

How to survive in a world without silence

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With the family today. My brother once explained to me that he doesn't really get why people don't listen to upbeat music. If it doesn't get the blood pumping, what's the point. Conversely, my mother has repeatedly complained that anything more upbeat than Enya "scrambles her brainwaves". Fortunately, we were in the car with my brother's pal, R of College Park, MD, who resolved the conflict by finding smooth jazz interpretations of bossa nova classics on the radio.

Me, I just want something. My mother constantly narrates whatever it is that she's doing or thinking, and that scrambles *my* brain waves. [I've mentioned this to a few people and they all tell me that their mothers do the same thing.] More generally, I feel surrounded by noise all day long. There's the usual cacaphony of cars, until evening, when the noise of the city's refrigeration and air conditioning units run all night long. Used to live upstairs from Morry's Deli in Hyde Park, IL, and we would all hang out on our back porch = Morry's roof. It was a great place to sit and chat, except when the mega-refrigeration unit kicked in, so we worked out where its fuse box was. Sorry, Morry, but it was just too loud to talk over. The train tracks were a block away, but as Mr. PS of Brooklyn, NY, points out, everybody loves the sound of a train in the distance.

I once got to visit the NIST sound-measuring room. There's noise-absorbing foam on all six walls, so you walk on a grid of wires in the center of this padded cube. It is arguably the quietest place on Earth. Me, I heard ringing. Others who had been to fewer concerts and spent less time in traffic than me heard their heart beating. Nobody could honestly say that they heard nothing.

In the morning, the birds start chirping extra-early, if they stop at all, since they're so confused by the sodium-whatever lights buzzing all night long. At my volunteer work for (name of think tank), I wear ear plugs under noise-cancelling headphones, and if I crank the music, I can't hear the keyboards and the case fans and the ubiquitous air conditioner.

More than anything, I want music to provide order to a disordered world.

A lot of things will do this, as pointed out by a certain Quiet American—though somehow smooth jazz doesn't cut it. It may seem like an innocent enough desire, but I feel that most of the world opposes my wish for ordered sound over white noise. Further, most people seem to believe that in a conflict between the music listener and the white noise-seeker, the white noise-seeker is

automatically in the right. You can always tell somebody to turn down their music, and if they don't comply, they're bad people. The guy in the next cube has occasionally asked me to turn down my headphones, yet has never asked the interns to stop chattering, or anyone at all to type more quietly.

Cars spew noise pollution constantly, though drivers typically don't notice this because their cars are carefully designed to deflect noise away from the driver and out to the rest of the world that didn't pay for the car. But nobody gets tickets for driving noise-spewing cars—unless they're playing the stereo too loud. Leaf blowers, lawn mowers: no problem. Somehow, everyone else in the world can tune these noises out, but can't tune out music; and I can't tune out the sound of the thousands of little motors that surround me all day.

My first memory (at least what I tell the therapists who never fail to ask) is of laying in bed listening to music from two apartments down. The train tracks were right out the window (yes, we lived on the wrong side of the tracks), so apart from the rare train that wandered that way it'd be relatively quiet, except for that far-off record. I'd stay up trying to picture the people who were listening to it. It was the late 70s, so it was silly Billy Joel-esque pop, but being from two windows down it had just the right echo and distance to make it beautiful.

Even living in Washington Heights, where the same repetitive four-minute salsa track can be played up to 360 times a day, I still felt the music from my neighbors was a blessing, a little absolution from the constant noise of the city.