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John Cage's Silent Opus Is Drafted Into a Flute-Loving DJ's Noisy Crusade

Ben Davis, Wednesday, December 2, 2015

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Image: Screenshot of djdetweiler.com.

You may have heard the news this week that Soundcloud censored a track because it featured an unlicensed sample of John Cage's 4'33, a composition that famously consists of silence.

Such an outrageous turn of events would mean, of course, that Soundcloud had literally censored an artist for *nothing*.

John Cage's 4'33"



Unfortunately, this hilarious case of copywrong appears to be a myth. The truth, however, is not uninteresting.

The stunt is the work of a puckish character known as DJ Detweiler, who last week posted a screenshot of a notice that he had received from the team at Soundcloud that allegedly looked like this:

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Hi D.J. Detweiler,

Our automatic content protection system has detected that your track:

"John Cage - 4' 33 (DJ DETWEILER REMIX)"

may contain copyrighted content. As a result, your track has been removed from your profile for the time being.

Wait SoundCloud, I think I have the rights to this!

If you think we've made a mistake, you can tell us about it by following the link below and filing a dispute.

You can file a dispute if you have the rights to post this to SoundCloud - for example, because you are the copyright owner or have permission from the copyright owner(s).

If either of these things apply to you, tell us about it here: <https://copyright.soundcloud.com/dispute/soundcloud:disputes:17249129>.

To learn more about copyright, please visit our [copyright information page](#).

Thank you,

The SoundCloud Copyright Team

Music blogs picked the story up, and it quickly circulated. But when Engadget actually reached out to Soundcloud, the company explained that the offending track had been penalized because it made unlicensed use of Justin Bieber's summer hit *What Do You Mean?* It had merely been titled *John Cage—4'33 (DJ DETWEILER REMIX)*.

Reached by Engadget, DJ Detweiler didn't deny the charge. Instead, he (or they; the interview is with a group, so it's confusing) claimed that the affair was meant to highlight the absurdity of copyright law, with the entire brouhaha standing as the "remix" of Cage's work, which was all about questioning what counted as music: "All the content that comes out from this is part of our remix."

Having investigated a little further, I think this John Cage stunt can be seen more narrowly as a case of collateral damage in the struggle between the formerly free-wheeling remix-haven Soundcloud and major record labels. Soundcloud has recently been ramping up its use of take down notices on a "massive scale" in an effort to head off law suits.

This has not gone down well with artists like DJ Detweiler, who yanked his remixes from Soundcloud three months ago, announcing the decision in a Reddit "Ask Me Anything" thread. He replaced them with a robot-voiced placeholder track that says, "Hello, this is a message from Soundcloud. The major labels make us cry so we have to do anything they tell us. That's why we replaced this banging remix with this message."

DJ Detweiler became famous—or at least, DJ famous—for pioneering a genre of remix called "flutedrop," for which he takes various club anthems and then inserts goofy recorder sounds. It goes without saying that such gags cannot function without use of the original (I'd have somehow thought they would be shielded as "parody").

My description cannot do the genre justice, so here's the DJ Detweiler remix of Pitbull's *Don't Stop the Party*, preserved on YouTube:



In general, I agree with Astra Taylor, whose book *[The People's Platform](#)* argues that we need a more nuanced politics towards these kinds of debates than just "stuff should be free!" Still, I think we can all agree that a world where we can't have a "flutedrop" remix of John Cage is not one we want to live in.

UPDATE (12/8/15): DJ Detweiler has sent the following statement to journalists, clarifying the nature of the prank (and quoting Guy Debord to boot):

"The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.

Beauty, however, in its general aspect, is the inseparable characteristic of the idea when it has become known. In other words, everything is beautiful in which an idea is revealed; for to be beautiful means no more than clearly to express an idea.

In the era of the general restructuring of domination, DJ Detweiller finds itself hunted everywhere and within each individual, being the unemployed as well as the stranger or the pariah. That is why it must camouflage itself under so much artificiality, because DJ Detweiller is the face of the civilian in the midst of the universal militarization of disaster.

Yes: it was a Justin Bieber song, but is that really important?"

-Dj Detweiler

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