



**Muzak**

**to  
my**

**ears**

**Canned music  
& class struggle**

*Public space and muzak as policing*

# Muzak to my ears

*“If you want more Mozart in your life, start loitering.”*

The managers of certain public commercial spaces, such as shopping centres and railway stations, have seen the use of these spaces by youths for meeting places as a problem for some time. It sends the wrong message out to potential consumers, can feel intimidating and can affect profitability. It's not the image or ambience they want to promote for their businesses. So they have enlisted a tactic (or rather it has been sold to them) of playing classical music over loudspeakers to drive away the groups of youths. *“Staff at Co-op stores ... have a remote control that ‘can turn the music on if there’s a situation developing and they need to disperse people’. Tyneside Metro reports similar success, especially if the music is either ‘sung by Pavarotti or written by Mozart’. For your better-educated vandal, atonal music has been found to do the trick: the union bar at Leicester University was emptied in an instant by some computer-generated sounds. And apparently we can expect to hear more of this kind of deterrent on the London Underground, which has taken up the scheme. If you want more Mozart in your life, start loitering.”* This has reportedly been surprisingly successful in the UK, which is kind of depressing, if these reports are accurate and not wishful propaganda. From our own limited observations, there would seem to be some truth to its effectiveness.

Its effectiveness presumably shows how much youths are attached to self identity being defined by consumption of particular kinds of music. That they can be so easily manipulated in this way is another example of how much personal image and its close relation, status, still are invested with an inflated sense of self worth and importance. The mere situation of being seen to share the same space as ‘uncool’ music is considered damaging enough to move on. Music is every bit as much a lifestyle accessory and element of conspicuous consumption for these kids (as it is for many other social groups) as the flash car or watch is for the pimp, yuppie

or other businessmen. Of course we are all colonised by Capital sufficiently to be driven to indulge in often irrational, contradictory behaviour as compensation for the miseries of social life within capitalism; gambling, drugs, fashion, celebrity worship and various other avenues of entertainment and consumption. But the extent to which this is now dominant and no longer balanced by other countervailing, more critical oppositional forces in daily life is depressing - and a symptom of a terrible defeat that we have, as yet, failed to overcome....

Muzak is annoying, but to so easily cave in to its presence is a pretty weak state of affairs. Maybe it shows how weak people's sense of self, of individuality, are in a society which colonises us from every angle. Maybe it's a reflection of the general air of resignation in the UK as a country with, for so long now, such a low level of struggle - the ego's resistance to externally imposed culture is likewise at such a low level. (Yet in other places, such as Seattle, USA - where struggle has been at similarly low levels - street people have resisted this musical policing and refused to budge from occupying public space. Maybe because these are the street-homeless who really have nowhere else to go.) Ironically, some of these UK youth are likely to be the same characters you can sometimes find keeping a whole neighbourhood awake at all hours by blasting out the heavy thump, thump bass of their favourite rappers from car stereos - or from their bedroom CD players. But maybe that's a clue to their passive response to the Muzak - a conformity to the law of the urban jungle; he who roars the loudest claims the territory in the noise war of all against all. The common sound of the stupidly loud<sup>1</sup> car stereo blasting from a car of (usually male) youths as they drive around is a territorial gesture. It says "I exist,

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**1:** *The volume of domestic sound systems has grown massively since the 1960s. The average home/car stereo at high volume is now often louder than a whole rock band in the early 60s. Add to this the widespread use of Walkmans, Ipods etc (particularly on public transport where the volume has to be set high to drown out the noise of the engine or traffic), very loud sound systems in clubs and cinemas - and its easy to see why widespread hearing loss is reported among young people. Which means they are being caught in a vicious circle of having to keep turning the music up louder to hear it, which does more damage...*

look at me and the flash car I possess, I listen to music that is modern and cool and I therefore embody these qualities, I insist on dominating your attention and consciousness for the duration I am in your presence.” Competitive appearance and conspicuous consumption is valorised into the be all and end all of the use of public space. In fact it makes the space less public, and brutally colonises it with a generally hypnotic noise (dominated as it is by the bass frequency and the particular emotional and biological affects this imposes)<sup>2</sup> - so one is even denied the internal space to think and concentrate in peace, as



one negotiates the generally uncommunicative population of the streets.

