



The New Analog: Listening and Reconnecting in a Digital World

Damon Krukowski

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What John Berger did to ways of seeing, well-known indie musician Damon Krukowski does to ways of listening in this lively guide to the transition from analog to digital culture

Having made his name in the late 1980s as a member of the indie band Galaxie 500, Damon Krukowski has watched cultural life lurch from analog to digital. And as an artist who has weathered the transition, he has challenging, urgent questions for both creators and consumers about what we have thrown away in the process: Are our devices leaving us lost in our own headspace even as they pinpoint our location? Does the long reach of digital communication come at the sacrifice of our ability to gauge social distance? Do streaming media discourage us from listening closely? Are we hearing each other fully in this new environment?

Rather than simply rejecting the digital disruption of cultural life, Krukowski uses the sound engineer's distinction of signal and noise to reexamine what we have lost as a technological culture, looking carefully at what was valuable in the analog realm so we can hold on to it. Taking a set of experiences from the production and consumption of music that have changed since the analog era—the disorientation of headphones, flattening of the voice, silence of media, loudness of mastering, and manipulation of time—as a basis for a broader exploration of contemporary culture, Krukowski gives us a brilliant meditation and guide to keeping our heads amid the digital flux. Think of it as plugging in without tuning out.

The New Analog: Listening and Reconnecting in a Digital World Details

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From Reader Review The New Analog: Listening and Reconnecting in a Digital World for online ebook

Ollie says

I think it's believed that music nerds often prefer vinyl or analog sound over digital. Like we're purists somehow who hate change or anything new. And while that's true to some extent, and those music nerds who swear by vinyl and analog exist by the thousands, I've always sided with the format or delivery system that is most accessible to people, the format that goes from the musician to the listener in the most convenient way. In that sense I have completely embraced the digital age and its mp3s or streaming services. But then again, I also think music should be available for free to listeners, because money is just another obstacle between the music and the music lover.

Damon Krukowski's *New Analog* is an interesting book for many reasons. From its shape (the book is the size of a 45 record) to its content. Before I get into the grand conclusion Krukowski draws from this book, I should say that the topics he chooses to write about are interesting, relevant to music listeners and music lovers, and written in an easy-to follow language. The *New Analog* spends most of its time discussing the shift of music from analog to digital, the gadgets it's brought us, and how the music listening experience has changed now that we're dealing with digital albums and not hardcopies. It also spends a fair amount of time discussing how music is recorded and the process is presented in a more-or-less very interesting way as Krukowski knows not to get too technical in explaining details. Though it's short, the *New Analog* can be enjoyed at the surface for the way Krukowski talks about the different topics and there's honestly a lot to learn here. The man just knows his stuff and it's nice to get the opinion of someone who did the research.

The main issue with the *New Analog* is Krukowski's idea that analog noise is important for music enjoyment and its survival. He feels that the noise, meaning the surface noise on the vinyl, that the recording gear picked up in the studio, that encapsulates the music (the album cover and liner notes) and that literally separates you from the music (the journey to the record store) are all important for the enjoyment of music. And of course, although they all make for a different experience, one can also treat the recording of the music and its packaging as more noise and argue that music must only be experienced live. And no one wants to sound like John Philip Sousa. Isn't the money required to buy a record also noise? Krukowski ignores that much of what made analog music what it was had to do with limitations and that a lot of that noise we hear, the artists would rather us not hear and are not part of their vision for the music they made. They're simply limitations. And if the convenience of listening to music on my iPod or streaming it on my phone leads to my listening to more music than I would otherwise, maybe this is a step in the right direction.

The *New Analog* is a good book and it means well, but it's better enjoyed in its separate parts.

John Cooper says

Krukowski, whose work in *Galaxie 500* I enjoyed, goes about his task of writing this book as if he were a professor stuck with a class of exceptionally dense students. He sprinkles his text with unnecessary italics, apparently to assist the challenged. He belabors trite points as if they were brilliant insights of his own. And his first analogy, about analog vs. digital type (page 4), is hogwash. Instead of getting "twice as bad, every eighteen months" in an inverse of Moore's Law, digital typography started out bad, got worse for a few years

as amateurs with cheap tools took over, and now is virtually indistinguishable from traditional letterpress, at least in professional contexts. The degradation of typographic standards that remains is largely due to the technology of typography becoming widely available. It has nothing to do with digital tech vs. analog tech. (I know something about this; I was part of the development team for Aldus PageMaker and Adobe InDesign in the 1990s and early 2000s. Digital tools for professional-grade typesetting have been available for twenty years.)

