

Recording Notes: Houseboat Days

The physical recording of the Moho Memo's second album tells us indirectly much about the mindset of the artists and their approach to the medium of recorded sound at the time. *Houseboat Days* was recorded with a four-track recording desk built using purloined defective parts from America's nascent space program. In fact, the recording engineer for *Houseboat Days*, Elliott "Twee" Edgars, left his Mercury Project job at NASA unhappy with procedural changes brought about by the agency's conversion from NACA in late 1958. It was his electronics expertise that allowed the group access to the pioneering recording technologies that set their sound apart from so many records of the day.

While these electronic advancements are not entirely obvious on *Houseboat Days*, a careful listen will reveal many subtleties of sound coloration, a significant presence of sonic distortions and other recording artifacts that make the album both unusual and extremely difficult to accurately transcribe into the current digital formats. Edgars was an eccentric, believing that the use of defective parts was, literally, 'instrumental' in fashioning the group's sound. That is, Edgars and the Moho Memo apparently viewed the recording devices themselves as instruments, to be played during the act of recording.

Edgars was also a devoted author and theoretician, cultivating the Theory of Electronic Personality through such written works as *The Spirit of the Valve*, *Psychotronic Ambioopathy*, and his most widely read tome, *The Electron's Signature*, briefly a textbook for advanced students of theoretical electronics, which forwarded the notion that every electronic component is imbued with its own unique personality¹.

Thus the use of "defective" parts in the construction of the Moho Memo's recording and sound equipment. Edgars viewed these components, parts that had failed to meet the exacting specificity of the Mercury Program's requirements, merely as individuals with more dramatic personalities. They were to Edgars more interesting members of his chorus, and his job as choirmaster was to get to know each of them personally and figure out how to use

¹ A somewhat more detailed explanation is as follows: in addition to the variability of materials involved in component manufacture, other elements uneasily detected by our five senses play a significant role in the formation of each component's unique personality. There are no such things as "identical components" in Edgars' thinking. Components fashioned at the same factory, from the same source materials are in fact subtly different due to the variability of the source materials and the conditions of the factory over time (e.g. temperature change, wind direction, mood of employees, weather patterns, fluctuations in the earth's magnetic field, the cumulative expenditures of energy and their relative directions in the immediate vicinity, minute perturbations of gravitational influence due to the presence or absence of weighty objects, etc. all of which act as subtle but real and detectable influences on the electrostatics of the environment in which the components are manufactured). The boldness of Edgars' research was in its clear rejection of the identity politics of mass production which he perceived as a collective will towards ignorance and generality, forms of bigotry in his mind, that disallowed the individuality of the objects produced. His claim was that so-called identical circuits using "identical" components were measurably distinct, a theory which has to a limited extent been born out by measurements taken with today's more sophisticated and exacting technologies. In sum, take two guitar amplifiers produced at the same factory on the same day by the same people using "identical" components, and they will *sound different*.

their skills, abilities, liabilities, their personalities to the desired artistic ends.

Of course it is no accident that Edgars and the Moho Memo found each other, as their sympathetic ideologies were both strikingly similar and thoroughly unconventional at the time. His thinking resonated well with theirs, and his method, as obviously idiosyncratic as their own, fit well with their artistic requirements. In short, the shoe fit.

And so it was that in 1960 in Memphis, TN the Moho Memo found themselves recording on extremely sensitive and what would be charitably described by today's technicians as 'irregular' equipment under conditions as temperamental and fugitive as their own. Originally recorded in binaural duotone, the benefits of digital technology allow us for the first time to present *Houseboat Days* enhanced to a full-color sound field, tested and believed to accurately reflect the true recording conditions at that time.

Edgars' work with the Moho Memo spanned many years of recording, including their electronic works *The Neptune Suite* and *Electronic Age*, as well as many of their more commercial works, such as *Mixed Nuts*, *In-Stir-Mental!!!* and of course *Houseboat Days*. It remains unclear if Edgars is still living or still working; regardless his contributions to both the worlds of art and theoretical electronics are noteworthy and impressive, if, as is so often the case with near-genius, far ahead of their time.