The flipside of this domination is the solitary retreat into the internal soundtrack of the walkman/Ipod/MP3. Cutting off from the public arena where people rarely talk to each other is a self-fulfilling prophecy - part of the appeal is that people are less likely to communicate with you, and you can also block out the

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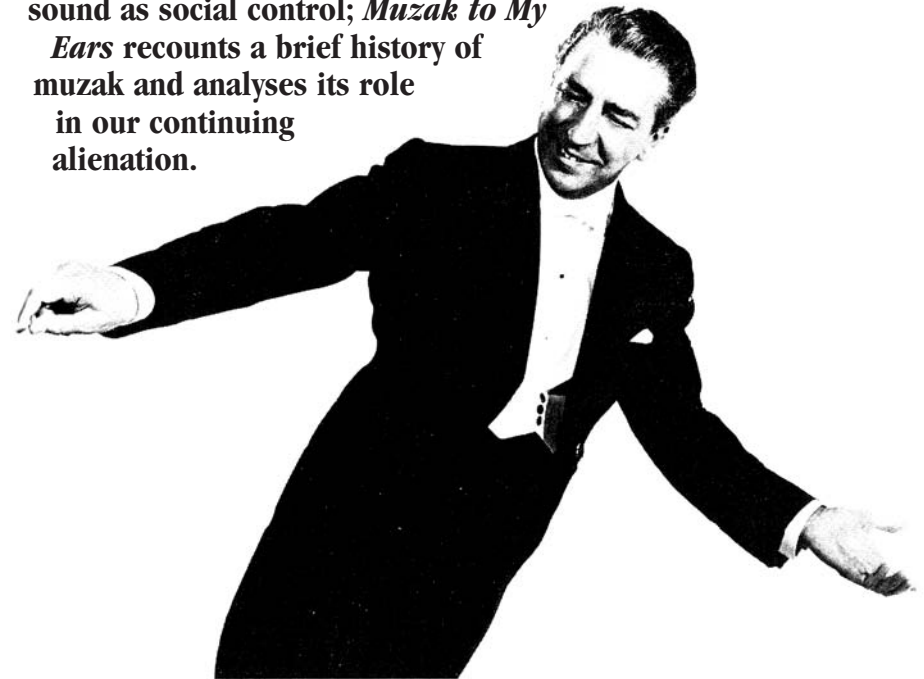
**2:** Each to their own in taste in music - but there is a link between an aggressive, individualist anti-social attitude and a choice of music that often promotes those values. As well as in the way it is used by the individual to mediate his public presence.

**“Muzak... the equivalent of Chinese water torture... for forty hours per week... horrible.”  
(former shop-worker)**

**Originally piped into workplaces to improve productivity, muzak has now invaded public space like a cancer everywhere, from lifts to shops, transport, toilets, telephones...**

**Used in shops to create an atmosphere that makes what is on sale more saleable and appealing, Muzak is a commodity that, by being consumed, encourages you to buy other commodities; neatly illustrating the old situationist slogan “culture - the commodity that sells all the others”.**

**From drumming more productivity from workers in World War 2, through bamboozling shoppers into spending more, to modern developments in music and sound as social control; *Muzak to My Ears* recounts a brief history of muzak and analyses its role in our continuing alienation.**



*Amunzio Paolo Mantovani: His layered strings brought Heaven to vinyl.*

This text is a chapter of a larger unfinished work on music, which, together with many other fascinating and challenging texts, can be found at [endangeredphoenix.com](http://endangeredphoenix.com).

