



## The Right to Quiet Society for Soundscape Awareness and Protection

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<http://www.quiet.org/readings/frazier.htm>

# Please Turn Off the Music

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Background music in the sixties was usually supplied by an organization called Muzak and was just that, background music. Its soft, insinuating sound was almost subliminal and simply drowned out some other noises to provide a more soothing atmosphere, in the opinion of its proponents. Today, all of that has changed: whether piped music comes from Muzak or some other supplier, it is loud, often including lots of percussion, and a good deal of the time it now includes the lyrics.

When I asked them about this, Muzak said they now provide mostly vocal music to retail stores and restaurants and instrumental music to offices. They make no recommendations as to how loud the music should be played; nor, they say, have they ever studied the effect of loud vocal music on the public. That's too bad, for if they did they would find out that not only does a big part of the public not like it, it actually causes some of them problems.

There is really no need whatsoever for this music, and especially not at the volume used in some establishments. A study at Gatwick Airport in England found that most travellers were not even aware of the music. (This is not uncommon when the music is instrumental and kept at a low level.) Of those who were aware of the music, however, the majority disliked it. Another study, this time in Germany, found that the presence or absence of so-called background music in a retail outlet made no difference in the amount of time a customer stayed or how much was spent. Since providing this music is not cheap, it would seem that businesses would not do so were they aware of this research.

There is a portion of the public, however, to whom this music is not just an annoyance, it is just another hurdle they have to overcome in their daily struggle to hear in an increasingly noisy world. President Bill Clinton has just publicly announced his membership in this group: the hearing impaired. There are over 5 million Americans wearing hearing aids and another 23 million who have some degree of hearing loss, constituting the country's largest, least understood and most neglected minority. The statistics for percentage of the population with some degree of hearing loss will increase dramatically as others of President Clinton's baby boom generation realize they have a problem: it is estimated that 20 percent of the over-50 generation will be afflicted.

For all of these people, loud vocal background music makes it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to converse in a restaurant, to hear and understand clerks in retail businesses, or simply to get directions in a mall. In an emergency, the music could keep them from hearing a warning.

A Swedish study tested those with normal hearing and those with impaired hearing to compare their ability to understand the same number of words in a given string under two types of noise conditions. They found that, with steady noise at a given level, the words had to be 4 decibels louder for the hard-of-hearing group to hear them than for those with normal hearing. When the background noise was

other spoken words rather than steady-state noise, the sound level had to be increased by 10 dB for the same number of words to be understood. This study used subjects with varying degrees of hearing loss and then averaged the results.

According to the American Academy of Otolaryngology, normal conversation is at around 60 dB. For a person with normal hearing, background music being played at 55 decibels would not drown out spoken words. For the hearing-impaired, however, if that background music is vocal music, it would drown out most of what was being said unless the speaker raised the decibel level to at least 65 dB.

When I visited one of my local malls recently, they were playing instrumental music. They had just opened and there were almost no people in the mall, but because of the music the ambient sound level ranged from 59 dB to 69 dB. You would have to speak at 73 dB to be understood with this music and at 79 dB to be understood by the average hearing-impaired person. For a person with more than an average hearing loss, you could end up speaking with a voice in the mid-80's -- and that is loud. (The typical alarm clock is at 80 dB.)

For many, the first reaction to the above problem for the hard of hearing is to say they should get hearing aids, just as President Clinton has done. Well, they don't understand hearing aids and their function. The newest types can, to a limited degree, be tuned to give more amplification to the particular range of sound that the wearer has the most difficulty hearing. They do still, however, amplify all of the background sound; so when they make a voice louder, they make the annoying background noise louder too. The result: as long as there is loud background noise, the hard of hearing will have trouble communicating. If the noise is vocal music, the problem will be worse.

For those afflicted with hearing loss, functioning in today's cacophonous world has become a real challenge. They have to be selective in where they shop, where they eat, where they go for entertainment. According to a study done in Holland, they will hear 16 percent fewer words in a noisy setting than will a person with normal hearing. That's about 1 word out of 6. Try carrying on a conversation leaving out every sixth word.

This problem is not necessary. The simple solution is for businesses playing unwanted and annoying background music to, at the very least, use instrumental music at a level below 50 dB -- and preferably to just turn the music off.

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