artists through to the 2016 albums *Endless* and *Blonde*. Significantly, these later two albums are his first in which the number of songs without backbeats equals or is greater than the number with them. Now, it is important to point out that the first two collections – both “The Lonny Breaux Collection” and “undocumented RARE” – are unofficial, fan-made compilations of early Frank Ocean material, compiled and leaked online after he became famous. With regard to “The Lonny Breaux Collection,” Ocean has stated: “several of these songs i had no hand in writing. i only laid reference vox on em because i was being paid. the rest are incomplete ideas, reference songs that were sent out for placement on other artists. records that were never intended to represent me” (“Lonny Breaux”). While bearing this important caveat in mind, these leaked songs are representative of the kind of material Ocean was working on early in his career, and as such, they do give important context for the later stylistic shift on *Endless* and *Blonde*.

Even *Blonde* songs that are built around backbeats save their emotional high-points for the moments at which the drums drop out and we float in a sea of harmony, Ocean's vocal flow supplying the rhythmic interest. This is the case throughout the almost drumless "White Ferrari." While there are some hi-hat-dominated percussive taps teasing us from 00' 16" [https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=Dlz_XHeUUis&feature=shared&t=16], suggesting this might turn into an emotional power-ballad, the song never goes the full Whitney Houston (see the drum entry at 00' 58" [<https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=CVakYOT2CJo&feature=shared&t=58>] in "I Have Nothing"). When an acoustic guitar enters at 01' 25", guitarist Alex G can be heard periodically tapping the instrument's body on beat two of a four-beat measure, suggesting the rhythmic outline of a backbeat without it ever being given full articulation. Instead, it's the syncopated vocals that provide the rhythmic interest of this song, floating above a musical landscape that is almost entirely free of in-tempo percussive accompaniment.

In sum, *Blonde* grooves hard, but it does so — for the most part — without explicit backbeats. This did not please everyone on its release. Here is *National Public Radio's* Jason King, speaking a few days after the album had dropped:

The challenge for me is less about songwriting, and more about the deliberate lack of groove that comes as a result of *Blonde's* neglect of drums or basslines on songs like "Skyline To." To draw on that car metaphor, I want *Blonde's* engine to rev up more often than it does, and I'm occasionally disappointed when it doesn't.

King's colleague Ann Powers agreed: "you're right about the songs on *Blonde* sparsely containing the elements that usually unite people behind a pop offering — most notably memorable beats. If the people can't dance, will anyone be part of your revolution?" It would be easy, with the benefit of hindsight, to scorn these listeners for not catching a musical masterpiece. But to understand why some people felt this way, we need to step back and look at the backbeat, its importance in popular music, and just what Ocean is doing with it on *Blonde*.

Let's conduct an experiment. Perform the following actions:

Stamp your foot once.
Clap your hands once.
Stamp your foot twice.
Clap once again.

You have just made the most important rhythmic pattern in modern music. In fact, the backbeat is so ubiquitous that we hardly even notice it anymore. In his PhD thesis on the origins of the backbeat in rock 'n' roll, Garry Neville Tamlyn calculates that, assuming we listen to an hour of backbeat-driven music per day, each of us will hear around 1 million backbeats per year (1). When we think of backbeats, we hear the snare drum on beats two and four of Chuck Berry's greatest hits, or teenagers twisting on a 1960s dance floor. As Steven Baur points out, the pattern is also found in the shout choruses of early jazz music, such as drummer Andrew Hilaire's playing in the last two choruses of "Black Bottom Stomp" [<https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=CBfV6ZNT5aI&feature=shared&t=169>] (1926) (02" 49"-03' 12"), recorded with Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers.² A shout chorus is where the energy hits its peak at the climax of a song, backed by a repeated rhythmic accompaniment. From serving in these shout choruses as the musical icing on the cake, the bass drum-snare drum alternation of the backbeat spread throughout popular music over the course of the twentieth century, providing the rhythmic backbone for everything from the Beatles' "Love Me Do" (1962) to Beyoncé's "Crazy in Love" (2003). Taking away the backbeat, as Ocean did in *Blonde*, is like weaning your audience off their favorite aural drug. Why would he do so?

