



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

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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