Way Out Music for Way Out Kids

Bruce Haack and Esther Nelson’s Experimental Electronic Music Collaborations

ABSTRACT This article explores the 1960s children’s recordings of Canadian electronic music pioneer Bruce Haack and his collaborator, the American dancer and educator Esther Nelson. Their musical partnership existed at the intersection of music, performance, and technology at a time when all three were changing rapidly. The unpredictable and playful recordings that resulted relied upon DIY electronic equipment to create an unusual range of styles and sounds, from low-fi electronic collage to traditional folk music against a mechanical backbeat; they also, crucially, relied on the input of children. By examining the resulting musical experiments within the cultural and technological context of electronic music from the early 1960s to today, we hope to emphasize that, far from being diminished versions of electronic music, children’s electronic music articulates some of the genre’s most intriguing and lasting concerns. Indeed, the innovations in musical technology and technique deployed in these recordings forecasted changes that would come in electronic music decades later.

KEYWORDS electronic music, children’s music, electronica, synthesizer, experimental music, DIY, Bruce Haack, Esther Nelson

In May 1968, experimental electronic musician Bruce Haack made an appearance on the new television program Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood. He demonstrated a device Rogers himself would dub “the musical computer,” a DIY hybrid analog-digital synthesizer and sampler made of household items, such as a silverware holder shoehorned into an old suitcase. By waving his hand in front of a photosensitive circuit, Haack alters the pitch of a basic analog oscillator wedged inside. The other knobs modulate the sound in other ways, opening and closing filters/amplifiers and shaping envelopes, ultimately producing a now-canonical electronic timbre that we have since come to associate with the sound of “weirdness” and science fiction cinema. After a few minutes, Haack’s long-time collaborator Esther Nelson arrives on set with several children. She invites these children—and also, implicitly, the children watching—to join in a guided, creative dance accompanied by the blippy sounds of Haack’s musical computer. The kids
pretend to be wheels turning ‘round and ‘round, cats basking in the sun, cyclists, tops. It’s goofy, energetic—and fun.¹

The show aired the same year that Haack and Nelson released their fourth album, *The Way Out Record for Children*. This record was indeed “way-out”: slang from the jazz world of the 1950s, meaning eccentric and bold, and later co-opted by psychedelic culture. It also, crucially, offers a way out: an alternative to some of the more syrupy sing-alongs packaged for children’s consumption in the 1960s. Rather than featuring songs that had a surfeit of strings and an element of strongly moralistic storytelling, Haack and Nelson, both of whom had degrees in psychology, created songs with children’s cognitive development in mind, as well as the understanding that children and adults might enjoy similar musical experimentation. These innovations in musical technology and technique forecasted changes that would come in electronic music decades later. As Nelson observed, Haack was extraordinarily creative: “When Bruce needed instruments, they never existed. They only existed in his head, and so he had to invent them.”² Even as Haack’s technologies themselves have become more mainstream than they were in the 1960s, the surrealism, the DIY electronic instrumentation, the matter-of-fact psychedelia of Haack and Nelson’s work—as well as their engagement with child collaborators—stand out.

By examining these musical experiments within the context of children’s as well as electronic music history, we aim to demonstrate how crucial both children’s culture and actual children were to early experimental electronica—and how those early experiments continue to reverberate today. We want to situate children as important participants in the art and business of music and, at the same time, de-emphasize the myth of the solitary creative genius. For, while Bruce Haack may be the “creative genius” behind much—but certainly not all—of the music, it was Esther Nelson, who did much of the work necessary to their business: she found reviewers, got their records into stores in New York, and secured their spot on *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. It was also, notably, Nelson and her two daughters who managed record distribution.