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banal nonsense that people generally insist on talking in public on their mobile phones (“I’m on the bus...”). Everybody on the bus is physically present, but so many people are socially and mentally somewhere else. *“Technology - the knack of so*



*arranging the world that we don't have to experience it.” (Max Frisch). So technological responses to the social alienation of public space generally perpetuate and compound the problem, or create new ones.*

Another related, more sinister, form of policing public space is also now in use, sometimes used in combination with muzak; *“Mosquito units are small generators giving out a[n irritating] high frequency sound which, it is claimed, only people aged under 25 can hear due to the density of their inner ear bones.”* These are turned on and off as necessary to give the youth an aural cattle prod to get moving. So there is a low level guerrilla techno-war going on in the arena of public space. On the one side, the homeless who live in the streets, and also those youths with no communal leisure spaces of their own. On the other, the market forces of shopkeepers, shopping mall managers, security guards and other cops. The message is that if you're not here to consume then you have no business being here. One might expect that some smart young techies could come up with a blocking device against the mosquito units. (There have been calls - in Feb 2008 - by the Children's Commissioner for the device to be banned, as it is an indiscriminate targeting based solely on age which, for example, also affects babies - whose source of discomfort would not be understood by their parents.)

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## Canned music for the masses

*"Boring work is made less boring by boring music."* (Muzak Corporation promotional slogan, 1960s.)

*"...in a recent Mori poll, 17% of people surveyed said that "the thing they most detest about daily modern life" is the use of muzak."* (Guardian, 28/3/2006.)

*"When I was younger, I worked in retail, and Muzak was the equivalent of Chinese water torture. Imagine listening to Lawrence Welk, or instrumental versions of Christmas carols, for forty hours per week. It was horrible."* (CBS News website, 9/2/2008)

In 1948, the local transport system in Washington DC began broadcasting Muzak in its buses and streetcars. Over 90% of the passengers favoured the continuation of the service, but a small but vocal group objected to this infringement. There followed a court battle challenging the constitutional basis for the broadcasting of music in public spaces - a court battle which proceeded to the US Supreme Court. Psychologists were employed to testify for the supposed healthy effects of Muzak on the population and the case was ultimately lost, thereby securing in law the irresistible expansion of muzak in daily life.

*"MUZAK*

*Muzak is about an idea. A big idea. The kind that shoots past the conventional, sharp lefts around the expected and knocks the predictable off its pedestal. Its premise is simple. Every company has a story to tell. What we do is bring that story to life with music, voice and sound in a way that is as powerful as it is persuasive. Emotion is our driver. It is the force that connects people and places. The intangible that creates experiences that builds brands. The passion that fuels who we are and what we design. Seventy years ago, Muzak created an industry. Three*

alongside advertising - of sales techniques within the shopping environment. With the growth of the mass consumer, the terrain for maximising the circulation of commodities was enlarged into the emotional and sensory areas of human life - as part of the 'retail experience'. Retail 'branding' of corporate image went beyond simple audio-visual advertising and became a creation of a multi-dimensional environment in chains of shops, hotels etc. As capitalism has achieved the commodification of "free time" and leisure as consumption, marketing develops to try and colonise the consumer's senses and emotional responses via the subconscious. The fact that many people "ignore" or filter out Muzak from conscious awareness is the ideal response desired by its creators. So Muzak becomes part of an environmental design consciously arranged by planners to affect the consumer unconsciously.

And so the commodification of daily life is intensified; the unobtrusive nature of Muzak takes it 'under the radar' of conscious reception and allows its deeper intrusion.

## ***“You’re on hold.....”***

*“...the subject is fascinating - all part of mood-control. For me the intentions of background music are openly political, and an example of how political power is constantly shifting from the ballot box into areas where the voter has nowhere to mark his ballot paper. The most important political choices in the future will probably never be consciously exercised. I’m intrigued by the way some background music is surprisingly aggressive, especially that played on consumer complaint phone lines and banks, airlines and phone companies themselves, with strident, non-rhythmic and arms-length sequences that are definitely not user-friendly...” - J.G. Ballard*

As we can see from the Muzak Corporation’s references to “Audio Architecture”, music is now used as environmental material to enhance sales techniques and marketing, usually to soothe the nerves and irritation of impatient phone callers but, as Ballard points out, also to jangle the nerves and exacerbate the irritation of dissatisfied service customers, probably to make them stop holding on.

