

Abstract (Summary)

Besieged by the clamour of teen rock, roosters and Celine Dion ringtones, we spend our lives in unquiet desperation, writes Meg Mundell.

Full Text

(2065 words)

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CHANCES are you entered this world screaming your head off, and your poor mum was likely doing the same: birth is seldom a quiet event. From that rowdy start, life requires us to navigate a complex love-hate relationship with noise to strike a balance between the sounds we hear, and those we make.

Sound raises questions about personal space, relative rights, and how we live with others. But the real discord stems from sound's rowdier cousin, noise. Tricky to define, ignore or regulate, noise is an emotionally charged topic. Add high-density apartment living, leaf blowers and Celine Dion ringtones, and it's no wonder noise has spawned lawsuits and murder trials.

Noise is usually defined as unwanted sound, an intrusion into someone's acoustic space. Trouble is, the line's a fuzzy one: ACDC reckon Rock'n'Roll Ain't Noise Pollution, but my grandma disagrees.

"Your sound can be someone else's noise. To the person playing guitar in their bedroom it's sound, but to the person next door trying to sleep it's noise," says acoustic designer Nigel Frayne.

Indeed, few things divide a neighbourhood like noise. I have lived below a talented saxophone player, who remains a close friend and above a rotten one, who swiftly became a mortal enemy. Other friends report unneighbourly disputes over crowing roosters, crying babies, fighting couples, revving dirt-bikes and "full-blast teeny-bopper music".

In the worst cases, frustration can escalate to violence. In 2004, a normally "mild-mannered" British man flattened his neighbours' Volvo with an earth-mover after being driven mad by their barking dogs. In the US in 2007, a Cleveland man angered by fireworks shot three people dead. Closer to home, last November, a Heidelberg West man was murdered after complaining about noise from a nearby party.

"They were making the usual sort of noise you get on a Saturday night. Living around here, you get that noise all the time," a local resident told The Age the next day. "We were in bed .

. . and then we heard screams and then they got a bit louder. The missus went outside to have a look. Then I started hearing sirens. I would say it was an every-Saturday-night type of party that escalated into something just a bit, sort of like, morbid."

Sound is often overlooked in urban design, says Frayne. A one-time rock musician and former head of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (WFAE), a group that aims to improve our sonic surrounds, he has designed soundscapes for zoos, museums, public spaces and palliative care patients. "Acoustic ecology is not about turning the world off," he says. "It's about designing acoustic environments that are more coherent and functional, and cause us less damage." Australia lags behind, he says: "[Soundscapes] are as much a part of our environment as the walls of our homes."

Gary Goland, head of lobby group Noise Watch Australia, agrees: "I grew up on a sheep station in the back of nowhere. We loved hearing rain on the roof it meant the grass would grow." A jazz lover, Goland appreciates sound, but noise has cost him dearly. When a small sawmill next door to his family's rural property expanded, they endured "horrible low-frequency machine noise" at all hours. Goland tried soundproofing, court action and mediation, without luck. "In the end we couldn't live with the noise, so we abandoned our home," he says. "It's been sitting empty now for three years. We refused to sell it and dump the problem on new owners."

Goland admits he's now obsessed with noise: "Noise in our living and working environments causes a lot of stress, injury and social intrusion, but the authorities are ignoring it." The health effects are real: at 150 decibels that's a jet plane taking off 25 metres away your eardrums rupture; 140 decibels can cause permanent deafness, while a 120-decibel thunderclap represents the human pain threshold. Eight hours' exposure to 90 decibels about the volume of a food blender can permanently damage hearing.

Subconsciously we're constantly tuning out irritating noises, a process called "psychoacoustical masking", which taxes both body and mind. Even during sleep, our brains read certain sounds as danger signals, triggering the release of stress hormones; if prolonged, this can cause high blood pressure, gastro-intestinal problems, chronic fatigue, reduced immunity, insomnia, anxiety and depression. A British study found that even some sub-audible noise, called "infrasound", can trigger anxiety, sadness, revulsion and fear.

Noise Watch Australia aims to reduce "unwanted noise" and its effect on communities, and Goland wants governments to do noise-mapping studies and revise planning laws. Human rights should also enter the debate, he says: "We'd like to involve ethicists in the planning process to manage noise better. The EPA and councils should emphasise residents' vulnerability, rather than the [noise-generating] company's liability. We're not all equal in matters of health, and we have different levels of vulnerability to noise."

Garret Keizer, US author of a new book *The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want*, shares this last view. He says noise disproportionately affects society's "weak" the elderly, sick, poor and incarcerated, those lacking the dollar power to move somewhere quieter or quit a noisy job. "Noise is political," writes Keizer, "because peace and quiet are forms of wealth." The less control we have over a noise, the more annoying it gets; for the grisly implications of this, look no further than the US military's use of loud music as a torture tool. Our relationship with noise is paradoxical, he adds: from jet aircraft to street spruikers, it tends to

be a by-product of our wants and desires. His book concludes with a simple but resonant entreaty: "We need to live more quietly."

Overseas, the noise debate is gaining traction. In New York, the city that never sleeps, Mayor Michael Bloomberg introduced tough new noise laws in 2007, shifting the focus from decibel levels to "audibility" from specified distances; barking dogs, jackhammers, nightclubs and ice-cream van jingles are all covered. In recent years, the EU has spent tens of millions of euros on noise "mapping" and abatement projects, while rowdy vehicles and low-flying planes have been banned from national parks in Europe, the US and Canada in order to protect delicate ecosystems.