In emphasizing the collaborative nature of this project, we acknowledge a large body of work on collaboration, by authors including Jack Stillinger, Marjorie Stone, and Judith Thompson. We call attention, in particular, to work on child-adult collaboration by scholars such as Marah Gubar, David Rudd, Richard Flynn, and Victoria Ford Smith who, as Smith puts it, “recuperate the actual child as creative collaborator.”³ For decades, following the lead of critic Jacqueline Rose, scholars in the broad field of children’s literature emphasized that, rather than reflecting the desires of actual children, literature written for a child audience reflected adult concerns and attitudes. Yet, as David Rudd


2. *Haack: the King of Techno*, DVD, directed by Philip Anagnos (Port Washington, NY: Koch Vision 2005). Haack’s Dermitron, for example, was similar to a theremin in that it used the body’s natural ability to conduct electricity as a means of generating electronic tones. It did not allow the user to “play air”—controlling volume and pitch near two antennas, as with a theremin—instead, it worked by having two people touch one another skin to skin, thus closing an electronic circuit and setting off an oscillator or a rhythmic pattern.

maintains, such “[i]nsight into the child as cultural trope” led, over time, to a “neglect of the child as a social being, with a voice.”4 In light of this, Marah Gubar emphasizes the need to adopt a way of thinking that “allows us to appreciate as well as criticize, believe as well as doubt, build and tinker as well as dismantle and deconstruct.”5 Such work moves beyond the boundaries of children’s literature; the scholars above analyze the adult-child partnerships within drama, fiction, poetry, and illustration, as well as the material culture of children’s play.6 In this article, we acknowledge their insights as we explore the ways that children, although their role has historically been minimized, were at the heart of 1960s electronic experimentation.

Before exploring the unique collaboration of Haack and Nelson, we look to the thriving children’s music industry in the early 1960s. Prior to World War II, there was not much money in children’s records. After the war, though, the children’s music industry exploded, as studios began to recognize the immense commercial potential children’s musical recordings offered. Soon, versions of Robin Hood, The Little Red Hen, Cinderella, and many other songs and musical tales were being marketed by dozens of companies.7 Influential music educators, including Beatrice Landeck,8 objected to many of these post-war “kididisks,” finding them condescending and critiquing them for their “elaborate production in the Hollywood or Radio City manner, large orchestras, reliance on big-name stars to the exclusion of anything else, and sound effects ad nauseam.”9 As one librarian colorfully put it, in the immediate postwar period, the children’s music industry produced a good deal of “recorded goo and blah.”10

But amidst the goo was a good deal of lively, musically inventive work for children. In 1948, Ruth Seeger, Pete Seeger’s mother, published American Folk Songs for Children, which had been circulating during the war years. That same year, Moses Asch founded the Folkways label to record many of these artists. In 1948, Ruth Seeger, Pete Seeger’s mother, published American Folk Songs for Children, which had been circulating during the war years. That same year, Moses Asch founded the Folkways label to record many of these artists.11

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4. Rudd points out that Rose does acknowledge the child outside of the book, the child as social being; however, her emphasis is on the ways that adults evoke “the child” for their own purposes and desires. As a result of her popularity, scholarship has followed suit. David Rudd. “Theorising and Theories: The Conditions of Possibility in Children’s Literature,” in International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature, ed. Peter Hunt, 29–43. (London: Routledge, 2004), 30.
6. Moreover, ethnomusicologists, particularly since the mid-2000s, have become increasingly focused on child agency, acknowledging that children are co-constructors of their musical cultures. See Patricia Sheehan Campbell, “Music in the Culture of Children.” In This Thing Called Music: Essays in Honor of Bruno Netti, ed. Victoria Lindsey Lavine and Philip V. Bohlman (London: Roman and Littlefield, 2015), 15. Tyler Bickford, who operates at the intersection of children’s literature, childhood studies, and ethnomusicology, also emphasizes children’s musical agency. Tyler Bickford, Schooling New Media (New York: Oxford UP, 2017).
8. Ibid., 36. Landeck was music director at the Little Red Schoolhouse, the first progressive school in New York City (founded in 1921), in the early 1940s. She wrote reviews for a variety of magazines, including Parents’ Magazine, and based her reviews on children’s responses.
from *The Story of Jazz* Narrated by Langston Hughes to *Music Time* with Charity Bailey to *1, 2, 3 and a Zing Zing Zing*, an album of street songs, were not “kiddie records”: they were records that refused to talk down to children. One *New York Times* review observed that “[t]heir children’s series has the double virtue of taking from and giving to youngsters,” recording children themselves at play in addition to introducing children to ballads and folksongs—a much more collaborative approach than other record companies. Uninterested in creating hits, Asch instead “preferred to record artists who had something to say and were unafraid to say it.” This included Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and Ella Jenkins—who were records outsold most of Folkways’ adult catalogue—and the ex-convict Lead Belly, who was known for his rapport with children and became surprisingly popular with parents and educators. In her study of radical children’s books, Julia Mickenberg observes that many people out of work due to blacklisting or graylisting in the mid-century, including Langston Hughes, found work in the fields of children’s literature and music. And David Bonner’s *Revolutionizing Children’s Records* details the way that the left-leaning Young People’s Records and the Children’s Record Guild became the first commercially significant record clubs in the world, attracting thousands of subscribers and influencing musical taste.

