

Can You Hear What I Hear?

Liana M. Silva

Blog post published July 27, 2009 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/5a5ar-znr02>

Abstract

Recently I read Meta Wagner's article on listening to music in public, "A Lament on the Deafening Silence of iPods." Wagner reminds readers that there was a time where people actually listened to their music in public—and I don't mean in designated venues like concerts, but rather boomboxes, car radios, and block parties—vis a vis nowadays [...]

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Listening, Music, Noise, Place And Space, Sound Studies

Recommended citation

Silva, L. M. (2009, July 27). Can You Hear What I Hear?. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/5a5ar-znr02>

Copyright

Copyright © Liana M. Silva 2009. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Recently I read Meta Wagner’s article on listening to music in public, “[A Lament on the Deafening Silence of iPods](#).” Wagner reminds readers that there was a time where people actually listened to their music in public—and I don’t mean in designated venues like concerts, but rather boomboxes, car radios, and block parties—vis a vis nowadays when people prefer to listen to their music on their mp3 players left and right. She briefly draws attention to the political/subversive undertones of the act of listening to music in public; however, she shies away from that political tone and points the reader toward music’s ability to connect people who otherwise wouldn’t interact with each other. I want to call attention to the subversive act of listening to music in public; when I play my music in public, I am making a statement about who I am and what I stand for, even if subtly. But if everyone around me is tuning out, what happens to that assertion of presence? There will always be people who complain about the loudness of the music of others (think back to the obnoxious lady on the bus staring down the youngsters and their music blasting through headphones), but they weren’t listening in the first place. They want to silence the music. Who will listen to the music?

This article particularly struck me because my iPod has become an intrinsic part of who I am: it never leaves my side. Oftentimes I tune in precisely because I want to tune the world out—like when I am writing. One time, a friend told me he refused to listen to music on the NYC subway because he would miss out on all the interesting conversations that take place in subway cars. He made me feel a little self-conscious, frankly; my white headphones were a sign of distinction and, dare I say, musical snobbery. But his comment made me realize that when we put our headphones on, we are doing more than setting up our soundtrack: we are tuning out the world around us, and in that act we are exercising the power to not listen to others. When we or the people around us blast their music, maybe that is what they want: to be heard. In the loudness of their music there is a subversive element, subversive because it demands to be heard. If music oftentimes reflects who we are, in playing music in public we are sharing it with others, and expressing it in a loud manner. It may seem rude, but it becomes an expression of self from which you can’t run away. When we listen to someone’s music across the subway car, we’re listening to *them*.

After that conversation with my friend, I try to avoid tuning out when I ride the subway—or in other public places. I want to listen to my surroundings, listen to the music play, because they’re looking for an audience.

LMS

[Tune in, tune out.](#)