If Krukowski's authorial tone showed just a smidgen of humility, his book would be easier to swallow. Instead, we have yet another self-appointed authority who doesn't know what he doesn't know. Seems there's a lot of that going around these days.

Matt Schiavenza says

Damon Krukowski's book tells two stories in one. The first is a philosophical meditation on how digitization and optimization — which Krukowski calls removing noise from signal — has cost us considerably as a society. The second is a detailed explanation of what digitization does to sound. As a non-expert, I found the latter sections to be a touch too dense and technical, hence my rating of four stars. But Krukowski's central thesis is valuable and important and well worth reading.

Chad says

"Noise has value." So goes the thesis statement of this wonderful book by musician Damon Krukowski. He reckons with how digital media—specifically in the realm of music but also writ large—has changed how we consume and what we expect from our pop culture, which has been stripped of context and its surrounding "noise" and turned (for a profit) into pure "signal".

I listened to Krukowski's podcast miniseries *Ways of Hearing*, which covers a lot of the same ground as this book. But ironically, despite its inability to convey sound, I thought the book was better at explaining the concepts and aural phenomena of analog that Krukowski dives into.

Will definitely make my list of favorite books of 2017.

Drew Metzger says

Galaxie 500 frontman Damon Krukowski offers a wonderfully thoughtful take on our world's transition from analog to digital output. It is refreshing to hear an artist's take on the way they have perceived the digit revolution. It is more technical than I thought it would be going in, but I actually enjoyed it all the more because of Krukowski's attention to detail and the amount of research he did to write this book. I would recommend to anyone that loves music.

Phil Carroll says

This is an erudite but accessible discussion about existing in the digital world. Rejecting the binary lens of good vs. bad with the digital takeover of music consumption, Krukowski lends a musician's knowledge to the enduring value of analog in a digital world. His premise is that with many new revolutionary inventions, we shouldn't rush wholesale into the new medium (even though we have been rushed, so to speak). This rush necessarily destroys what it's replacing, and Krukowski does a phenomenal job of elucidating the aspects of analog that will benefit us as the world is digitized. No troglodyte, he gives the reader much to think about as he navigates through the digital world. And that's of the main points - we must navigate, because even though digital media promises our on-demand satisfaction, there are clear consequences to our full-on embracing of digital media. While no doom-and-gloom prognosticator, Krukowski deftly calls out those things that we should hold on to. In the end, it's our human connections that the digital world separates. This is not an "answers" book (one of its greatest strengths), but if there is an answer, it's to retain what works from analog as we live a digital life.

Scott Holstad says

This book is more than just a simple “back to vinyl” sermon, refreshingly. It’s a highly scientific and socio-psychological look at the history of recorded music, the transition from analog to digital, and what that means to people and society.

Damon Krukowski writes as a musician, music fan, and techno nerd, yet mixes this all together quite skillfully. He writes about context, signal, and noise in ways that will make sense to most readers.

Krukowski writes that people hear in stereo sound. That having two ears allows us to make the small, even tiny, mental distinctions providing much-needed context for the world around us. He tells one story, among others, of a person falling over while riding a bicycle wearing earbuds because, while they were focused on the sounds that were being delivered in their ears, they weren’t able to integrate and HEAR other sounds in the world around them. Krukowski asserts that our stereo hearing is incredibly accurate for providing context for what we actually hear (and need to hear, for the most part) while our brains separate signal from noise.

And what’s the distinction? The author explains that signal is the foregrounded sound we’re supposed to concentrate on, ie., music in this case, while noise is the allegedly “unnecessary” sounds that interfere with our being able to focus on signal. The role of technology in separating signal from noise provides the allegedly purer sound that one obtains through digital transmission, eliminating noise entirely. But the question is, is music without (analog) noise what we really want to hear? Krukowski makes the case that it is not.

Krukowski’s “The New Analog: Listening and Reconnecting in a Digital World” skillfully examines the science, physiology, and effects of the changes from analog sound to digital sound, not only over time, but now in the rapidly changing musical media world in which we live. By putting our audio experience of recorded music into a bigger context of how people interact with the world, he offers a more intricate view than many who bemoan the emergence of digital music as it's experienced through devices like head phones, iPods, and even smartphones. He argues that the digital delivery of music replacing analog, tactile music has largely been responsible for the loss of community represented by now many distant-memory record stores where people could hang out, chill, and talk with others about music and other similar interests, while

shopping for tangible, artistic items of value that one can hold and play and hear signal WITH noise. He then calls for the re-introduction of the noisy environment once surrounding all music, that would lessen the near-total isolation with which people now experience music.