In addition to providing artists with a way to make a living, children’s music also appealed to the desire to influence a younger generation. Folk legend and Folkways musician Pete Seeger, who played at summer camps and independent progressive schools, wrote that many people were thinking that “[i]f we’re going to save this world we’ve got to reach the kids.” Such a romantic and even utopian vision was common among progressive and radical thinkers, but it nevertheless had very practical implications on the pedagogical practices that viewed children as “autonomous, critical thinkers who questioned authority.” This is not to suggest that these practices were not ideological; however, they did often serve as counterpoints to a post-war culture that sought, relentlessly, to codify and commodify children and their “creativity.” For Bruce Haack and Esther Nelson, “reaching the kids” meant not talking down to them, acknowledging their simultaneous difference from adults (as children, whose needs were unique) and sameness (as humans who delight in play).

12. Ibid., 140.
13. Ibid., xvi.
14. Woody Guthrie’s wife, Marjoria Mazia, was also a dancer who recorded one album with Folkways, *Dance-a-Long*, released in 1950, 147.
15. Ibid., 142.
16. Ibid., 11.
19. For more on this, see Amy F. Ogata, *Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Midcentury America.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
Haack’s involvement in the world of children’s music was, much like Lead Belly, somewhat surprising. He had allegedly smoked peyote at a tender age, suffered frequent bouts of depression, and found work commitments difficult. He was also an “autodidactic musical prodigy” and Juilliard dropout, who could hear a piece of music and play it back “immediately from memory” even though he couldn’t sight-read.20 As with many of the more innovative performers working with children, his music retained a level of serious playfulness no matter the audience, something evident in his work that was “for adults,” such as The Electric Lucifer (1970) and Haackula (1978). Unlike the more entrepreneurial electronic pioneers Raymond Scott and Bob Moog, whose goals were more commercial,21 Haack, despite his early career success in television commercials, often operated outside the business of electronic music. In Esther Nelson, though, he found a musical collaborator who could help him find an outlet; she was, Nelson herself observes, the “one who was out in the world,” while “Bruce hid.”22 As with other important performers, such as Ella Jenkins and Charity Bailey, Nelson incorporated hand-clapping motions and movement into songs. She maintained that “every child instinctively knows the joy of simple body movement. Combine this with love and discipline, and every child can dance.”23 Miss Nelson, as she was widely known, created numerous dance programs throughout Westchester County and published books of movement games. Many artists appreciated her work, including Pete Seeger, who described her as “one of my favorite people,” adding, “There must be thousands of children who feel the same way.”24

Nelson was also heir to the music and movement tradition that had existed in progressive schools for several decades. In the 1920s, Ruth Doing, educator at the progressive City and Country School in Greenwich Village,25 emphasized a kind of dancing that intended for the child’s “whole organism” to respond “with creative energy to the pulsation of forces around him.”26 Likewise, Charity Bailey, who was music director at another progressive New York City school, the Little Red Schoolhouse, had been trained in Dalcroze Eurythmics, a method of teaching young children music through rhythm and movement. Nelson herself trained at New York University under influential dance instructor Martha Hill, who brought together the classical ballet tradition and more avant-garde forms of modern dance.27

