

Summer Soundscapes, East Coast Style

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Abstract

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The humid dog days of summer are upon us, and with them their unique soundscape. In central-AC bereft Binghamton, NY, this means the opening of windows from now until the air turns crisp in September, an act whose necessity casts the intimate sounds of my daily life into my neighbor's homes and invites their sounds into my apartment. You don't need to be Mrs. Kravitz to pick up on the comings and goings next door; basically, summertime means your biz is in the streets whether



you want it to be or not. In my former neighborhood, youthful and well worn, this meant anything from the heated fights of newlyweds—and the equally passionate make-up sessions, stereotypical but true—to bumping music and whose kids go to sleep when. I used to know what video games the guys next door played and how they were progressing, even though I still couldn't tell you what they looked like.

In wintertime, this heat-necessitated, neighborhood-sanctioned audio voyeurism ends abruptly with the first frost; double-paned windows tell no tales. But for now, the sonic community is vibrant, even in my current neighborhood comprised mainly of retirees: the brush of wind through the trees, the yap of small dogs, the hum-and-drip of wall units, the snarl of lawn mowers and the high-pitched whine of edging equipment—I have learned after trying to work at home a few times that retirees reserve the right to mow any time they damn well please, thank you—and the gossip of family gathered in lawn chair semi-circles two doors down. I knew my next-door-neighbor's grandchild was visiting two days before she saw me watering my plants and proudly introduced me to the sheepish little one.

I have to say that even after three years of living here, there still a part of me that finds the annual summertime ritual-cum-reality show novel and slightly unnerving. bars on windowsIn my home state of (Southern) California windows are rarely opened unless they have bars on them—people worry that strangers will crawl inside, especially when Robert Downey, Jr. is off the wagon—and I have my dad's perpetual “we aren't paying to cool the outside” burned into my brain. Not knowing one's neighbors is often a badge of pride in SoCal and privacy is treated as a right rather than a financially and technologically-enabled privilege or an unfortunate side effect of paranoia. The closest I have come to such a high degree of sonic intermingling was when I lived in a first-floor studio apartment at the bottom of an air-shaft in an old LA building, where, in addition to

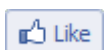
overhearing all sorts of drama, I would also find unexpected gifts in my shower: old razors, half-used designer shampoos, crusty loofahs.

This season, however, I was really settling in to the summer soundscape until we finally had our first real heat wave. Temperatures skyrocketed into the 90s and the dew point wasn't far behind, creating an intense humidity that unleashed a noise the likes of which I have never heard before. . .at least not in this acutely painful way. It was finally warm enough for the people behind us to start SWIMMING in their POOL. Pools are a rarity in the Bing, and I have to say that when it is hot enough for sweat to creep down your back, the sheer torture of hearing splash after splash is enough to push anyone over the edge. But my discomfort with the sound is due to more than simply heat frustrations; it reminds me more than anything that even after three years, I remain a stranger in a strange land. Like sound artist and theorist [Tony Schwartz](#) reminded us, "There's no party so noisy as the one you're not invited to." And I feel that intensely with every cannonball and yelp of pleasure that I hear over the back fence. I don't know my neighbors yet—definitely not well enough for impromptu pool parties—and I don't know anyone with a pool to holler at on a hot day, swimming pools: a site of fantasysomething I took for granted growing up in suburban SoCal, where swimming pools and homies with *some* kind of access to them, illicit or not, were much more plentiful. While sound has the ability to moor us to particular locations, it can also unmoor us in the same moment. As I hear the slurp of the choppy water against the concrete rim, I am simultaneously stewing in the shade of the neighbor's giant pool-view blocking white fence—ironically the only shade in our yard—and I am back in 1980s Riverside, playing Marco Polo until my lungs ached from gulping too much smog. The sounds of swimming are so familiar to me that they are completely foreign in this new location and I can't help but feel a little alien myself as a result.

A friend recently suggested that I should resolve my noise-related tensions the old-fashioned upstate New York way, by knocking on their door, son in tow, with a basket full of tomatoes fresh from our garden. I have long disagreed with the slogan of the [Noise Pollution Clearinghouse](#)—"Good Neighbors Keep their Noise to Themselves"—believing that in many occasions, noise is a product of social relations. This instance seems like an excellent test case. Perhaps if good neighbors shared more fresh produce, they would get more pool invites, and all that splashing would blend seamlessly back into the Binghamton summer soundscape. Or, I will pack up the car like usual and continue to be grateful that, unlike SoCal, public pools are still king in these parts.

Sounding Out! would like to hear about your favorite summer sounds. . .and the ones that drive you a little bit crazy. Drop some in our comment box, then adjust the bass and let the Alpine blast. . .

JSA





https://youtu.be/X_PDns23RWY