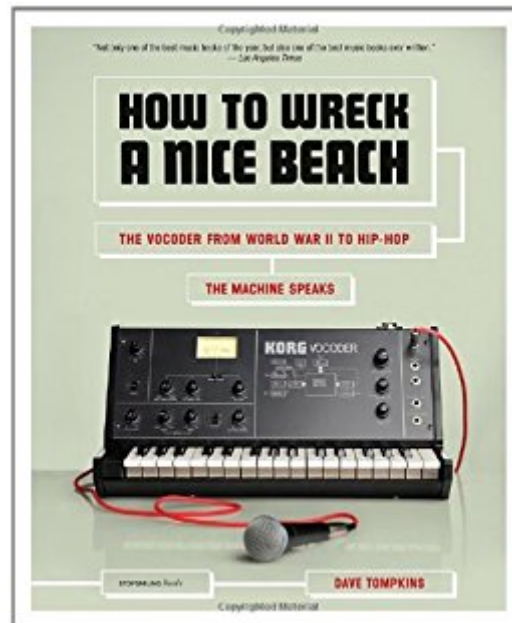


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# How To Wreck A Nice Beach: The Vocoder From World War II To Hip-Hop, The Machine Speaks



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

File Size: 36291 KB

Print Length: 352 pages

Publisher: Stop Smiling Books; Reprint edition (November 8, 2011)

Publication Date: November 8, 2011

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B004ZZNZ2G

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #946,292 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #60

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Arts & Photography > Music > Theory, Composition &

Performance > MIDI, Mixers, etc. #260 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Arts & Photography >

Music > Recording & Sound #284 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Theory, Composition

& Performance > MIDI, Mixers, etc.

## Customer Reviews

I don't think that before I read *How to Wreck a Nice Beach: The Vocoder from World War II to Hip-Hop: The Machine Speaks* (Stop Smiling Books / Melville House Publishing) that I even knew what a vocoder was. After reading it, I am convinced vocoders must be everywhere. They seem to have been a foundation of Dave Tompkins's life. He has written this quirky book over a period spanning more than a decade, with some of the interviews going back more than ten years ago. Since he is an accomplished music columnist, mostly covering hip-hop and other popular music, most of the book is about the vocoder's use for entertainment, though it does cover the history of the device as a military tool. The vocoder helped win WWII, and even if you never appreciated it for that, and even if you aren't much of a pop music fan, you have probably heard its work when the movies needed a robot voice. *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970) featured "the first paranoid supercomputer to speak through a vocoder." It has made cameo appearances in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Tron*. It formed the words for the minimalist lyrics of Kraftwerk's *Autobahn*, and did the synthesized chorus for the electronic version of Beethoven's Ninth in *Clockwork Orange*. It was the basis for the vocals in the Christmas album *Zoot Zoot Zoot, Here Comes Santa in His New Space Suit*. OK, you don't know that one, and nobody is going to get all of Tompkins's astonishingly scattershot cultural references, but still, this hyper-illustrated, zingily-written historical tribute to Tompkins's favorite gadget is an amusing and in-depth examination of a particular and peculiar bit of technology and culture. It is no surprise that the vocoder invented in 1928 is nothing like the vocoder now.

The writing, frankly, is indulgent beyond belief, and often diffuses what he is trying to say. You have to pick through unclear convolutions and winking references you either get or you don't (it's like a Simpsons episode, except more distracting than entertaining) to get at the meat. To boot, he often throws in fictional elements to further pursue our admiration for his "flash" style. For instance, in setting a scene, he mentions that a cow is yawning and a food cart worker is stealing money while someone is onstage at a state fair with their vocoder...in the eighties. Pretty sure that didn't turn up in his research. That would be fine for a novel, but this ain't that. The cow is a harmless enough detail, but the result of telling me someone stole money while the band played--because you think it reads cool--is I am often wondering if more ambiguous details are fact or fiction. Bad news for a history of anything, even the vocoder. There were a lot of things I took with a grain of salt; you certainly couldn't cite this book as a source for research! (If you were even completely sure of what was being said in the first place.) The style is basically what someone might use trying to get

attention and look clever in a 100-word blurb review in a magazine, stretched out over a book. I finally packed it in and am just skimming now. Check this one out from the library if you want to read about the vocoder, don't buy. I generally don't review things on ...once every couple of years...but this book is so off-putting I wanted to warn people.

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