21. Moog and Scott were at the forefront of a new industry as well as a new technology and were more concerned with business ventures than Haack.
25. The City and Country School was named the Play School when it was founded in 1913.
As a team, Haack and Nelson wedded this tradition of movement play and dance for children with electronic music. In 1963, Haack recorded one of Nelson’s dance classes; it was the beginning of the impressive collaboration of, as Nelson called them, these two “kindred spirits.” That same year, they released their first album: Dance Sing and Listen. Altogether, they would release seven children’s albums for their own label, Dimension 5 Records with musician Ted Pandel. These records drew on Progressive Era ideas about music—in particular, engaging the whole child through dramatic play. As the album title tells us: dance first, then sing, then the arguably more passive listen, presumably in that order. Once movement happens, then singing can follow; only then does listening come into play, subverting the traditional idea of the child listening to a record. The record was meant to help children develop a sense of rhythm through movement and offered lessons in critical listening, improvising, and communicating.

Much of Dance Sing and Listen is what we might think of as “robot music”: a lounge-y pop tune sung out by basic electronic circuitry. While the timbres are certainly novel, it is Haack’s production that makes this album so noteworthy. He artfully clips the sound, splices the tape, and adds artificial delay and reverb for an effect that is disorienting. He often doesn’t attempt to recreate the sounds of what Nelson or the children are describing; instead, he seems to be creating a tandem story. All throughout, the album features sweeping theremin-like glissandos as well as found sound and spoken word poetry. It also draws on the tradition of musique concrète, which relies on the assemblage of natural sounds recorded on tape and modified (spliced into bits, looped, varied in pitch.) The songs on the album feature ear-body coordination games, body tapping, and pretend play. On the first track, “Clap Your Hands,” Nelson and Haack take “Old Joe Clark,” a popular mountain folk ballad, and turn it into something surprisingly new. Here, the production method adds a processed, filtered quality to otherwise traditional old-timey banjo instrumentation. The reverberation on Nelson’s voice makes it clear that she is in a particular space, a particular room. She tells child listeners: “I want you to get up on your toes, stretch your arms out and let me see how very beautifully you can dance” and she guides them into creative movement throughout the record. The song “Sunflowers” features dramatic dynamic shifts, seemingly aimless plucking of an acoustic guitar, and electronics that spiral off in their own direction. There are no fades; rather, the music ducks out each time Miss Nelson picks up her narration of the growing seeds. At times, Haack’s music emerges as scattered tracings of unfettered electronics, growling and whistling along unconcerned with any semblance of traditional musical logic. It is not unlike sounds that can be found in the collaboration of Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Bob Moog in Variations V (1966), which also had dancers interacting spatially with a series of Moog-installed antennae and electronics. To believe this mode of experimental music making was ideal for children speaks to the singularity of Haack and Nelson’s vision; they, like

29. The French musician Pierre Schaeffer, who developed the compositional practice in the early 1940s, emphasized the importance of jeu, which in French—as in the English play—suggests both the playing of an instrument and play more broadly.
Cunningham, Cage, and Moog, offered an opportunity to reimagine the relationship between the body and the instrument on a fundamental level.

Crucially, children were collaborative partners throughout the whole process, from the creation of the sounds to the distribution of the records. Each album was a DIY venture, made at home with a seven-dollar microphone, garbage trucks rumbling in the background.30 Children in Haack’s neighborhood, whom he referred to as “star children”—emphasizing their link with the cosmos—would go to his studio. As they describe it, they would sit on the floor, cross-legged, to listen to music and then become involved in its creation; the whole process, one former star child says, felt like a “tribal ritual.” The Dimension 5 records themselves were collaborations with children, including Tony Spiridakis (age 9), who sings “soulful rock music” that “he conceived and helped Bruce write” on The Way-Out Record for Children. Nelson’s own daughters, Risa and Mara, are integral to a number of albums. On Way-Out, they encourage listeners to move their bodies to celestial rhythms: “I bring you sparkling sunlight on a green leaf. While one arm moves as a worm, let your other hand move like the sun as it appears to travel from one horizon to another.” As the girls speak, Haack plays a funky, tinny groove that would be at home in a hip hop break beat. Immediately after, the music drops into a mashup of Eastern and Western modalities, an introduction to what would have been, for many, novel timbres, despite the increasing popularity of the sitar due to Ravi Shankar and the Beatles. As the album description of the song puts it: “We give you love, peace and music on the sitar. Mara and Risa offer you a chance to fly.”31 While adults are the ones asking questions on the albums, the children’s answers seem fresh and unedited. On Dance Sing and Listen, when Haack asks the children if dance makes your imagination grow, they interrupt him to exclaim, “Yes!” “You’re not stiff and you’re free,” one of the girls says, “You can really do anything.” This resonates with the idea of electronic music as a form of tonal liberation, a promise echoed in dozens of advertisements from the early days of electronic instruments promising “any sound you can imagine.” Although such promises were lofty (and obscure the very real conditions of the production and distribution of these technologies), there is undeniably a spirit of freedom and improvisation in this “dance record” that the children help create.

