

Jan-Peter Herbst & Jonas Menze

## **Gear Acquisition Syndrome**

Consumption of Instruments and Technology in Popular Music

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## Foreword

A few months ago, I was struck by a strong urge to buy a new electric guitar. I already owned several. Some—a lovely purple Ibanez, a cheap red Hamer—lay in various states of disrepair. I had retired a red Gibson Les Paul Studio guitar several years ago, which now sits neglected, rarely taken out of its case. The guitar with which I had replaced it, a brown sunburst Gibson Les Paul Signature “T,” is my favorite guitar in terms of sound and playability, but as my aging body has become more subject to back and shoulder pain, it has become too heavy to play comfortably. So, too, has my far less expensive but still very fine ‘Made in Mexico’ Fender Stratocaster. I bought a lighter guitar, a Guild Bluesbird, that has mostly served me well in recent years, but has sometimes been unreliable. My goal, then, was to purchase another lightweight solid-body electric guitar that would prove to be sturdy while having great sound, good feel, and a nice aesthetic design. It did not take long for me to set my sights on a Gibson SG, a guitar I had long coveted and almost bought in the past. But then several other questions arose: which model of SG, or year? Did I want a brand new instrument or a used one? Was I willing to pay a high price for a ‘vintage’ SG or would a more recent model suffice? I spent the better part of a month exploring my various options, reading online reviews of different SG models and years, before finally settling on a used SG ’61 Reissue model made in 2006 that I found for a reasonable price on the online musical instrument and gear mega-site Reverb.com. I have played the new guitar nearly every day since my purchase and remain pleased with my choice. For now, my guitar collection feels sufficient to suit my needs. However, the purchase of a new amp may not be too far in the future...

Do I suffer from GAS, or Gear Acquisition Syndrome, the phenomenon that gives this book by Jan Herbst and Jonas Menze its title? I have never considered myself to have anything like an excessive interest in buying guitars and related gear. The guitars that I own have been accumulated over decades, although I have admittedly purchased more in the last ten years—three—than at any previous time. Yet that can be explained by different factors: my increased disposable income as I have advanced in my academic career; the fact that I joined a band at the age of 48; and as alluded to above, my aging body which has entailed searching for a guitar that is comfortable to play. I own three amplifiers, each with a distinct purpose: one is my full-time amp that I play at home and when I gig; one stays in my office on campus; and one resides in the space where I rehearse with my band. My pedal collection is notably small, and many of the pedals that I own I acquired more than twenty years ago, such as an early generation Boss DD-2 digital delay dating from the mid-1980s. The only significant recent addition is an MXR Super Badass distortion pedal, which I use all the time to feed into my Traynor tube amp. Otherwise, I mostly prefer the straightforward signal that exists between my guitar and amplifier, something that

sets me apart from so many contemporary players whose well-stocked pedal boards are a key to their expressiveness.

My moderation might make me an unlikely victim of GAS. The popular image of GAS is one of excessive, extreme behavior, of unregulated desire for that next object, the purchase of which only leads to temporary satisfaction before the quest begins again with a new target. While some have treated GAS as though it merits serious consideration as a psychological disorder, more common is the tendency to present it with humor, as Jay Wright does in what has been to date the only book-length treatment of the subject. In a passage quoted by Herbst and Menze, Wright (2006: 22) observes:

GAS can strike you at any time, but onset normally occurs upon seeing, hearing, or touching a particular axe. The attack itself can range from mild to severe... You drool, you stare, you drool some more... Your mind races, as you imagine the rest of your life with this baby in it—how much more skilled, happy, and fulfilled you would be... You're faced with two immediate problems: 1) how to find relief from this powerful force, and 2) how to manage a transfer of ownership. That, my friend, is a GAS attack.

