

Boisterous Rats and Fast Food

I've had to become more tolerant of noise where I live now than I ever have been before, or I would be even more insane than I am.

I have a jar full of foam-rubber ear protectors, but I'm conservative about their use, because they keep the sounds my own head makes (tinnitus) and my thoughts, often cacophonous and uninvited, inside my head instead of allowing them to escape out my ears and dissipate in the surrounding atmosphere. The sounds my head makes are soft compared to near-flying airplanes, lawn mowers, hedge trimmers, carpet-cleaning equipment, or passing cars, motorcycles and trucks, but the sounds of my own head can be irritating too and have my knowledge that they are potentially personally controllable and yet uncontrolled adding to their ability to irritate me.

Music used as a sound-mask to drown out objectionable sound, helps, but not much, because, when I play music to drown out irritating noise, I still hear irritating noise, even if it is woven into pleasant music and not as apparent as it would be without the music. It is still there, not harmonious with the sound of music.

Earphones I bought were advertised as sound blockers and were as expensive as ones that block sounds, but they don't exclude much sound. I was caught up in disappointment when I tested them but otherwise satisfied with their quality at receiving high fidelity recording, and I didn't want to do the work of repacking them and returning them as falsely advertised. Now that the allowed return time has expired, I wish I had done it. I don't use the earphones.

Tom and Emily (our nearest neighbors) are having their carpets cleaned today. The machinery in the house is run by a small, very loud, internal combustion engine. The man who cleans the carpet places the motor inside his van, which echoes the sound and magnifies it many times at a particularly-irritating pitch.

A long time ago, when he worked at another nearby house, I asked him if the noise his machinery made was hard on his

hearing. He said, "Excuse me. What did you say?"

Soon after the carpet-cleaner started his nearby work, Laura shouted from downstairs to suggest we go out for lunch. I got ready immediately, and we left for our favorite fast-food place.

Besides serving food very soon after it's ordered, the restaurant has some choices that are quite good, tasty food served without grease, salt or sugar, food that could be honestly classified as health food.

The noise of popular music at the restaurant didn't annoy me as much as usual, partly because I studied the noise and tried to draw conclusions about how most people react to noise. I needed to study noise at that restaurant to have more of what I needed to write an essay about noise in fast-food restaurants.

Sometimes I can study noise in a nearly rational fashion by forcing myself into a scholarly state of mind. If I succeed at reaching this state of mind, it reduces the stress excessive noise brings me.

I think it's a law now that all fast-food restaurants must play loud, popular music, more for the benefit of the workers who run the restaurant, usually young and on their way, as soon as possible, to more complex, higher-paying jobs, sometimes without music, than for the benefit of customers.

My careful study of facial expressions and reactions leads me to a preliminary conclusion that most customers don't object to the loud music and indeed may not object to most noise, wherever it is. Indeed most customers seem not even particularly aware of noise.

Nearly everyone I see in my rare ventures into public space seems to be used to and quite accepting of noise. This willingness to accept noise leads to more noise, because if no one objects to something objectionable, why make any effort, during design of the environment and things destined to be in the environment, if that effort to reduce objectionability would take awareness of objectionability, time, focus and money?

As we ate our lunch at the fast-food restaurant, I tried to understand words recorded singers sang and found that hard to do. I find many recordings of songs hard to understand even in quietest circumstances. Recordings are harder to understand against the background noise in the restaurant (people and machines working to prepare and serve food and people eating food and talking) and near the restaurant (trucks, cars, motorcycles, and airplanes going by).

I thought one song might be about boisterous rats, climbing

up my leg, playing mumblety-peg and biting with sharp teeth. I couldn't tell for sure, but I thought that might be what the man or boy or young woman or older woman was singing about.

Making the words as understandable as possible didn't seem to be part of what the musical group was attempting to do. I'm not sure what the group intended to do. I think they intended to make loud, repetitive sounds with suggestions of musical tones, rhythm, and mysterious words.

The next singer seemed to express pain, perhaps from rat bites. I couldn't tell for sure, because it was hard to decipher what words he or she sang. It may be the style now to sing words that aren't easy to understand. I don't know what is the contemporary style, not least because I don't listen to much contemporary popular music.

When I went to college, long ago, poems that were difficult to understand were usually given the most weight, considered the most meaningful of poems. It could be that consideration prevailed into modern music, that what is most difficult to understand will be the longest-lasting and the most meaningful in the history of humankind, therefore worth working toward, though often, the poems were difficult to understand because their meaning dipped into complex, hard-to-understand philosophy whereas these songs I listen to at the fast-food restaurant are difficult to understand because the words are not clearly enunciated.

They may be songs about complex, hard to understand philosophy, too. I don't know, because I don't understand most of what they say.

Sound-recording equipment and/or techniques for the songs I listen to at the restaurant may not be high quality. Words are drowned by instrumental music. Equipment that reproduces the song in the restaurant may not be high quality. Sound is mixed at the restaurant with background noise. Some or all of these factors might contribute to words that are sung being hard to understand.

Sorting out and studying sound, noise, is amusing, interesting, instructive, distracting, and educational. This study and sorting is background to eating our lunch and only happens occasionally, or it would, like noise that becomes too much a background for my living, irritate me in a rather extreme way, and I would need to stop visiting restaurants altogether, which I do for a while occasionally, usually in an attempt to rest my hearing and my mind.

The people who work at these restaurants and some of the patrons might miss me, but missing me would be in the nature of very small pain, ignored because not understood, as accumulated stress from unnecessary noise seems to be for many in this world where the hard-of-hearing or deaf have an often unrecognized and perhaps admirable advantage over those who, subliminally and stressfully, or often, consciously and painfully, hear every sound.

I would like to say when we walked out into the day's sunshine after our lunch, we found restful quiet, and relaxed the slight tension that came from our noisy environment in the restaurant, but that would not be true, because it was as noisy or noisier outside as cars and trucks and airplanes and motorcycles sped by. I marveled at how people stayed sane in such a noisy environment and then realized most of them didn't.

I commented on this realization to Laura, but a large, noisy truck when by just then, and she didn't hear me at all, just made brief eye contact above the car, to make sure we were both still there, then set about entering our own noisemaking automobile.