

And you will know us by the sound of vuvuzelas

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Abstract

Despite some stunning matchups, the news story of the 2010 World Cup has undoubtedly been the vuvuzela. While there have been valiant efforts to the contrary (see Jennifer Doyle's article in *The Guardian* about homophobia and sexual violence), not a newscycle goes by without some reference to this small plastic horn.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustics, Aesthetics, African Studies, Article, Crowds

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Despite some stunning matchups, the news story of the 2010 World Cup has undoubtedly been the vuvuzela. While there have been valiant efforts to the contrary (see [Jennifer Doyle](#)’s article in *The Guardian* about [homophobia and sexual violence](#)), not a newscycle goes by without some reference to this small plastic horn.

Designed in South Africa in the 1960s as a more portable facisimile of traditional kudu horns — and now mass-produced by the thousands in Chinese factories—the vuvuzela’s drone has been broadcast across the globe to the thrill of some and the annoyance of others. Non-African players have complained of headaches and difficulty playing because of the constant, loud sound; the BBC has created a [special filter](#) to block out some of the horn’s buzzing tones for at-home viewers. An oddly virulent backlash against the rising popularity of the horn outside of South Africa has effected bans against the vuvuzela at events as distant from South Africa and FIFA as one can get: the U.S. based Ultimate Fighting Championship, the Scottish T music festival, and, most recently, Nathan’s Coney Island Eating Competition, lest the horn “[damage the competitive eating aesthetic](#).” The language used by many of these bans is that of contagion, like the sound of the vuvuzela is the herald of an infectious disease or a plague of locusts.

There have been many critiques of the horn at the level of decibels and hearing damage—the vuvuzela is [reportedly 127 decibels](#), louder than a rock concert—although by that same logic the entire sport of NASCAR should be banned outright, as the *New York Times* reports it at a whopping [140 decibels](#). The pointed Nathan’s ban targeting “aesthetics” cuts to the quick of this heated debate. As an African instrument with its own particular history and cultural protocols, the vuvuzela seems to bother some people—namely members of Western and European nations—much more intensely than others, and for different reasons. Two of my husband’s coworkers, from the Ivory Coast and Grenada respectively, described the vuvuzela as a symbolic African diasporic sound of celebration that makes many white people uncomfortable; banning it outright would be not only an obvious pander to Western sensibilities—especially a preference for song over more

random outbursts of sound—but also offensive, especially as South Africa is hosting the event. Or as the *Botswana Voice* Newsblog broke it down: [“Hands Off the Vuvuzela!”](#)

Dissenting voices have described the horn as annoyingly loud at best and disturbingly disruptive at worst. John Leicester, sports columnist for the Associated Press, managed to describe the sound of the horn as both “mindless” and “brainless” in his blog [“Vuvuzela drone killing World Cup atmosphere,”](#) as opposed to what he calls “football’s aural artistry”: the “ooohs,” “ahhhs,” and stadium chants of the “inventive” English who are “usually among the best-drilled noisemakers in football” but have been tragically drowned out by the “brainless” horns. After cultural comparisons like this—along the lines of the old racialized mind/body split concocted during the Enlightenment—it is difficult not to read Leicester’s closing plea, “Please, South Africa, make them stop. Give us a song, instead,” as a latent desire to control African people, not just their sonic output. At the very least, it is a tacit acknowledgement that the world is still divided along the lines of “us” and “them” and that sound plays a much larger role in facilitating these uneven power dynamics than previously thought.

It has also shown the world that struggles over the shifting border between sound and noise are rarely just that. It is precisely in such battles where sound studies can make an important intervention. . .so drop us a comment on the vuvuzela and the intense reactions it has elicited. What do you think? Has the vuvuzela been racialized? Is it a case of noise just being noise? Or is this phenomenon something else altogether? At the very least, blow one for yourself [here](#) and get a taste of what all the fuss is about.

JSA