The question of power in adult-child collaborations is a vexed, ideologically charged one; this is particularly the case when one of the adults is the child’s parent. Nelson observes that her children would sometimes accompany her to Saturday morning dance classes and that she expected them to treat her as a teacher: “I made it very clear: you can’t be a mother and a teacher at the same time.” “I remember saying, ‘Now, Risa, in the class, remember I’m not your mother. I’m Miss Nelson,’ and she would say, ‘Don’t worry, mummy, I’ll call you Miss Nelson.”32 Such a statement illuminates the compelling family dynamic that was at the heart of the collaboration. At least according to this account, children seemed willing and even eager to go by the professional rules.

30. Haack: the King of Techno.
Moreover, Nelson’s daughters were not just dancers in a class or performers on a record, brought in to “play along.” She underscores that “the people who helped in the shipping and the billing and the running of Dimension 5 were my children. And it was a tremendous amount of effort and energy.”\(^{33}\) She emphasizes that this “family affair” involved receiving the records, which were shipped individually, lugging them up to their fourth floor walkup, putting them in the sleeves, and bringing them back down the stairs to take to the post office. Each sleeve, she observes, has their, and her, handprints on them.\(^{34}\) Thanks to this work, records were sold in stores around New York City and shipped across the country. Children, then, were not just on the receiving end of this electronic music: they were creators, producers, and business associates, learning alongside their mother (who observes that she did not know what an invoice was when she began).\(^{35}\) Indeed, unlike children’s albums that featured sweetly wholesome choruses or even the call and response of folk music, these children are at the intimate heart of experimentation. These are “intergenerational collaborations”\(^{36}\) that give children a degree of agency, permitting them, on Haack and Nelson’s albums, to give instructions, answer questions, be wild and weird—and help keep a small business going.

All of Haack and Nelson’s albums are unexpected and peculiar, almost pre-punk in their inventive appropriation, but the records that have the most input from children seem the most “way out”—that is, as the definition of “way out” puts it, “far removed from reality or convention.”\(^{37}\) “Way out” as a term had gained currency by 1968, when Nelson and Haack titled their own album *Way-Out Record for Children.* The title echoes electronic music duo Perrey and Kinsley, whose 1966 album *The In Sound from Way Out*, aimed to make electronic music accessible—and pleasurable—for a wider (adult) audience, challenging the perceived self-importance of *musique concrète.*\(^{38}\) Haack and Nelson are able to do the same for a child audience but, while Perrey and Kinsley are exploring the technology in a popular context, largely for its own sake, Nelson and Haack explore the potential technology has for changing children’s music, dance, and their way of being in the world. This album has a propulsive quality to it, and even more of a jazzy rhythmic texture than previous Haack and Nelson endeavors, with Krupa-esque drum solos on tracks such as “Motorcycle Ride.” The revving motorcycle of this song alludes to the mid-century appeal of hot rod culture (and of the manifold demonstration records that comprised primarily engine samples), and a funky bass sequence buoys Miss Nelson as she intones instructions. Other tracks have bouncing mid-century melodies in the style of Raymond Scott’s (and Haack’s own) commercial work, as well as electronic imitations of

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33. *Haack: the King of Techno.*
35. Ibid. She was nevertheless a savvy marketer of their music, securing a spot on *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* and using her connections in the dance world to get their music to the public.
38. The album is a collection of electronic pop tunes grounded in the tape-splicing techniques of *musique concrète.*
sitars, sequenced baselines, and synthesized drums looping familiar rhythmic patterns not unlike those found on popular home organs of the time. Haack also incorporates primitive vocal looping and manipulation in songs such as “Tools,” where the voice bends and swoops like a theremin over a looped male chorus. Once again, the child listener was meant to be a part of this creation, as she moved in her own way to the music: riding on a pretend motorcycle or slithering like ketchup. One critic later wrote of the album: “Simple, repetitive, and rhythmic, it was like a kindergarten Kraftwerk.”