Muzak has been applied at the heart of the two central arenas of modern life; work and leisure. Its initial development as a means of improving workplace productivity led to its later application in the arena of mass consumption. This only reflected capitalism’s wider social and economic developments; as rising productivity enabled the greater integration of workers into society as mass consumers, so Muzak then became a weapon -



*generations later, we’re still revolutionizing it.*

### *AUDIO ARCHITECTURE*

*Audio Architecture is emotion by design. Our innovation and our inspiration, it is the integration of music, voice and sound to create experiences that link customers with companies. Its power lies in its subtlety. It bypasses the resistance of the mind and targets the receptiveness of the heart. When people are made to feel good in, say, a store, they feel good about that store. They like it. Remember it. Go back to it. Audio Architecture builds a bridge to loyalty. And loyalty is what keeps brands alive.*

### *AUDIO BRANDING*

*Think of it this way. You are a brand. Your clothes, your hair, your way of walking, talking, living-all of those elements are unique to you. It’s the same with companies. Each one has a brand all its own. Muzak translates that image into a language that speaks to the heart. We call our creation Audio Branding. It is the convergence of art and science, of methodology and intuition, of pulling out the parameters and accelerating to something as true as it is engaging.”*

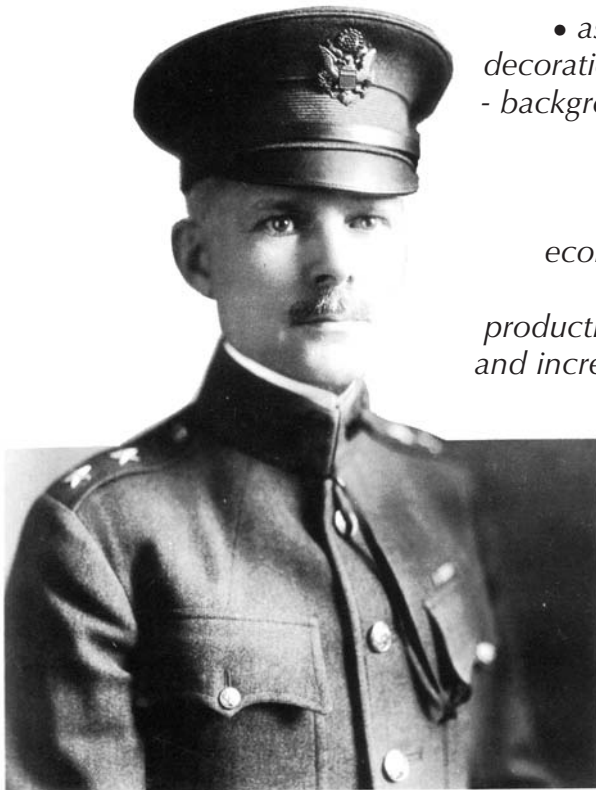
*- Promotional drivel from the Muzak company website.*

Muzak is both the name of the company that introduced piped music, aural wallpaper, into our lives back in 1924 and also the common generic term for such product.<sup>[1]</sup> Originally piped into workplaces to improve productivity, it has now invaded public space like a cancer everywhere, from lifts/elevators to shops, transport, toilets, telephones etc. It is nowadays often used in shops to create an atmosphere that makes what is on sale more saleable and appealing. The effect of various music on consumers’ behaviour has been thoroughly researched and analysed in its various aspects; including its biological and emotional effects and its effect on brain function. Muzak is a commodity that, by being consumed, encourages you to buy

other commodities; neatly illustrating the old situationist slogan “culture - the commodity that sells all the others”.

But Muzak is only the logical extreme of a more general commodification of music in this society; it is an exaggeration of the ‘normal’ social function of music. Music has several different functions and forms as a commodity:

- as a recorded performance - record, tape, CD, MP3 etc.;
- as live performance - in concert by musicians;
- as component of another (usually visual) commodity - in film, TV, advertising;
- as environmental aural decoration, ambience creator - background music, jukebox, Muzak, ringtones;
- as an influencer of economic behaviour - by encouraging greater productivity in the workplace and increased spending in the marketplace.

