

# a e t h e r

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## Harmony in my Head

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ON A RECENT TRIP TO HAWAII I NOTICED A FELLOW TRAVELER who had an iPod that could be listened to underwater. Several questions crossed my mind at that moment: how would the music sound underwater? What would they (or I) listen to during a snorkeling or scuba diving expedition? Or perhaps most importantly, why would someone want to do this at a time when they are, in theory, communing with nature? This also got me thinking about how the consumption and spatiality of music has changed over the years since my childhood. The ability to listen to music while snorkeling or scuba diving while surrounded by sea life can be perceived as an amazing achievement or a vile bastardization of nature depending on one's perspective. Either way, my mind was catapulted back to when I was a kid, how music became an important part of my life, and how and where I listened. Later on, as I embarked on a career as a geographer, I also got to thinking more seriously about spaces of music, which to most outsiders is an alien concept and perceived as a frivolous pursuit without much meaning. People tend not to think much about sounds/music as aural spaces, but this topic has become an increasingly interesting and fertile avenue of inquiry.

All of us beyond a certain age are likely to remember the first album we bought and not only how it sounded, but also how it smelled and how it felt in our hands, not to mention the multiple uses of the fold-out albums. My first introduction to buying music though was with 45s (I'm not old enough to ever have owned 78s) and listening to AM radio-inspired 'bubblegum pop' (e.g. the Archies "Sugar, Sugar") in the sanctity of the bedroom in our suburban Connecticut duplex. But what also resonates today is where these songs were heard and how the sound and place are eternally married in my (and I'm sure most of our) mind(s). This place we created was one of great pleasure, an escape from our parents, siblings, homework, etc. These spaces have now become portable beginning with the Walkman and now morphing into iPods where you can take your entire music collection anywhere. In effect, people can take their musical sanctuary with them thereby reconfiguring how people, music, and space interact.

We all live with the so-called “soundtracks of our lives” which are intimately connected with place. For example, one of my earliest vivid memories is of listening to Stealer’s Wheel “Stuck in the Middle with You” on a family road trip to Cape Cod in our 1967 Pontiac Le Mans. When Tarantino resurrected the song for *Reservoir Dogs*, I was at once pleased and wounded that part of *my* past was now being replayed for a new generation. As we grew and progressed from 8-tracks (I can still hear Kiss “Alive” as played on my Ford Pinto’s 8-track player and the patience required to wait while the player switched tracks in the middle of a song) to cassettes (buying a 10 pack of Maxells to copy all of my friend’s Steely Dan albums in our faux wood paneled ‘den’ was such a cool thing). Also quite vivid is the memory of holding down the turntable needle as it rolled over the skip in the record to end up with a clean recording. Despite its flaws, albums persisted for a long time and the one thing that endured my many moves was my collection of 500 or so records. Then came the fateful day when I bought my first compact disc and I knew life would never be the same. It all seemed a bit too easy and there were a few, perhaps overly romanticized, aspects of the record album, that I was not fully ready to part with such as the *legible* record sleeves. Now in the age of digital music, people no longer listen to full albums but rather get fixated on songs and seldom even know the dozen or so songs that the artist recorded and several of those less popular musical gems remain undiscovered by many. I often took great pleasure, *nee* pride, in knowing all the words to all the songs on some of my favorite albums (I hope this gap in knowledge does not scar future generations). Through these early changes, *where* music could be listened to was shifting—portable music was surfacing and this innovation, in turn, transformed much of the enjoyment of music into a very private affair. We now see people walking on campus, riding on a bus or plane, sitting in the back of a car, or even snorkeling listening to their own music insulated from their surroundings. Many criticize this behavior as ‘anti-social’ and perhaps there is a legitimate argument there, but the reality is that how music is consumed has changed.

It is not a very long step from the enjoyment of recorded music to the world of live music. One of my most vivid pre-teen moments was at a KISS concert in Springfield, Mass. watching a couple engage in acts beyond my pre-pubescent imagination in front of a pre-concert audience of several thousand, thereby cementing my devotion to rock and roll. The outrageousness of the punk rock movement kept people guessing and kept me coming back for more. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, live shows became increasingly outrageous and as we entered the 1990s it seemed (at the risk of sounding old) that everything had been done and as Jane’s Addiction stated in 1988’s *Nothing’s Shocking*. As a parent of a 10-year-old girl, it is obvious that kids today are exposed to so much more than I was at the same age. The media landscape has been transformed to the point where they can have everything now and how this has detached things such as music, from the material places of our past into places that are now virtual, but immediate. If you want to see a Killers’ concert you need to go no farther than your

computer and log into YouTube and watch. Gone is the anticipation of what they look like or how that song sounds live, or if they'll play that one. Here, however, is everything at your fingertips and the ability to listen to any band in the world at any time, no need to hope the radio station will play that band or if the record store will stock that album.

As I continue to reflect back on my own personal music history, I was also reminded of how music was my entre into many thoughts and 'activities' that I was unfamiliar with. I have to admit that as an American teen, I did not know much about British politics until listening to the music of The Clash and Billy Bragg, for example. I believe it was Joe Strummer who, a while back, said something like "not many will read a book about an issue, but most will listen to a two or three minute song." Despite the transformation of the music industry as a whole, music is arguably more central to the lives of people today than it was 30 years ago.

I'm not sure that this ramble has much of a point, other than that music and other forms of media are now more central to our existence than ever before and as social scientists, our ability to understand this becomes increasingly important. My hope is that *Aether* will cultivate a forum where geographers of many stripes will have a place to disseminate ideas on things media, both music and other forms, that would not fit the confines of more traditional journals and I am happy to be part of this board and look forward to contributing to the expanding horizons of Media Geography.