To understand Ocean's reduction of backbeat-driven tunes in the context of a media environment that structures the relationships between celebrity artists and their audiences in terms of "public intimacy," we need to next turn to the precedent of the Beatles. While working on *Blonde*, Ocean referenced the Fab Four as a key influence on his musical craft ("Frank Ocean Interviews"). Four years later, on his *blonded* radio show, Ocean thanked the group "for almost single-handedly getting me out of writer's block" during the sessions for *Endless* and *Blonde* (Tom). The Beatles are an important precursor to Ocean, both in terms of how they used local silences in their music — moving away from the backbeat-driven twisting and shouting of their early music towards more varied sonic textures — as well as their deci-

sion to stop touring in August 1966. Indeed, the two aspects of their music were closely linked: freed from the constraints of banging out the hits for their screaming fans, the Beatles could concentrate on crafting their songs more freely in the studio, kickstarting a three-year period that produced some of pop's most renowned albums, from *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) to *Abbey Road* (1969), the work that gave Abbey Road Studios its name.

In the same era that the Beatles were revolutionizing postwar pop and Sinatra was revolutionizing postwar singing, trumpeter Miles Davis was also using the microphone to create his own intimate sonic environments. Here is Davis in 1978, speaking of his live performances in the 40s, 50s and 60s:

I know what the power of silence is. When I used to play in clubs, everybody was loud; there was a lot of noise. So I would take my mute off the microphone, and I would play something so soft that you could hardly hear it ... and you talk about listening. (40)

This interview was one of the few given during Davis's own five-year hiatus, a period in which he retreated from public performance and studio recording. When he returned to performing live in 1981, his tone was (once again) created by putting his trumpet right up against the microphone, creating the intimate listening experience that was his trademark. Instead of always out-blasting sonic competitors with volume — as a young Louis Armstrong recalls street bands doing in early twentieth-century New Orleans (97) — Davis changed the listening environment of recorded music, getting his listeners to lean their ears closer to what he played.

While Davis could silence background chatter by moving his trumpet away from the mic, nothing could calm the Beatles' rabid audiences. It got so bad that, during live performances, drummer Ringo Starr had to look for visual cues to figure out where they were in a given song:

We used a house PA, with those huge amps and I had to watch the back of the boys because I couldn't hear nothing so if they went [wiggles shoulders] I'd know "Oh, we're there! That's where we are now." (Stolworthy)

Fed up with being unable to hear themselves onstage, the Beatles ceased touring shortly after releasing *Revolver* in August 1966. Beatles engineer Geoff Emerick has noted the increased experimentation during the subsequent sessions for *Sgt Pepper's*, caused by the fact that the band no longer

had any impending touring obligations to fulfill. He recalls that, during the recording of the album's closing song, "A Day in the Life," the studio became an instrument, through which "the composition was [...] structured during the recording stage." In a telling foreshadowing of the change in musical texture of Ocean's work when freed from a grueling publicity schedule, the Beatles' increased financial and business freedom was reflected in the experimental sonic textures of the albums that followed.

Ocean would have been aware of this musical history: he recorded most of *Blonde* in Abbey Road Studios, site of the Beatles' most creative work. What is more, we can hear their direct musical influence on "White Ferrari," when Ocean sings "Spending each day of the year" (01' 45"-01' 48") [https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=Dlz_XHeUUis&feature=shared&t=105] to the melody of Paul McCartney's "Here, There and Everywhere": "Making each day of the year" (0' 13"-0' 16") [<https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=xdcSFVXd3MU&feature=shared&t=13>], transposed down a fifth. "Here, There and Everywhere" is *Revolver*'s fifth track, marking an important link between that album and Frank Ocean's *Blonde*. Just as the Beatles' post-*Revolver* period marks a major milestone in 20th-century music history, standing as a shift towards a more studio-oriented aesthetic for the century's most influential pop group, *Blonde* is a major moment in 21st-century music, using public and musical silences to break through the noise of contemporary culture. By returning to the strategic, local silences of his musical precursors, Ocean returns us to the importance of silence at a time when we may need it most.

