

MEDIATED MUSIC & MEDITATION IN MODERNITY:

Radio Pop and Train Whistles in Public and Private Spaces

By Phylis Johnson & Jay Needham



Image by Jay Needham

Stereo Forest

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn...
(Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854)

Influenced by the Massachusetts Peace Movement of the early 1800s, transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau believed that peace was derived from an awareness of an internal state of being. Thoreau longed for peace within his soul and surroundings. He retreated into the woods that embraced his Walden, a respite for time and space appropriate for independent thought.

Thoreau lived on the fringe of town, yet he was close enough for an occasional visitor to stroll by his cabin. He was attentive to the sounds of birds, yet he spent much time contemplating the trains that crossed his sonic terrain:

The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard, informing me that many restless city merchants are arriving within the circle of the town.
(<http://eserver.org/thoreau/walden04.html>)

The train perhaps provided a connection to a larger, inescapable sphere of influence that bordered his Walden. The train was a reminder of the "spiritual" distance between his sound sphere and the burgeoning modernized world. Its encroached upon the natural sounds of the Walden woods and foreshadowed the coming industrial era.

The sounds of nature and the roar of machines intertwined have inevitably become part of the same sonic scape in urbanized

society. Ironically, naturalist writer John Burroughs died on a train while traveling from California to the family farm in Roxbury, New York in March 1921. Before his death, Burroughs (1919) wrote *Field and Study*, in which he calls attention to the regularity of nature at a time when industrialization was coming of age:

All our song-birds sing with mechanical regularity and persistence. It is as if they were instruments wound up to go off at a certain time, and to continue for a certain time. I know of no species that during the breeding season does not repeat its song many thousands of times a day or night. (p. 97)

The sonic context of the industrial era, driven by scientific thought and productivity, gave rise to a new type of modern noise that challenged personal and social soundscapes. Emily Thompson (2002) points out that in this new era, what she calls the "soundscape of modernity," a unique culture of listening began about 1900. This culture encroached upon private and public sonic spheres, as sounds of machines intruded into personal and urban spaces (Sterne 2003).

Radio was born into this industrial era, and its reproduction of sound would envelope our thoughts as radio became mobile. The portability of radio would create a new sonic backdrop at beaches, stores, and in our cars. Under such circumstances, radio squeezed out the audibility of incoming tides, seagulls, and the rush of wind, and redefined concepts of solitude.

As much as we attempt to escape industrialism, we seek ways in which to escape solitude. The mediated voices and sounds from household radio and television sets contribute toward our sonic sphere. The impact of radio—as words, music, ambience,

physical vibrations, or subconscious impressions—is rarely studied for its significance in our daily lives, other than the broad-based questions regarding the impact of popular music on society (although relevant).

Daily Culture of Radio Listening

Recorded music became an inexpensive way to fill commercial airtime. Yet, as all radio stations began to sound alike, they began to differentiate themselves from each other with on-air personalities, live appearances, and gimmicks. With the disc jockey as the moderator, music offerings fed a daily culture of listening for many Americans. Storr (1992) states music evokes an emotional connection between people, similar to that of an exchange of ideas. Interestingly, what is disturbing for one listener might provide peace and relevancy to another person. Thoreau was both fascinated and disturbed by the train that passed through his sonic sphere.

Likewise, there is a love and hate relationship among radio listeners. Many listeners complain to each other that they tire of the repetition of popular songs; yet they seek those stations that deliver the comfort of familiarity. Although they may say that they anticipate the new, they remain captivated by the songs of their youth and what has become pop culture. These melodies or constructions provide collective meaning to individuals, groups, and societies, much like Burroughs' birds that found consensus and communication.

With radio as a companion, listeners complete household chores, drive to work, and spend time listening on the beach or at the park through their portable units. They bring these contraptions into their personal Waldens. They visually retreat from the cityscape, and sonically they remain captive to manufactured sounds and songs with little appreciation of what sonic opportunities they might miss along the way or the sonic distress that these constructed sounds bring to the natural beat of the woods.