I am tempted to say that Herbst and Menze address the topic with more seriousness, but that does not tell you very much. More to the point, they address GAS with far more nuance than available commentaries have typically done. In their analysis, GAS is comprised of a complex set of motivations, some eminently practical and some thoroughly driven by emotion. Rather than draw a strict line between those impulses that may be deemed 'healthy' and those that may appear 'unhealthy,' they view the phenomenon as existing along a continuum wherein the pragmatic drive for improvement and a more basic sort of wish-fulfillment are always vying with each other for supremacy. From their perspective, GAS is a particular manifestation of the wider field of desires and practices that arise from living in a society and an economy that are organized to a large degree through acts of consumption.

In his groundbreaking study of digital music technologies, Paul Théberge emphasized the degree to which consumerism had become central to what musicians do *as* musicians. With the advent of affordable digital synthesizers in the 1980s, electronic keyboard instruments were equipped with an expanding range of pre-set sounds that the practicing musician could select at the touch of a few buttons. Addressing this new availability of ready-made electronic sounds that were designed to emulate everything from a violin to a snare drum to a digeridoo, Théberge (1997: 200) asserted:

In effect, musical production has become closely allied to a form of *consumer* practice, where the process of selecting the 'right' pre-fabricated sounds and effects for a given musical context has become as important as 'making' music in the first place. Musicians are not simply consumers of new technologies, rather their entire

approach to music-making has been transformed so that consumption...has become implicated in their musical practices at the most fundamental level.

GAS might be seen as an outgrowth of this development. As Herbst and Menze demonstrate, many musicians spend as much or more time shopping for new gear—whether instruments, effect pedals, amplifiers, or for horn players, new mouthpieces—as they do playing their instruments. They do so out of a hope or conviction that a new piece of equipment will reinvigorate their playing or expand their stylistic range by giving them new sounds or techniques to apply. In this way, and following from the insights of Théberge, the act of purchasing new equipment is not only incidental to their musical lives and identities but is essential and inextricable from the self-definition of contemporary musicians.

Study of these aspects of modern music culture has remained limited in the more than two decades since Théberge's work appeared. When music consumption is treated by scholars, it is nearly always the consumption of recordings that is at issue. While musical instruments have begun to receive more dedicated analysis in recent years, the 'new organology' as it has sometimes been called has not typically placed consumption at the forefront of concern. Herbst and Menze's study of Gear Acquisition Syndrome therefore constitutes the most concerted and substantial effort to address the drives and processes through which musicians acquire the tools of their trade to appear in many years, and this book makes plain why the subject deserves attention and how much we have left to learn about it.

Central to the book's success is the authors' deft balance between theoretical and empirical considerations. Theoretically, they employ concepts such as Robert Stebbins' notion of 'serious leisure' and Russell Belk's idea of the way that consumer items contribute to the formation of an 'extended self' to explain why the purchase of instruments and associated gear has such consequence for understanding how musicians think of themselves and what they do. Empirically, they combine the results of extensive survey research with close reading of online message boards to bring us inside the world of practicing musicians and their ways of talking about their gear to an unusual degree. Doing so, they examine such factors as how musical genre affects decisions about gear, whether or not players think of themselves as 'collectors,' how much influence the gear choices of well-known musicians have upon the preferences of amateur players, and how gender informs participation in networks of gear consumption, among several other issues. Their findings are sometimes surprising and always illuminating, not least in the discovery that GAS is not only found among guitarists—who have been most commonly associated with the phenomenon—but is to a significant degree shared among players of diverse musical instruments.

To return to the question I asked above: do I suffer from GAS? I would have resolutely said no before reading this book. Now, I am not so sure. Yet I think a yes or no answer is not the point. Reading the insights of Herbst and Menze prompted

me to reflect on my own relationship to the musical equipment I possess in a new light. I may not feel compelled to regularly update my gear collection at every turn, but I absolutely view the amps, pedals, and especially the guitars that I own as a major part of my ‘extended self,’ every bit as much as my collection of vinyl and compact discs, or the shelves of books that fill my house and campus office. Anyone who plays an instrument in a more than casual way will likely see themselves in some facet of this book, and will come to a new understanding of how the gear they own and use is both personally and socially meaningful.