The only reason I am giving this book 4 stars instead of 5 is that he sometimes gets caught up in going seriously too far into hard technology that one might need an engineering degree to fully appreciate, and the middle has an extended section that drags a bit as a result. However, he ultimately delivers a very thoughtful analysis at how rapid technological change leads to unanticipated social consequences that aren't always good. A very interesting and decent book and recommended for all audiophiles, vinyl (and CD) enthusiasts, and music lovers in general.

M.L. Rio says

As both a writer and a vinyl junkie, I enjoyed the heck out of this. Krukowski uses the audio dichotomy of signal vs. noise to explain and explore how media—and the way we interact with it and the world around us—has changed since the shift from analog to digital. His analysis sits at the crossroads of curiosity and keen perception, likely to engage and intrigue even the most reluctant readers.

Phil Wilkins says

A fairly slim volume given its price, but a thought provoking non the less. It posits a fairly nuanced argument that in simplified terms is that as we rush to digitise everything we are leaving behind really valuable context and insight, some might call noise. For example embracing iTunes and Spotify all the rich contextual information, about who was involved with the recording etc is lost that is provided with the physical content. For a die hard rack digger this is good info as it can lead you to other recordings you'll like.

Peter says

I love the ideas presented in this book, and find myself thinking about them often.

Edward Sullivan says

Lively but disorganized and often underdeveloped. The Revenge of Analog by David Sax is better.

Michael Ritchie says

This book is a bit all over the map, and many of the points the author makes could be developed in more detail, but it sure is an interesting read. Krukowski notes in the introduction that the reader may want to flip

through rather than follow the page numbers, and though I read it straight through (in one sitting, I might add, which is rare for me), I can see that random perusing might be the way to go. His chief idea is to use the concepts of "signal" and "noise," both literally and metaphorically, to discuss what he fears we are leaving behind in the digital media world. (He focuses on sound--physical media vs. non-physical digital, and uses cell phones in his argument--and says nothing about physical vs. non-physical video, but I guess that would be a whole different book, though most of his arguments would apply.)

Krukowski, a member of Galaxie 500 back in the late 80s, is a musician and makes sure that he doesn't come off as a head-burying luddite: he understands the lure of digital, and is a user of Spotify--and I assume iTunes. But he is concerned both as a creator and consumer of music about the "noise" being left behind (the metadata of album packaging, the ambience of analog recording) as digital focuses with laser intensity on "signal" (the actual content being communicated). His examples are drawn from a wide variety of sources--Beatles, Beach Boys, Oasis, Kiss, The Sweet Inspirations--and I was quite charmed by his use of a publicity shot of Joan Crawford and Rosalind Russell in 1939's *The Women*, and of an exchange of dialogue from a Fred Astaire movie.

There are some concepts that zipped past me, like "latency," which has to do, I think, with lag time in live digital broadcast, but most of what he tackles he explains well. As a music lover who was happy with my scratchy 45s, I've never really been an audiophile so I'm a little less concerned with digital compression, though I 100% agree that vinyl sounds richer and warmer than digital ever does. But I do miss my metadata, as I was the kind of music consumer who pored over liner notes and credits and appreciated album art, and it was this argument that made me really appreciate this book. I'd love to read a sequel if ever gets around to it.

Matt Carton says

This is a book I will return to as the summer progresses. Pretty much all of my concerns about the digital world that I have thought about since my 50th birthday are addressed by Krukowski - brilliantly, might I add. One of my great delights over the last two years is diving back into the world of LPs. I forgot how much I missed records until I started listening to them again (the needle on my turntable broke in 1987; I had a cd player, so I didn't see the need to replace the expensive \$30 stylus).

I will reread this in a few weeks. I'll be sure to annotate it when I do that, too. Since I think we need a balance with the analog and digital worlds, this book was the perfect book for me to read right now.

Alex Leonard says

Whilst there were a number of points in the book which I agree with, the overall tone came across as one who hates all things digital and refused to make any reference to the numerous advantages it offers. Numerous points are rehashed over and over or stretched beyond a reasonable point to apply them to other examples. Other points, such as the ones made about GPS, are laboured and feel quite irrelevant.

I agree that yes, when abused or misused, the digital world has its negatives, but this generally came across as a constant railing about how things are universally worse now than ever before, which is something I wholeheartedly cannot agree with.

Ted Lehmann says

Damon Krukowski is a musician, poet, and publisher who has written a book exploring the ways that the move from analog recording and distribution of music to digital has effected the way in which music is experienced. In *The New Analog: Listening and Reconnecting in a Digital World* (The New Press, 2017, 224 pages, \$24.95/15.48) he examines, in some detail, the history and development of transmitting both print and recorded versions of sound to make it available to those wishing to reproduce and hear it. From printed notation to player piano rolls, wax cylinders, records, CDs, to broadcast from radio signals to streaming digital, he examines copyright issues as well as the complex nature of sound and its reproduction. Along the way, he discusses copyright issues as they affect those wishing to make a living from recording (musicians, writers, engineers, recording companies, sound distribution) providing the most cogent explanation of “mechanical royalties” I’ve ever read.