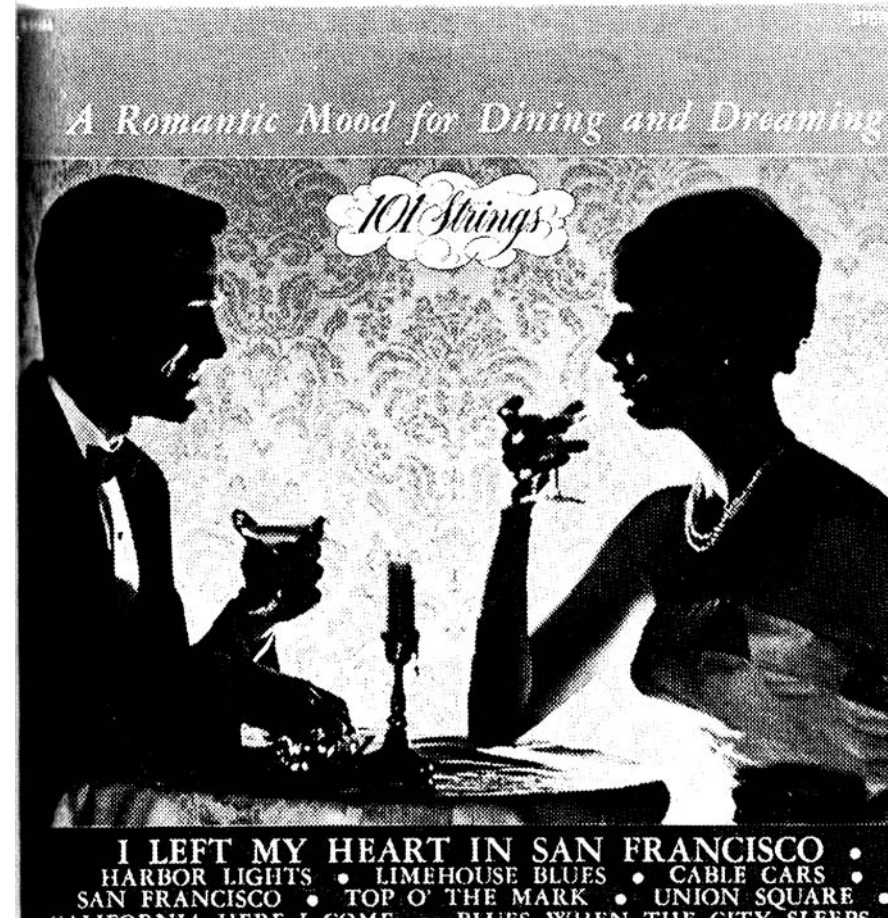


*General George Owen Squier, the Father of Muzak. Picture says it all, really.*

It is this last aspect we want to explore in discussing muzak. Muzak was developed by an ex-army general at around the same time as Taylor was developing his theories and

whole lifestyle choice for the consumer, where some impoverished form of community is found within shared consumption (e.g. the ‘community’ of the parade of various weekend youth fashion cults - associated with various musical styles - of London’s Camden Lock market, for example; an empty cultural void lacking in these times even a relationship to any oppositional social movement.)

\* \* \*





whole civilised world.

Another comic misunderstanding concerning Clash songs occurred when a bass player in a Bristol Clash tribute band texted the lyrics of 'Tommy Gun' - *"How about this for Tommy Gun? OK - so let's agree about the price and make it one jet airliner for 10 prisoners."*, intending to send them to the lead singer in the band. He typed in a wrong number and the member of the public who received the text notified the cops, who sent a Special Branch officer to visit the unfortunate punk rocker. *"He said he had then been asked to explain what the message meant, and described how the detective had looked "puzzled" when told the words were by the Clash. The officer seemed "a little embarrassed" when he left, Mr Devine added."* (Guardian, June/3/2004). The security services have become so jumpy and paranoid that 30 year old songs (that were anyway only militant punk posing first time around) can be mistaken as a threat. How ironic, at a time when the cosy nostalgia of punk - as the lost youth of the middle-aged consumers of punk tribute bands - has never been less threatening.