Even the album cover is experimental. The Way-Out Record, like other collaborations between Haack and Nelson, was done as inexpensively as possible, using drawings from family members. While earlier albums featured a similar aesthetic—all of their albums have black lettering on a stark white background, as well as simple black images—this one is more elaborate. The multiple typefaces, haphazard placement of both words and images (which include children, musical instruments, a motorcycle, and the iconic psychedelic swirl) create a hallucinatory effect. The cover might be seen as alluding to surrealist collage or even prefiguring the DIY photocopied punk zines and silk-screened singles that would evolve nearly a decade later. On the album’s back cover, Haack and Nelson write:

We do fill the senses with an almost infinite range of concepts, abstracts, words, sounds, advice and a contract with order and form. But we know that kids compute—so we ask them to use our basics and stretch to the sky. They do—because kids are turned on. In this Wild and Wonderful time we hereby take the slogan “Drop Out”—turn it around—and print our own button for children . . . “Drop in—We love you.”

The phrase “Kids compute” is implicitly in opposition to the robotic catchphrase “does not compute,” first used several years earlier on the television series My Living Doll by the character Rhoda, an android. Kids do compute, Nelson and Haack say, and they urge them not simply to follow their orders, but to take what they offer and “stretch to the sky.” They also seem to be referencing another important cultural touchstone, the spoken word record by Timothy Leary titled Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out. For Leary, “turn on” meant to “go within to activate your neural and genetic equipment. Become sensitive to the many and various levels of consciousness and the specific triggers that engage them.” While Leary did not intend the phrase “drop out” to mean abandoning “all constructive activity,” it was frequently interpreted as such. Rather, he insisted that “drop out” was a “commitment to mobility, choice, and change.” Haack and Nelson’s “drop in” is equally positive but with a different inflection. It emphasizes connectedness, offering, as

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39. It also evokes the experimental playfulness of the Monkees film Head, which also came out in 1968.
40. Brend, The Sound of Tomorrow, 150.
42. Bruce Haack and Esther Nelson, Way-Out Record for Children.
45. Ibid.
the definition suggests, an “unexpected visit” to the adventurous, collaborative world that the duo created.

Although these albums, as well as those that followed, may seem too unusual for everyday listening, they were met with a degree of critical acclaim. Dance Magazine observed that it was “small wonder that these records have the recommendation of N.Y.C.’s Board of Education . . . they are fun to work to and just to sit and listen to—for anyone.”46 The front cover of Dance Sing and Listen features recommendations from Martha Hill, director of the dance department of Juilliard (and Nelson’s mentor), The New York Times, and The Instructor Magazine, among others. Many musicians and critics, though, remained skeptical of the whole field of electronic music. To them, this was not music at all but the bleeps and bloops of a menacing machine. It was particularly threatening to many in the music establishment. At the beginning of the 1960s, celebrated composer Aaron Copland worried that composers were “in danger of being put out of their own house” since “the writing of music has begun to attract a new type of individual, half engineer and half composer.”47

Indeed, Haack was just such a person. As the cover to the first record observes: “[b]esides being the total orchestra, he was his own recording engineer” as well as the composer.48 It would take some years before the delicate dance between programmer/composer and the machine came to be regarded with less open hostility, much less celebrated. Brian Eno’s seminal 1979 work “The Studio as Compositional Tool” was influential in marking this shift. Eno writes of a kind of music making “where you no longer come to the studio with a conception of the finished piece. Instead, you come with actually rather a bare skeleton of the piece, or perhaps with nothing at all.”49 Such a process “puts the composer in the identical position of the painter—he’s working directly with a material, working directly onto a substance, and he always retains the options to chop and change, to paint a bit out, add a piece, etc.”50 For Haack, who considered himself a composer and engineer but not a performer, every musical event was its own low-budget, lo-fi (but high-concept) creation that was cut up, turned around, sped up, hacked.51