Radio in Private and Public Places

Radio music pervades our life in the public arena in a variety of places; music seeping through the bedroom walls of our adolescent children, blaring music emanating from cars (sometimes only heard as bass vibrations), the backdrop of our household chores as we hum along, our traveling companion as we do errands, and the soundtrack of our grocery shopping and shopping sprees. Radio has found its way on crowded and secluded beaches. The disc jockey might be viewed as a music ambassador, one who introduces culture to nature, and subsequently reconstructs our perceptions of tranquility and peace as we allow music to invade our sonic environments.

Many people have become accustomed to the sound of modernity, as described by Thompson (2002). Sound is evolutionary, rarely revolutionary, in this sense (Attali 1985). Revolutionary music is often commoditized and dismissed as a trend or noise or "bad" (Attali 1985; Keil and Feld 1994) until it is assimilated and no longer perceived as a threat. One female deejay told me, "I become unaware of the terrible message of the song and become numb of it, not realizing how revolting it is after hearing it every hour."

Radio stations have a way of embracing sexuality and violence in a catchy beat. Rap music has been both an individual and cultural means of expression that has been simultaneously criticized and lauded among cultural theorists (Mitchell 2002;

Rose 1994). Reggae, punk, and electronic music have significant identifiable audiences, and they often exist outside the public listening sphere. Radio provides a place for music assimilation across all genres, and ultimately its success is defined by its ability to disconnect itself from cultural meaning.

"Oneness" with the Music: Inside the Studio

I have sonically traveled with radio for 25 years, as a radio disc jockey and avid (and biased) listener. I have heard my station play in the grocery and clothing stores where I have shopped. I have heard it shout from the car next to mine at the stoplight or play as background music in the dentist office.

I am the "woman inside the magic box." With a touch of the screen, I can set the station on automatic, or I can play each song manually. But it is the computer, with only its gentle hum, that decides what next to play unless I decide to become rebellious and break format by inserting a song from the back screen in a moment of indiscretion only known to me and my boss (if he or she is listening). I minimally interrupt the flow of the songs with promotional announcements and song titles. I love the feel of speaking over my favorite song introductions, conveying a personal sense of empowerment and oneness with the song. I am transformed into the song. Alone in my studio, the ominous speakers serve as my personal headphones.

One particular day, three radio remotes were scheduled in a matter of six hours. Songs were replaced with music talk beds, as if we might fool the listener into thinking that the music never stopped. Nearly all of our commercials have music beds. My particular shift covered two of those remotes: the first one occurred at a local motorcycle store that was giving away a motorcycle to the contestant that could keep his/her hand on the shipping crate for the longest. The remote spanned the weekend. The other remote was at a car dealership; in fact our station sponsored a remote there nearly every weekend. The music beckoned listeners to drop by and join the celebrations ("sale-brations"). I listened to the live breaks of the disc jockey positioned at the remote broadcast, as I ran the show from inside the station. When the live break was finished, the microphone was switched off and the Marti line was filled with static. I was disconnected from the other disc jockey.

Just before each break, he would activate the microphone, at which point I could hear our station's music echo through the parking lot. I felt like I was eavesdropping on the chit-chat between the other announcer, listeners and sponsors whose voices bled through the audition channel of the audio console. Occasionally, listeners would walk up to the announcer to request songs to be played while car shopping. I heard all these distractions while the music played continuously in the background. As the final song of a scheduled set faded, both I and the other announcer would momentarily connect into conversation as I introduced him and his location on the air. The music bed ran continuously to cover the chatter, but it was obvious that the station had come to a crossroad. I imagined listeners wandering away as the station moved further away from their favorite songs (pre-determined, of course).