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Northampton, Massachusetts, USA, January 2021

## Preface

Many musicians know the nagging feeling of incompleteness when it comes to their rig. There is always a new instrument, another amplifier or accessory that would improve one's tone and help one progress as a player, or that would just be 'cool to have'. Discovering a new band, watching a video or learning a song might be enough to plant the seed that there may be ways to further improve one's setup. This phenomenon, which comes in many different forms, has a name: 'Gear Acquisition Syndrome' or 'GAS', as it is usually known. Initially, the term stood for the 'Guitar Acquisition Syndrome', pointing to a musical background. However, as it was coined in 1996 by Steely Dan guitarist Walter Becker, the term has also been applied to other instruments and eventually spread to leisure activities outside music.

It was at the end of 2016 that we sat in the Gownsmen's pub at Paderborn University, Germany, and contemplated the fun we could have from studying GAS. After a proper literature review, we were surprised by how little attention GAS had received in popular music studies and music technology. Perhaps a bit naive, we decided to develop a theory and test our hypotheses with a comprehensive international survey of musicians, based on the few available studies and relevant blogs, and supported by face-to-face interviews conducted in a music store.

The results confirmed some of our assumptions but left more questions open than were answered, and we realised that a complex cultural phenomenon such as GAS required and deserved a more large-scale investigation. Since the gathered material had meanwhile become too extensive for a research article, we planned to write a short book. Gradually, we saw that it neither worked and that only a full-fledged book might answer our research interest satisfactorily. The outcome is a substantial book examining GAS from various disciplines, bringing together selected theories and empirical studies from the fields of popular music studies and music technology, cultural and leisure studies, sociology, psychology, psychiatry and consumption research.

GAS turned out to be a complex cultural practice, so we are wary of proposing a 'definite theory of GAS'. Instead, we regard our work as a starting point for future investigations and hope that it will be useful for other researchers. Although we concentrate on popular music and a few selected instruments—guitar, bass, drums, keyboards, saxophone, trumpet—conversations with colleagues and fellow musicians suggest that the principles are similarly applicable to classical music or, in fact, any music. Likewise, we see many similarities between music performance and record production. Just as musicians tend to upgrade and expand their rig, recording engineers invest in their microphone collection, and producers extend their (digital) tools. The same formula applies: Guitar or Gear Acquisition Syndrome could well be Plugin or Microphone Acquisition Syndrome. That is why the results of our work

may be valuable for the relatively new academic field of the ‘art of record production’ and many others. The practice of collecting appears to be another understudied area of popular music, cultural and leisure studies, so our work offers a new perspective in addition to the small body of work on record collecting. We also came to realise that GAS is most probably related to developmental processes and musical expertise, which would allow researchers in music education, psychology and sociology to benefit from our findings.

In evaluating theories and adapting them to GAS, we drew on our own experience as musicians and academics. To make our interpretations more transparent, we would like to give some personal background information. Jan has studied concert and electric guitar and took drum and piano lessons. Throughout his career, he came to enjoy playing the electric bass guitar. Although not considering himself a keyboard player, his day-to-day teaching involves keyboard-related technologies such as sound synthesis. Jan has experienced GAS to different degrees on the guitar, but curiously more so on amplifiers than on the actual instrument. In the last years, his creative work has shifted towards music production, accompanied by the respective GAS tendencies. Today, these mainly concern recording gear and production software, a highly tempting field for GAS-related behaviour, given the immense amount of audio plugins that are vividly debated on message boards and in social media. Moreover, discounts promising huge savings are presented almost daily by emails. Such offers are highly tempting for customers susceptible to GAS. Jonas enjoyed piano lessons as a kid and has been playing the electric guitar for about twenty-five years as a hobby. He also enjoys casual drumming and digital home-recording. His propensity for GAS has never been too pronounced since the lack of space in his living environment has led him to limit his activities to the reconfiguration of two distinct electric guitar setups—including appropriate backups for gigging—which enable him to meet a wide range of sound requirements. He manages to balance his buying and selling of equipment.

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and who made great efforts to share their experiences with us in detailed comments and descriptions.

Jan Herbst & Jonas Menze

Huddersfield (United Kingdom) & Münster (Germany), February 2021



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