Despite an often dark outlook on the world, Haack believed in the power of his music to transform society by transforming the lives of children. In the liner notes to Dance Sing and Listen Again and Again! Haack and Nelson write that their goal is to give “children contact with an awareness of the infinite variety in everyday things, and inspires children

50. Ibid.
51. He was, as the definition of “hacker” in a glossary for computer programmers puts it: “A person who enjoys exploring the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities, as opposed to most users, who prefer to learn only the minimum necessary.” Ben Yagoda, “A Short History of ‘Hack,’” New Yorker, 6 March 2014, www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/a-short-history-of-hack.
to think—to move—to create, to shout ‘yes’ at the thunder and dance to the music of the
wind.”52 Such belief was undeniably idealistic, a kind of wish fulfillment. It was also, very
practically, a way for the impractical Haack to make money, both with records and in
classes at progressive schools in New York and the surrounding counties.

In recent years, Haack has received some credit within electronic music circles for his
pioneering role as an electronic musician and creator of instruments. This work, however,
has often neglected or downplayed the importance of his work with children. For
example, one of his most innovative inventions—and an important part of the history
of avant-garde music in the United States—is the Farad, named after nineteenth-century
scientist Michael Faraday.53 In 1968, Haack developed this early form of a musical
vocoder and used it on the 1969 Electronic Record for Children. Although music pioneer
Bob Moog was developing a musical vocoder54 at the same time as Haack, it would be two
years before a playable version of the instrument, as used briefly in Stanley Kubrick’s A
Clockwork Orange and five years before Kraftwerk’s 1974 influential album Autobahn,
was available. Children’s music, then, wasn’t just keeping up with or reflecting musical
trends of the day—it was setting them. Notably, Raymond Scott was also putting his
pioneering electronic techniques on records meant specifically for babies, Soothing Sounds
for Baby 1, 2, 3 (each for a specific age of child development). Unlike Haack’s more
chaotic electronic explorations, Scott’s Soothing Sounds draws from the former bandle-
ader’s extensive knowledge of popular and symphonic music to craft gentle looping
melodic phrases that slide and skip atop hypnotic drone pulses and machinic arpeggios.
Nevertheless, with these albums as well as with much of Haack and Nelson’s work, there
is a clear through line to ambient music a decade later, such as Brian Eno’s Discreet Music
in 1975, as well as various electronic genres into the twenty-first century.

Although children were an important part of early electronica, either as collaborators
or as an audience, they, along with Haack and to an extent Scott, also remain largely
sidelined or invisible in the histories and academic discussions of electronic music.55
In The Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music, Haack is not listed at all, and
Raymond Scott’s technical abilities are only briefly discussed; there is no reference to
children’s music.56 In Thom Holmes’s Electronic and Experimental Music: Pioneers in
Technology and Composition,57 Haack is briefly mentioned, but his name does not

52. Bruce Haack and Esther Nelson. Dance Sing and Listen Again and Again! New York: Dimension 5,
1966, LP.
53. Faraday discovered electromagnetic induction, the principle behind the electric transformer. He was crucial
in helping electricity become a powerful technology and not just a curiosity.
54. First developed as a long-distance communication technology in the 1930s by engineers at Bell Labs.
55. Given its marginalization, it is worth remembering that children’s music is part of the earliest recorded
sound. One of the first known sound recordings (1860) was of the French song “Au Clair de La Lune,” a folk song
commonly taught to young children. In 1888, the first recorded plates sold included Mother Goose nursery rhymes.
approach.php
UP, 2007), 259.
57. Thom Holmes, Electronic and Experimental Music: Pioneers in Technology and Composition (Oxford:
Routledge UP, 2002), 143.
appear in Holmes's *Electronic and Experimental Music: Technology, Music, and Culture*. Scott’s work is discussed, although not his work for children. Even in the book *Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music and Sound*, which explores the “intersectionality of gender with other aspects of identity,” age is not a category that is explored, and children, as is often the case, are not visible.\(^{58}\) And, while the independent film *Bruce Haack: the King of Techno* acknowledges the influence Haack would have on that genre, it, too demonstrates an adult-centric understanding of children’s music: the back cover of the DVD states that “ironically” Haack’s music evolved from his creation of children’s albums, showing no acknowledgement of the ways children’s records might be addressed to a dual audience. One notable exception to these gaps or dismissals is Mark Brend’s *The Sound of Tomorrow: How Electronic Music Was Smuggled into the Mainstream*, which includes Haack as an important music pioneer and makes note of his “magpie-like imagination.”\(^{59}\)