Sonic Travels Outside the Studio

One of my recent voyages was to the grocery store where a "sister" station entertained me as familiar music sifted through ceiling speakers. I listened to myself, now prerecorded, but on a different station. I had recorded my voice hours earlier on this

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station, which was also owned by my company. I looked around to see if anyone was listening, but most people seemed oblivious to the music playing in the background. It was Saturday night, and most people had better places to be than shopping at a grocery store. Only the store clerk made note of one of her favorite songs to another checker.

As I left the store and got into my car, I listened to myself in the car as I tuned into the same station. The music again was only minimally interrupted by a few of my cliché ramblings over the air. I raised the volume and then lowered it, and imagined myself driving along listening to me, but not being me. There was a sense of solitude, for only I might interrupt myself as I listened to the songs transmitted into my car. It was a sonic escape from reality.

At a local festival crowds gathered around our radio station booth that blared song after song. Some people looked over for a second in curiosity, only to turn away immediately. Others walked by, with heads bobbing to the beat. A few gathered under the radio tent, and picked up stickers and buttons as if to immortalize this sonic experience, and reaffirm their station loyalty.

On another occasion, one of the songs “it’s getting hot in here, so take off all your clothes” pumped over loudspeakers behind a church parade float (unfortunately it was my pastor on the float). In all these places, radio invaded public spaces. Blaring popular music attracted “wandering” people to action, so to speak, in much the same way balloons on a store sign shout out “celebration.”

Geographic Considerations of Radio Music Listening

Soundscapes, in their totality of urban and rural geographies, provide listeners with an opportunity to participate in aural contextualization (e.g., ambience, voice, music and noise) and allow for comparison among personal and public sonic spheres, beyond their communities. Schafer (1992) states that the world’s music primarily exists in “counterpoise to the soundscape” (36). Our listening habits, and the very essence of creating social construction, should encourage us to look upon music as part of a larger soundscape in a global context. It is upon this foundation that music, as a narrative, should be constructed to provide us with a framework for sound analysis and appreciation.

The relationship of one’s personal sound sphere should be viewed in relation to a multitude of personal, localized, and global music public and subaltern public spheres. Sound spheres might be measured theoretically by their perceived distance between communicators in their respective spheres of influence and their frequency of salience (i.e., similar sound spheres communicating the same message).

Multiplicities of sound spheres coexist in a particular geography of space and time. A radio station creates a sonic sphere for the listener, who is somewhat limited by the station’s song playlist as well as his/her listening preferences already constructed by life experiences in the local and global community. The airwaves should be viewed as a meeting place for negotiation, but only if we presume that all participants are provided access to the selection process. The definition of music, furthermore, should be exclusive of the natural beat of daily life, and not limited to manufactured ditties that disguise the rich solitude of our personal Waldens.

I hear beyond the range of sound,
I see beyond the range of sight,
New earths and skies and seas around,
And in my day the sun doth pale his light.

A clear and ancient harmony
Pierces my soul through all its din,

As through its utmost melody—
Farther behind than they, farther within.

—Excerpt from Thoreau’s poem *Inspiration*
(Witherell, 1991)

Alas, among my many mediated memories are times when I observed several radios tuned to various competing pop stations, as their owners rested nearby in lawn chairs and on blankets along the stretches of lake shores or sandy beaches. In the latter case, the squawks of seagulls were indistinguishable among the synthesized drumbeats.

One Final Note

Pop radio has a way of crossing into a variety of public and private spheres, whether or not welcomed by its so-called unsuspecting victims or appreciative fans. Thoreau’s train raced across his sonic terrain, as he mused the coming industrial era:

The startings and arrivals of the (train) cars are now the epochs in the village day. They go and come with such regularity and precision, and their whistle can be heard so far, that the farmers set their clocks by them, and thus one well-conducted institution regulates a whole country. (<http://eserver.org/thoreau/walden04.html>)

I am compelled to consider myself analogous to the train conductor who blows the whistle to announce the arrival of manufactured icons of modernized America. Newly arrived songs soon fill the airwaves. In a moment, a familiar melody from a radio station playing in the woods captures my attention, as the whistle fades into the distance. Some nearby campers are tuned to the local pop station in the heart of their Walden. Reactions to a person’s sonic environment surely create an oral reservoir of personal observations and impressions, as one interacts with both nature and man-made sound.

