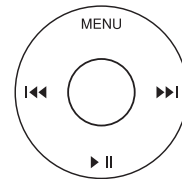# Listening to Music

The first issue to consider in *Popular Music: Topics, Trends and Trajectories* is the difference between hearing and listening. If we do not want to see a person or image that troubles us, then we can close our eyelids or look away. We do not have to see what we do not want to see. Hearing is different. Our ears do not have lids. As we move through daily life, we hear sharp and unexpected noises, arguments on the street, crying children and cars in need of a service as they grind around corners. Unless we remove our bodies from a location, we hear unintended and unwanted sounds. Often these unexpected sounds are termed noise. To close our ears to these 'foreign' sounds, a range of strategies can be deployed, including the use of iPod buds or headphones to block other people's noise with a listener's preferred soundtrack. Schafer described this as 'an attempt to modulate information intake' (2004: 28). A refusal to listen is also a refusal to fit into an environment. Mobile devices enable us to control what we hear and therefore create a sonic world of our own choosing.

Listening is different from hearing. It is intentional, conscious and active. Listening is literacy for the ear. It is a social act and involves making choices in filtering and select-ing our sonic environment. While we may *hear* noise, we *listen* to music. Listening is a reading strategy for sounds that involves choices to make music relevant to a context and environment. Listening is underestimated in our daily lives and undertheorized in academic literature. Jean-Luc Nancy confirmed that hearing is 'to understand the sense' and listening 'is to be straining towards a possible meaning' (2007: 6). He argued that listening requires work, decoding the unknown and inaccessible into the realm of interpretation and understanding. The overwhelming majority of information we receive to understand the world emerges through our eyes. We believe what we see. Most of what constitutes knowledge and methods of study – like ethnography and participant observation – attaches meanings to behaviour, derived primarily from the information we gather through vision. Since September 11, terrorism has been captured on live news. Differences between people are judged visually. Racism emerges from the differences that we observe, rather than the diverse accents that we hear.

With this saturation of visuality, Michael Bull and Les Back probe 'the opportunities provided by thinking with our ears' (2004: 3). When moving beyond the visual, there is an opportunity to explore and test other senses. For example, music also activates tactil-ity through playing musical instruments or feeling the groove of records as they spin on a turntable or touching the screen of an iPhone. When listening to sound with our consciousness, we experience our world differently, beyond the visual.

The bedroom. The lounge. The car. The train. The street. These are some of the spaces for listening in our lives. The desire to control our listening spaces and reduce the influence of the noises emanating from those around us is best revealed through the proliferation of personal stereos. The intimacy and isolation created by users with Sony Walkmans in the 1980s and iPods in the 2000s unearthed critics who lambasted the alienation and disconnection of young people. A great advocate of the classics, Allan Bloom, nominated personal stereos as a sign that a generation was deaf and blind to high culture and literature.

> As long as [my students] have the Walkman on they cannot hear what the great tradition has to say. And, after its prolonged use, when they take it off, they find they are deaf (1987: 81).

Bloom is making a comment not only about the loudness of music, but also about the literacy of popular music listeners. Similarly, in 1985, Steven Chaffee stated – flatly and without comment – that 'listening to music is the most universal mass communication behaviour, requiring neither literacy nor advanced electronic media' (1985: 416). Such dated statements from both Chaffee and Bloom confirm that listening to popular music has been misunderstood in our recent history. University academics have too often judged, rather than understood. As the 1980s progressed, such judgements about cultural value were questioned through postmodern theory, deconstruction, popular music studies, media literacy theory and ethnographic research into auditory cultures. To misunderstand listening is to ignore the literacy, choices and intelligence of groups and individuals who are unlike us. Listening to music provides the form and context for a different history of desire, hope, love and social change to emerge.

We read sound through our ears as much as we read print on paper or text on a screen. Through our sonic literacies we hear a voice, a combination of notes or a rhythm and assess its quality, effectiveness and appropriateness. Every act of listening is based on recalling a prior hearing experience. When we hear, we learn. Because we lack ear lids, we accidentally build literacies, learning about ourselves through what we hear and how we judge it. When reading the novel *High Fidelity* or watching the film, it is easy to see how views about listening become statements about identity and judgements of others. A fan of Bob Dylan has credibility. A follower of Chris de Burgh is assessed less favourably. The tether between listening choices and constructing a sense of self establishes boundaries of belonging, community, inclusion and exclusion.