The reluctance to give credit to the pioneering aspects of Haack’s children’s music is also evident in popular articles written about him. One article is titled “How Bruce Haack Went from Making Children’s Music to Making One of Canada’s Weirdest Electronic Albums,” suggesting that there is a large gap between children’s music and other, weirder, music.\(^{60}\) Even a recent popular piece at *Medium* that acknowledges the importance of children’s music to Haack diminishes the significance of his children’s music, stating that “[t]he context of children’s music proved not a limitation for his ambitions, but a driver, *almost*” (italics ours).\(^{61}\) Once again, children’s music is downplayed, presented in the negative formulation: “not a limitation.” This tepid, surprised, or uncertain acknowledgment of the importance of Haack’s child audience/child collaborators came about almost certainly because, in part, as one music critic wrote: “rock history balks at lionizing children’s music.”\(^{62}\) It reflects a broader bias in both popular and scholarly criticism beyond the fields of children’s literature and childhood studies: children are not regarded as active agents and texts for children are seen as simplistic. Or, perhaps (as is the case with *Pink Noise*), children are not considered in the first place.

Today, Haack’s influence can be heard not only in “the quirks, glitches, and audio signals of modern techno-luminaries, such as Kraftwerk and Daft Punk,”\(^{63}\) but also in contemporary children’s music and culture. The children’s television show *Yo Gabba Gabba* featured bands such as Ladytron and the Faint, who are heirs to the independent electronic tradition pioneered by Haack and others. Musician Robert Schneider of Apples

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\(^{59}\) Brend, *The Sound of Tomorrow*, 129.


in Stereo has explicitly expressed his debt to Haack as well.\(^{64}\) As Robbert Bobbert and the Bubble Machine, Schneider melds stripped-down 60s pop music with synthesizers and a vocoder, creating music that is whimsical and inventive. Haack was also recognized with the 2003 tribute album *Dimension Mix*, which features remixes of his songs by a variety of artists, from Stereolab to Beck. Each one is a unique homage to Haack, with some operating as traditional covers and others focusing more on sampling and recon textualizing the original songs, drawing on the melodies, timbres, and effects of the original albums.

The combination of the timbral and rhythmic freedom of Haack’s music with Nelson’s dance pedagogy resulted in some of the most progressive forms of cultural production of the time, as these artists acknowledge through their tributes. Part of the reason this work continues to resonate is because it brings together listening and movement collaboration with Nelson and Haack in a way that feels not experimental for experiment’s sake, but more extrapolative and exploratory in tone. Their work evidences every bit the heft of the experimental work happening at the time—such as the work of Cage and Cunningham—and yet insists on the importance of the child in the creative process.

Given the critical and cultural importance of Haack and Nelson’s children’s music, additional scholarly work is called for. Our hope is that such work will emphasize that, far from being diminished versions of electronic music, children’s (for and with children) electronic music articulates some of the genre’s most intriguing and lasting concerns. While mapping out the precise nature of children’s involvement in musical production and distribution can be difficult—and determining what is actually attributable to children rather than to the adults around them is an impossible task—it is nevertheless important to acknowledge that children influenced these key cultural achievements of the twentieth century. It is worth seeking out these “material traces of children’s agency that might otherwise go uncollected, unanalyzed, missing”\(^ {65}\) as well as continuing to think about the importance of collaboration in electronic music more broadly. By doing so, we can counter the idea of electronic music as a solitary or even solipsistic pursuit—an understanding that has only become more widespread in this age of the bedroom studio and downloadable instruments. Haack and Nelson’s collaborations are a reminder that “musical genius” is only one part of any album. These “kindred spirits” together developed “wild and wonderful” music that, while of its place and time, nonetheless manages to reach beyond it.

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