For the individual consumer, music is a fashion accessory, signifying a (usually) risk-free identification with various roles; ringtones on a mobile phone are a personality statement. Such small invasions of new areas of life by the commodity seem in themselves trivial; but they embody, transmit and embed the wider logic of the market and the commodity deeper into daily life and social relations. From booming car stereos to tinny ringtones, music colonises attention, filling sensory input and mental space. For many consumers, fashion becomes an obligation, conspicuous consumption the small margin of choice to express 'originality'; the obvious contradiction being that fashions, by their nature, are collective conformities to a passing 'look' of this season's/era's marketing; or more particularly, an ensemble of consumer choices - from haircut to ringtone. Music is an ideal commodity insofar as it is central to so many diversified avenues and forms of consumption and role images; recordings, film, clothes, advertising etc. The soundtrack to a

analysis of time and motion in the workplace. Both Muzak and Taylorism (which Lenin praised so enthusiastically) applied scientific observation and analysis as a means to increase the efficiency of workers' productivity. (These techniques were soon extended to also making consumer habits more 'efficient' for the capitalists.) Muzak is scientifically engineered music produced industrially. Research has repeatedly shown that Muzak raises workplace productivity and increases sales in the shopping environment. Cycles of rhythm, tension and release within the Muzak are scientifically programmed to coincide with the peaks and troughs of the biorhythms and attention spans of the worker.

By treating the worker as a simple component of production, an extension of the machine - but targeting certain of the component's human qualities so as to enhance the machine - such as efficiency - time and motion studies sought to ensure that the act of production could be rationalised to a point of maximum efficiency and output; the most profitable use of labour power. During WWII Muzak was further fine-tuned through its application to munitions production and its use in the Army. It was also used extensively to keep up national morale amongst the wider population. The same approach was applied on the other side of the Atlantic in wartime UK:

*" 'Music while you work' was first broadcast on 23rd June 1940 as an experimental series starting three weeks after Dunkirk and almost coinciding with the fall of France. The programmes were originally designed for factory workers "as a help to lessen strain, relieve monotony and thereby increase efficiency". They were broadcast in the Forces programme for a half hour each morning from 10.30 a.m. to 11.00 a.m. and each afternoon from 3.00 to 3.30 p.m.*

*In those critical days of 1940 the whole country was roused to further efforts of production - Ernie Bevin, then wartime Minister of Labour, wrote: "Britain's army of war workers, an army which is growing daily greater, is untiring in its efforts, but no man or woman can toil unceasingly without relaxation; the BBC's first*

*step in this direction was "Music while you work", a daily ration of music during the morning and afternoon which made the hours pass more quickly and resulted in greatly increased production."*

*Research was conducted among workers to discover their preferences and among factories to establish their special needs. Among various theories it was suggested that workers in "heavy" industry (machine shops, factories, etc) preferred a "heavier" type of programme - music of a more robust nature played by military bands, brass bands, or large light orchestras. Older workers, especially men, were said to show a preference for martial and light music, while younger workers and many thousands of women preferred dance music.*

*The regular announcement which introduced "Music while you work" in the General Forces Programme was "Calling all Forces overseas and workers at home"... [...]*

*In 1943 the programme retained the approval of the Ministry of Labour because it "sustained morale, increased production and gave workers everywhere a sense of kinship." Decca instituted their own special series of "Music while you work" records ... "intended and produced for the entertainment of our war workers and others engaged for long and tedious hours in factories". They announced that Edgar Jackson, former editor of the Melody Maker and reviewer of dance records in the Gramophone would be in charge. Their monthly pamphlet stated that "Before music can be suitable for such purpose a number of highly complicated psychological and technical factors have to be taken into consideration. For one thing, there is its effect on the workers. It must entertain them, but without distracting them from the tasks on which they may be employed. For another, it must be audible above the often almost overwhelming noise of machinery, and this calls for special forms of instrumentation and methods of orchestration and recording." [...]*

*he was released, he had missed his flight, which left Durham Tees Valley airport at 7pm last Thursday. He said: "The taxi had one of those tape-deck things that plugs into your digital music player. "First, I played Procol Harum's A Whiter Shade Of Pale, which the taxi man liked. "I figured he liked the classics, so I put on a bit of Led Zeppelin - the Immigrant Song - which he didn't like. "Then, since I was going to London, I played The Clash and finished up with Nowhere Man by The Beatles. "I got on the flight and two men in suits came on, asked me my full name and took me off for questioning.*