Most literacies are learnt, improved and disseminated through media. Radio has been the crucial medium of transmission for popular music. Until the mid twentieth century, it was described as 'the wireless', but this word has been recently appropriated to describe short-range networking through a Wireless Local Area Network, WiFi and Bluetooth. Radio refers to the transceiver device. Wireless describes the method used for the delivery of communication. The influential moment that entwined the history of radio and the history of popular music began in 1960, when Sony

introduced the first transistorized radio. Demonstrating many of the innovative features of the iPod, including its small size and weight and durability, it allowed music to be much more portable. It also disconnected teenagers' listening locations and genres away from the central family radio cabinet. Digitization has built on these earlier innovations, influencing radio, with Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB) increasing the selection of channels. Significantly, many of the features of talk radio have influenced podcasting, which involves a series of digitized media files being distributed over the internet using syndicated feeds (RSS). These podcasts are played on either a computer or portable media device. Podcasts – like radio – can refer to the content of programmes or the means by which it is distributed. The attraction of podcasting is that individuals can create what seem to be their own radio shows in the home with domestic software and hardware, including their preferred content. Listeners can then move the material to a convenient time and place. Most popular music genres, performers, DJs and fan communities have a series of regular podcasts produced by enthusiasts. For podcasters, listening has been transformed into the production of sound.

Listening has a history and this changes. The popularity of iPods for example has changed listening. Firstly, digitized formats like the ACC and MP3 have compressed sonic files, removing data from music. Secondly, through much of the history of iPods, consumers have heard music through ear-bud headphones with heavy leakage or small computer speakers (Milner, 2009: 354). Mobility, ease of downloading and low cost (or free if illegally obtained) music became more important than sound quality. Peter Gotcher realized that 'the reality is that the generation coming up may never own a stereo' (Gotcher in Milner, 2009: 354). One consequence of such an argument is that the literacy to recognize and appreciate high quality sounds and music may be declining. There is however an alternative narrative to this history of compressed files, tinny speakers and leakage from the iPod buds. Skullcandy have inverted the market, creating a new group of consumers who choose to wear large and bulky headphones with little or no leakage (Skullcandy, 2009). The parallel to the 1980s is obvious. Even in a period of Walkman miniaturization, boom boxes and ghetto blasters had started to appear on the street. These high quality, visible headphones also change how we listen. Compression freshens old sounds. When sonic information is removed, other sounds buried in the mix emerge. For example, Carly Simon's blistering revenge song 'You're So Vain' gains new layers of meaning as Mick Jagger's backing vocal is peeled away from the instrumental track after compression is applied. Conversely, the other famous backing track recorded by Jagger for 'Out of Time', the song co-written with Keith Richards for Chris Farlowe, dissolves in the mix, melted by the extraordinary paint-stripping voice of Farlowe. In other words, the combination of removing sonic material from sonic files and increasing the auditory capacity of the headphones such as the Skullcandy range is creating new modes of listening, a new way of hearing popular music.

Digitization is also reducing the range of musical platforms. The decline of the CD has had a major economic impact on recording industries. Downloaded sonic files are the new product. Such a change is also creating new opportunities, with innovative ways

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to combine the content of music with the form of media that can present it. Ralf Hutter from Kraftwerk asked,

> What is an album? In that format, it was 40 minutes, by a decision made by vinyl: side A, and side B. And then the CD was longer – and now, it could be endless. We could do an endless album … because for me, music is like 24 hours. We created the 168-hour week for Kraftwerk (Hutter in Harris, 2009: 3).

The change of platform has shaped listening in new ways. The iPod has altered how listeners think about and categorize music. The white ear buds signify a type of sonic experience, even if a range of iPods now features screens and touch. The iPod can encourage safe listening, only hearing what we have uploaded and downloaded, but radically transforms how we store, access, distribute and move music.

Listening is intensely personal. As Peter Szendy asks, 'what summons us to listen?' (2008: 142). It involves making choices about our environment and identity. Each new musical technology creates artificial ear lids to develop a new intimacy between the self and sound. The transistor radio in the 1960s disconnected teenagers from their family. The iPod has allowed diverse groups to claim space through sound, whether it is commuters, students or drivers. When sharing listening practices, communities of interest are built. On social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, a list of shared listening choices confirms a much deeper level of connection between 'friends' than only sharing music. Listening builds commonality and difference. Hearing and listening is an underutilized skill and literacy in all forms of research, which prioritizes eye over ear. Mark Smith et al. have realized that 'historians have only just begun to overcome their deafness to the aural worlds of the past' (Smith, Snay and Smith, 2004: 365). Our role as students and scholars of popular music is to render significant and resonant the sounds and sensibilities from the past and present.

Key Questions

1. Why has listening to popular music been denigrated by conservative writers and researchers?
2. Is listening to popular music passive?
3. What are the consequences to the study of popular music of not having ear lids?
4. What is the relationship between hearing and power? The panopticon was the visual mechanism for surveillance. Is there an equivalent aural mechanism for surveillance, empowerment and disempowerment?

Further Reading

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