In Australia, noise control is split between the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA), local councils and police. The EPA oversees noise from factories, vehicles and big outdoor music events, while councils and police handle domestic premises and entertainment venues dawn lawnmowers, pub patrons, bongo-bashing neighbours. The Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) handles certain noise disputes; in April it rejected plans for a wind farm near Mortlake, ruling that turbines can cause "significant distress even at a low noise level".

Melbourne City Council's 2006-09 figures for "requests to investigate noise issues" (not technically a noise complaint) show that gripes about music and entertainment venues dropped more than 30 per cent; residential and commercial noise, street-cleaning and barking dogs remained steady; and construction noise jumped almost 60 per cent. In 2008-09, noise gripes about buskers and spruikers rose 30 per cent. Lord Mayor Robert Doyle's recently voiced plan to weed out "dodgy" buskers using auditions drew fire from social justice advocates.

The busking debate forms part of a long-running tussle over the place of live music in Melbourne. "Melbourne likes to brand itself as a vibrant 24-hour city, but that always bumps up against residents' rights to peace and quiet," says Monash University's Dr Shane Homan. "Every capital city in Australia is trying to entice people back into the CBD to live, so it's a major challenge governments are now confronting."

Music venues shouldn't bear the full burden for noise control, says Homan. A new report he co-wrote, *The Music Capital: City of Melbourne Music Strategy*, urges the council to uphold the recommendations of the 2003 Live Music Taskforce report. That earlier report, commissioned by the Bracks government in the wake of venue closures and music industry lobbying, found that, "The onus of responsibility for the cost of noise management should fall upon the 'agent of change'." In other words, it recognised first occupancy rights: if you knowingly move or build near an established music venue, don't expect them to turn down the volume.

"Speaking as a muso, I think the right to make noise as part of earning your living, and providing entertainment, has to be upheld," says Homan, who moonlights as a drummer. "Governments, musicians and venues should all get collectively smarter about how we can do that, without changing anyone's way of life." Still, he adds, when it comes to noise, "people are very vague about their rights". He would like the council to build a website spelling out noise laws and decibel limits.

Sound artist, historian and PhD student Lisa MacKinney creates long "drone" soundscapes using guitar feedback, organs and effects pedals. "I'm not interested in writing songs, it's about creating a texture," she says. "It may not have the melody, chords or harmonic structures traditionally recognised as music." While our definitions of music have widened greatly, not everyone "gets" drone. "Once this guy in the audience got really angry, shouting 'You're giving me a headache!' For him, it didn't fit into the parameters of what counted as music. It was just noise and it really got up his nose." Others love her soundscapes: "One young woman told me she'd found it really moving, and another said it was like meditating."

MacKinney rejects the whole noise/sound distinction: "Noise is not pejorative I don't really think about it in that way. There's a whole movement of people calling themselves noise musicians, or sound artists, who use noise as their compositional device." MacKinney will don earplugs rather than quash a rowdy party, but says that certain spaces call for quiet. As a staff member at her university library, she often finds herself on "shush" duty. "I find that really difficult, because I'm very liberal about noise and don't like constricting people sonically. But a library is a designated study area, a scholarly environment. It's not the beach. Some people seem to think that's an infringement on their rights, but it comes down to respect."

Landscape architect Anthony Magen, who heads the Australian Forum for Acoustic Ecology, also mistrusts the noise/sound distinction. "For me it doesn't acknowledge the subtlety and detail of sound." Magen runs "sound walks", group listening exercises in which silent participants explore a locality on foot, tuning in to its unique soundtrack. These tours reconnect people with the acoustic qualities of place, he says, and architects, urban planners and politicians should take part "so they can make more sound decisions pardon the pun".

"In Australia we don't have very savvy ways of dealing with our acoustic environment," Magen says. "That needs to change at a higher level." We appreciate the investment of time, money and talent required to sustain an orchestra, he says, but put no effort into composing our urban soundscapes. He would like to see a special listening zone created in the city, an aural haven with strict acoustic guidelines: "a kind of 'slow sound' movement in the matrix of our urban planning".

So how do we balance the right to make noise with the right to silence? Les Blomberg, who advised on New York's new noise laws, puts it this way: "The right of your fist ends at the tip of my nose": your right to turn up the volume stops when the neighbours can't hear themselves think.

Frayne says navigating noise is largely about behaviour. "Everyone has a right to a degree of personal space, and for me that's what silence is: we don't want the acoustic equivalent of people tapping us on the shoulder constantly, or bumping into us. We need to develop a bit more respect for each other."

LINKS

Noise Watch Australia, anti-noise lobby
group: noisewatch.org.au/

Resonant Designs, Nigel Fraynes
soundscape service:

resonantdesigns.com/

Lisa MacKinney, noise artist and librarian:

(sound artist, performs as Mystic Eyes): myspace.com/lisamackinney

Anthony Magen, Australian Forum for Acoustic Ecology and sound tour guide:
afae.org.au

FURTHER READING

The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want by Garrett Keizer, Public Affairs,
garrettkeizer.com

In Pursuit of Silence by George Prochnik,
Doubleday, inpursuitofsilence.com

Zero Decibels: the Quest for Absolute Silence by George M. Foy,
Scribner Credit: Meg Mundell

[Illustration]

Caption: SIX ILLUSTRATIONS: GREGORY BALDWIN