

HOWLING CATS AND BARKING DOGS

Nicholas Gebhardt

“We were living at the time in a tiny ground floor apartment in which I was trying to write,” the novelist Ralph Ellison recalls in *Living with Music*, his autobiographical account of Harlem in the early 1950s. “I say ‘trying’ advisedly,” he continues. “To our right, separated by a thin wall, was a small restaurant with a juke box the size of the Roxy. To our left, a night-employed swing enthusiast who took his lullaby music so loud that every morning promptly at nine [Count] Basie’s brasses starting, blasting my typewriter off its stand. Our living room looked out across a small backyard to a rough store wall to an apartment building which, towering above, caught every passing thoroughfare sound and rifled it straight down to me. There were also howling cats and barking dogs, none capable of music worth living with, so we’ll pass them by” (Ellison, 2002: 4).

Ellison’s vivid sketch provides a useful starting point for thinking about our ideas of noise. His evocation of an everyday auditory terrain, with its uneven, fluid and varied sonic contents, opens onto a different sense of musical experience that is subterranean and dispersed, as focused on the uneventful noises in our lives as much as it is about ordinary encounters with music. Sometimes there is just too much going on, too many competing voices, to know what to say or where to begin. And at other times, the silence can be overwhelming.

Open the window, listen for the uptown local, groups of people passing by, conversations in motion, disputes underway. Pause. Rewind. And then there's the fridge! Humming and heaving and hissing and clacking. It's surprising, really, that no one has written a piece for multiple fridges, something like John Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* for 12 radios. Haze of sound, random references to Mozart, Korea, etc. Popping of ice, squeaking door, pulsing electrical hum. Stop. Enough. Start over. Creaking pipes in winter, used as ancient time-keepers. In the summer, breeze-filled curtains spin outward, caught between the car horns, the screeching brakes of a taxi and the non-stop hammering in the apartment below. What are they DOING in there?!

Writing with noise starts with a message, dialogue, some advice, observations about how to get things done, a list of items we can't forget, a program of sorts, pens, camera, paper, running order, catering booked, participant list, looking for the venue, seating set out for thirty people, some of them on couches already, waiting, a welcome and...off we go. Listen carefully to what she says. Writing with noise is an art, useful for getting along with others, for keeping on the move when you can't think of where to go, of travelling light and trying things out and on. Low-fi dreaming. Over one minute, repeated eight times over, we find a rhythm of scrawling that fits with what we want to say and how. And how? This is the challenge; always, with this exercise anyway. Stop start. Stop. Start. Hands tired, out of ink, stupid pen, stop. Start. Running out and over with images of sounds, trying to get at what the clear lines coming out of her instrument felt like, what we heard. It's hard to settle on adjectives; much easier with verbs. So many quickly alight on the page: sounding, tracking, scurrying, sloping, slipping, slouching, and so on. Face to face with another person, your partner in crime for this exercise anyway, brings new connections, search for a common tongue, a quick relay between vowels and groans and laughter. Then we drift apart. All too soon, it's over.

Edgework. Or working-the-edges. Or edging sounds into focus. These seem like useful definitions of writing with noise. Tracing out the limits of a particular sound world becomes a way of identifying new zones of noise-like activity. Noise-zones. “These worlds are structured by their own distinct edges,” Edward Casey says, “edges after edges, edges upon edges, and edges beside edges. Edges are everywhere, even if we do not have many names for them other than conventional terms (often classical in origin) like glissando, which calls for the merging of discrete edges into one smooth glide whose edge is that of the whole assimilated mass” (Casey, 2017: 160). Getting to the edge of things requires some sliding and shifting of position, nimble foot work, a quick wit, a bit of scrambling across rough ground. Reaching out, tumbling forward, fading away, all those points where things might happen...

The articles in this edition of *Riffs* form a map of these multiple sonic terrains, guiding us across the larger landscape of experimentation and expression. They mark out many levels and layers of possibility for getting from A to B, sometimes directly, and sometimes taking the long way around. They try to make sense of the sounds that reside in our experiences, conditions, things, moods, imaginaries, and gestures. Their methods are quite often divergent and conflicting, hinting at longer reflections, future projects, memory loss and adventures resumed. They mix terms and times, manners and music, figures and frames, jumbling this and that problem, history, practice, theory, and process, to create a fast-moving journey in thinking and writing and testing out the things that words can do.

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