*"I got frog-marched off the plane in front of everyone, had my bags searched and was asked every question you can think of. "I was told, 'We have had a complaint made against you due to your music.'*

*"It turned out the taxi driver alerted someone when I arrived at the airport and had spoken about my music....*

*He was quizzed by Special Branch officers for three hours under the Anti-Terrorism Act."*

*- News item, 5th April 2006*

So in these times, when social relations are often reduced to identity politics gone paranoid and psychotic, some racist UK cabbie can get you pulled in by the terrorising 'anti-terrorist' cops based on his interpretation of your innocent musical choices. But then music consumption is like a blank canvas and people subjectively project on to it their interpretation of themselves and of others. The tragi-comic aspect is how chronically the wires got crossed in this case, cabbie and passenger each assigning to the other assumed identities that did not match. What we see when we look in our own 'acoustic mirror' is not necessarily what others see. One person's 'cool' lifestyle accessory that expresses an image/attitude they strongly identify and align themselves with is someone else's corny, cheesy, dumb crap. One man's fantasy song with a catchy tune and a rocking beat is another man's declaration of a threat to the

## Crossed wires and crosstown traffic

Nowadays some taxis provide facilities for “the fare” to choose one’s own soundtrack; but as soon as musical choice enters the equation, potential personal conflicts and misinterpretations of meanings appear. The music facility is presumably to give the passenger the choice to avoid talk with the normally chatty cabbies - on this occasion a mixing of the two brought tragicomic results:

### *ARRESTED BY TERROR COPS..FOR PLAYING THE CLASH*

*A MAN was “frog-marched” off a plane on suspicion of being a terrorist - because he’d played the Clash song London Calling on his MP3 player.*

*A taxi driver called the cops after Harraj Mann, 24, played him the punk anthem, which includes the lyrics “now war is declared and battle come down”.*

*He also played Nowhere Man by the Beatles and Led Zeppelin’s Immigrant Song, which includes the line: “The hammer of the gods will drive our ships to new lands, to fight the horde, singing and crying: Valhalla, I am coming!”*

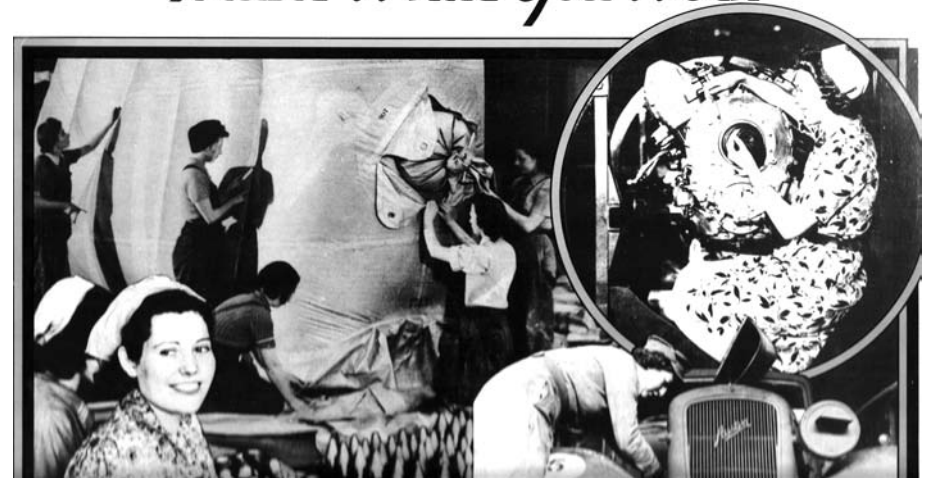
*Harraj said yesterday: “He didn’t like Led Zeppelin or The Clash but I don’t think there was a need to tell the police.”*

*The cab was taking Harraj to an airport to catch a BMi Baby flight to London but the driver became suspicious about his passenger’s choice of music and alerted the police. By the time they acted, the flight was taxiing into position on the runway - so they ordered it back to the terminal and escorted Harraj off the plane. He was quizzed by Special Branch officers for three hours under the Anti-Terrorism Act. Harraj, a mobile phone salesman from Hartlepool, Teesside, explained he was going to visit family in London. But by the time*