I’m not a techie. I haven’t understood what’s meant when my more knowledgeable friends talk about the compression or lifelessness of CD’s as compared with earlier vinyl recordings. I’ve even suggested double blind listening tests to determine whether even highly sensitive listeners can actually tell the difference, but I’ve never read or heard of any being conducted. Krukowski, almost talking in two languages, techno speak and fan, makes these issues clearer for me. He writes about context, signal, and noise in ways that make sense to me. Krukowski is able to make most technical issues clear, only losing me a few times. Written with an eye to clarifying certain issues in recording and hearing the distribution of those sounds, *The New Analog* helped me to understand much of what I have been missing, in trying to understand this revolution.

According to Krukowski, human beings hear in stereo sound. Having two ears allows us to make the minute mental distinctions placing us in space and providing context for the world around us. He describes a woman bike rider falling down while riding a bike with earbuds because, focused on the sounds being delivered to her ears, she was unable to integrate other cues. Our stereo hearing is remarkably accurate at providing context for what we hear while our brains separate signal from noise.

Signal is the foregrounded sound we are supposed to concentrate on...the music. Noise is the supposedly unnecessary sound that interferes with our being able to focus on signal. The role of the technology in separating signal from noise gives us the purer sound that comes to us through digital transmission, eliminating noise. But is music without noise what we really wish to hear?

The studio itself becomes a character in this dichotomy. A wooden studio provides a warm, wood-like sound. But a completely baffled and sound-dead studio, for a listener inside it, is still filled with sound, as one’s internal functioning – respiration, heartbeat, blood flowing in the veins – can be heard. There is no silence. But the digital studio seeks to eliminate noise, while increasing and layering signal. The work of the studio technician is to take a series of signals, layer and sequence them, and create a larger complex work that turns out to be all signal with no differentiation about what to foreground or background – no sense of context. Loudness has become a substitute for subtlety.

Along with the changes in sound have come a change in the delivery system of those sounds. The invention of file sharing, though Napster, while only lasting for two years, spelled the end of record stores and will soon sound the death knell of the compact disk as a means of distributing music. All our music will be downloaded to digital devices to be heard through ear-buds simulating stereo sound, but actually have no separation and providing no contextual cues. Furthermore, those features record lovers, and even CD

purchasers no longer have available the kind of information once provided by liner notes. Planned noise has been substituted for by social media, a very noisy place. However, the algorithms of FB, Twitter, Snap Chat, Goodreads, etc) quickly limit exposure to only the noise you wish to hear, increasing isolation and tribalism. We are not fully exposed to the range of noise that once took place in the record store, or other gathering places where people discussed and debated the values of content. However, the algorithms of FB, Twitter, Snap Chat, Goodreads, etc) quickly limit exposure to only the noise you wish to hear, increasing isolation and tribalism. Older mail lists, for instance, were relatively unfiltered, providing more choices of what to consider for the receiver. Who decides what the noise surrounding the signal will be?

Damon Krukowski is the editor/publisher of Exact Change, an independent publishing house, along with Naomi Yang, with whom he performs as David & Naomi. He has been a member of rock band Galaxie 500, a 1980's and early nineties indie rock band, as well. He attended Harvard University and lives in Boston. He blogs at International Sad Hits.

The New Analog: Listening and Reconnecting in a Digital World (The New Press, 2017, 224 pages, \$24.95/15.48) by Damon Krukowski examines the physiology, acoustic science, and effect of the changes from analog to digital sound in the rapidly changing media environment. By placing our audio experience of recorded music into a larger context of how human beings interact with the world, he offers a more nuanced view than many who decry the emergence of digital music as it's experienced through devices like head phones and iPods. He recognizes that digital delivery of music has been responsible for the loss of community represented by the teeming record store where people could hang out and discuss the music, as well as the quickly developing death of the CD as a means of delivering music. He calls for the re-introduction of the noisy environment once surrounding music, which would lessen the isolation with which people now experience it. While he sometimes gets caught up in the tangled weeds of detailed technology and psycho-physiology, he nevertheless delivers a thoughtful and readable examination at how rapid technological change leads to unanticipated social disruption. I received the book at an Advanced Reviewers Copy from the publisher through Edelweiss. I read it on my Kindle app.