Macnaghten (1998, 131) suggests that sound “organizes sight” in some instances, especially in underdeveloped countries. In North America we tend to underestimate the richness that sound brings into an experience—whether it is an impression formed from a spoken word, familiar melody, or cacophony of birds. Memories are cued by our sonic play list. What we hear often leads us to venture toward the sound’s point of origin. We affirm our experiences through repetition. Sound artist and anthropologist Steven Feld (1990) has studied the cultural significance of sound in Papua New Guinea. Everyday living is interpreted in a “world that is full of birds and alive with their sounds. Myths, seasons, colors, gender, taboos, curses, spells, time, space, and naming are systematically patterned: all of these are grounded in the perception of birds, as indicated foremost by the presence of sound (83-84).” Popular song titles like “Sunshine,” “Happy Ending,” “Confessions,” “Slow Motion,” and so forth also create a sonic vocabulary in today’s modern culture.

Popular music finds itself in our movies, at our homes and workplaces, across the Internet and in nearly every aspect of our society. Radio packages music as sonic commodities that represent and encapsulate our casual conversations. The danger of commodification, of course, is a culturally biased assumption of a ubiquitous melodic worldview of what might be considered “popular.”

Peace is more than solitude. Rather it is the ability of nature and human beings (along with constructions such as songs and other popular icons) to reside harmoniously in the same sonic sphere. In the 1920s, French composer Edgard Varèse trans-

Quotes

Songs live in the air and they appear at all times. If you're a songwriter you like music, but what you really want is for music to like you. You want to be an aerial, or an antenna, for songs to locate you, and they do.

Tom Waits

Music comes closest to meditation. Music is a way towards meditation and the most beautiful way. Meditation is the art of hearing the soundless sound, the art of hearing the music of silence—what Zen people call 'the sound of one hand clapping'. And when you are utterly silent, not a single thought passes your mind, there is not even a ripple of any feeling in your heart, then you start for the first time hearing silence. And silence has a music of its own. It is not dead, it is very much alive, it is tremendously alive. In fact, nothing is more alive than silence.

Osho in: *The Book of Books*, Vol. XII

I think I should have no other mortal wants, if I could always have plenty of music. It seems to infuse strength into my limbs and ideas into my brain. Life seems to go on without effort, when I am filled with music.

George Eliot

I believe the use of noise to make music will increase until we reach a music produced through the aid of electrical instruments which will make available for musical purposes any and all sounds that can be heard.

John Cage 1937

The dawn chorus sings a requiem
for all that was, is and could be
if only the ear could listen beyond
the rush of morning's traffic.

Gary Ferrington

Many were the evenings when, after her friends had gone home, [Momo] would sit by herself in the middle of the old stone amphitheatre, with the sky's starry vault overhead, and simply listen to the great silence around her. Whenever she did this, she felt she was sitting at the centre of a giant ear, listening to the world of the stars, and she seemed to hear soft but majestic music that touched her heart in the strangest way. On nights like these, she always had the most beautiful dreams.

From: *Momo* by Michael Ende, Puffin Books, 1984

formed New York's sonic environment into an orchestrated soundscape. His audience, however, was apprehensive and fairly unappreciative of the performance. Paul Rosenfeld argued that Varèse had come into "a relationship with the elements of American life, and found corresponding rhythms within himself set free" (Thompson, p. 139). Alas, the significance of seeking rhythm in one's daily life cannot be overstated as a way to better appreciate sound in spaces of the private and public as well as the natural and human-constructed.

The authors are currently working on a piece, entitled *Stereo Forest* that sonically captures the intrusion of mass manufactured recordings (i.e., contemporary pop tunes) into natural settings, such as lakes and woods. The campuses of Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, are nestled between the Shawnee National Forest and Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge.

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