*Wynford Reynolds, ... as organizer of the [Decca record] Series contributed a note to the 1945 BBC Year Book: -*

*“A survey of the past 5 years shows what an important part “Music while you work” has played in the working life of the community. Hundreds of factories have been visited to study reception conditions and to learn the opinions of the “men on the job”. To quote from a few factory reports - “The music exhilarates the workers without acting as a harmful distraction”. ““Music while you work” is a wonderful tonic that cheers us up every day. It gives us a break though we continue to work and helps us to carry on afresh.” The listening figures were*

## CALLING ALL WORKERS *Music While You Work*



*impressive, 7,000 factories employing 4 million in 1943, 8,000 employing 4 and a half million in 1944, rising to 9,000 factories after the war in 1945.*

*Excellent also as background music this was another example of a programme designed with a specific audience in mind, which acquired far bigger audiences than expected.*

*It continued for 27 years ... before it was axed... "*

- Tony Clarke, sleeve-notes to *"Calling All Workers (Music While You Work) "* LP, 1983.

The fruits of these researches were applied in wider areas when peacetime came. Now it was time to apply Muzak more ruthlessly to the consumption activity of workers. Retail outlets were monitored and analysed to provide the Muzak corporation with the data to refine their product as a tool for maximising the profitable shopping habits of consumers. As the Muzak advert says, *"When people are made to feel good in, say, a store, they feel good about that store. They like it. Remember it. Go back to it. Audio Architecture builds a bridge to loyalty. And loyalty is what keeps brands alive."*

*"Muzak helps human communities because it is a nonverbal symbolism for the common stuff of everyday living in the global village.... Muzak promotes the sharing of meaning because it massifies symbolism in which not few, but all, can participate."* (*"The Eco-Logic of Muzak"* - Dr James Keenan, industrial psychologist, 1967.)

Muzak is intended to function as a kind of aural Prozac, inducing a mood of passive contentment with one's immediate situation. A mood where one's critical faculties are overwritten by a pacifying effect via one's emotional receptors. The instinctive emotional responses are harnessed to the economic dictates of the marketplace, office and factory. A colonisation of emotional responses, all the more totalitarian in its very inoffensive and unobtrusive nature.

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Footnote; [1] Throughout this text we refer to both the Muzak Corporation and the wider genre as Muzak. An interesting book that deals with the history of both the Muzak Corporation and the genre from a pro-Muzak perspective is *'Elevator Music'*; Joseph Lanza, Quartet Books, 1994. For Lanza, we live in the best of all possible worlds, one where as eager consumers we are flattered with, flattered and seduced by the enticements of modern marketing. He sees the theme park and shopping mall as the highest realisation of muzak's application:

*"The art of merchandising, so celebrated in Disney's amalgam of advertising and entertainment, is practiced with more and more sophistication in other retail haunts. In-store shoppers have become a prime media target. This is why, as foreground music and background music become as interchangeable as microchips, Muzak and its epigones play a grandfatherly role in our information age by simulating the theme park in all of our surroundings. More than ever, the store has become the proving ground for media impact on global consumption. The greatest audience participation show of all is the daily stroll to the supermarket or mall, where our predilections are stimulated by an array of gorgeous products arranged with the precision of a Busby Berkeley spectacle. the scenario brings to mind the finale of the film The Stepford Wives, where robotized females amble placidly through supermarket lanes to elevator orchestrals that are more seductive than sinister."*

Lanza can only conceive of the human subject as consumer; therefore consumption must be the source of all pleasure, the realisation of all desire - in an environment choreographed by marketing forces. He concludes; *"Elevator music (besides just being good music) is essentially a distillation of the happiness that modern technology has promised. A world without elevator music would be much grimmer than its detractors (and those who take it for granted) could ever realize. This is because most of us, in our hearts, want a world tailored by Walt Disney's "imagineers", an ergonomical "Main Street U.S.A.", where the buildings never make you feel too small, where the act of paying admission is tantamount to a screen-test - and where the music never stops."*

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