Coda: Live Silence

The eight years since *Blonde* have been characterized as another long silence in Frank Ocean's career, without any album releases or live performances from the artist. However, he has been far from silent during this period, releasing ten singles between 2016 and 2021, enough to fill an album.³ As Weber points out, sometimes the mystique of silence surrounding an artist reaches such a height that even when they make clear statements, these statements are interpreted as part of their silence (132). Such has been the reception of Ocean's single releases. However, it is true that in spite of hints

as early as 2017 that a new record was in the pipeline, the album release that many of his fans have been calling for has not been forthcoming. In 2020, vinyl orders of a single were recalled, and fans were told that Ocean would no longer be releasing the planned vinyl “because of the events of this year” (Aubrey), one which saw the death of his younger brother Ryan Breaux in a car crash. Ocean discussed the intense grief of losing his brother in a 2021 conversation on his *blonded* radio show. What is striking about the *YouTube* comments in response to this is the relative lack of online vitriol for an artist who has supposedly been silent for five years. Many commenters reference his brother’s death, and most of them express gratitude for the new music which has been released. As a *YouTube* user named mar puts it:

It’s so rare to see people in a community and outside of the community be this supportive of an artist and not pressuring their come back it’s cool

Jay Bradford’s reply – “I[]g[uess] you ain’t seen Twitter then” – highlights how the social media platforms we use shape the forms of public intimacy we have with supposedly silent artists (*YouTube* comments). While this can lead to the “sympathetic identification” outlined by mar, comprised of “solidarity with the [...] suffering personality” (Marshall 69), it can also lead to aggressive, possessive demands from the audience for the artist to create new material.

Under such intense pressure, silence can sometimes be lost in the noise. Since Ocean performed his last live show in 2017, his fans had been eagerly awaiting his own re-appearance on the concert stage. When he made his long-awaited return at 2023’s Coachella Music Festival – a headline performance delayed since 2020 – many reacted with extreme disappointment to a gig that the singer himself described as “chaotic” (“Frank Ocean 2023 Coachella Set”). The set involved stripped-back, heavily rearranged versions of his own songs and a guest DJ set remixing his earlier releases while Ocean remained hidden from view. Most importantly, however, there was silence – plenty of silence. One audience member recounted that the silences between the songs – during which Ocean could be seen in discussions with his onstage musicians, suggesting an improvised approach to the show – lasted for up to five minutes, an eternity for an audience of a headlining act at a major festival (Davies).⁴ Indeed, the silences were such that, on the recording of the performance, one can hear the California wind blowing

through the microphones. (All that was missing, one might suggest, was a tumbleweed.) Such audience silence can be heard distinctly at the end of the 2023 Coachella version of “Wiseman,” which was rearranged from its slow (54 bpm), melodic single version to become a cacophonous, up-tempo (180 bpm) noise-rock track complete with screaming vocals, a heavily distorted guitar riff and repeated thirty-second-note drum fills (“Frank Ocean 2023 Coachella Set,” 48' 44"-51'00"). The silence following the track feels much quieter than standard audience hush, as members of the audience try to figure out just what they have heard. Rather than getting his audience to listen more closely, this particular use of live silence by Ocean seemed to simply turn them off. Since then, Ocean has largely maintained silence in the public sphere, with no official single or album releases, and no sign of the new album that he mentioned during his Coachella set.

As we have seen in this article, Ocean is aware of the power of silence as both a hermeneutic within his music itself and as a marketing tool for that music. While I am not in a position to map one-to-one relationships between silences in Ocean’s public and private life, I have tried to show that his acute awareness of silence on many different levels (public, private, musical) overlap to form a heuristic that listeners should be aware of when listening to his work. Silence is thus central to Frank Ocean’s aesthetic. But the use of live silence during his much-anticipated 2023 comeback show seemed to simply create confusion, lacking (or ignoring) the importance of how the silences employed resonated in the environment they were heard in. The Coachella set, combining intimate acoustic numbers with experimental guest performance, was ideally designed for a small club, not a major outdoor festival. Though Ocean was scheduled to play another set at the second weekend of Coachella, he pulled out of this engagement, citing injuries to his leg (Jacobs), whereupon the organizers replaced him with 90s punk group Blink-182. The rest, as they say, was noise, which even Frank Ocean’s silences could not cut through.

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Notes

1. Peckham originally made these remarks at a workshop in Newpark Music Centre, Dublin, in 2005. I am very grateful to him for allowing me to cite them in this article.
2. Vijay Iyer goes back further still, tracing the origins of the backbeat to "the important African diasporic cultural ritual known as the *ring shout*," a performance involving singing, dancing, footstamps and handclaps in which offbeats are accented (405).
3. I consider Ocean's "Come on World, You Can't Go!" (2021) to be a single release.
4. It emerged that the show had been redesigned at very short notice.

About the author

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