

The Noise You Make Should Be Your Own

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Abstract

Before I suggested the name VIBE, even before the magazine was being called Volume, it was known as NOISE. I never liked that name. I mean, I knew what they were going for: “Noise” was meant to imply the loud raucousness of youth that defined the increasingly popular urban culture that would fill its pages.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustics, Article, Hip Hop, Identity, Listening



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Before I suggested the name [VIBE](#), even before the magazine was being called *Volume*, it was known as *NOISE*. I never liked that name. I mean, I knew what they were going for: “Noise” was meant to imply the loud raucousness of youth that defined the increasingly popular urban culture that would fill its pages. But the dominant strand of that youth culture was going to be represented by hip-hop, and I was quite sensitive to mainstream society’s tendency to think of hip-hop—what I liked to think of as the breakbeat concertos of inner city maestros—as *not*-music, as nothing but noise, something not necessarily *from* the street but *of* it, like a garbage truck or a knife fight.

I started to reminisce about the *Noise* name a coupla weeks ago when I walked into my university-owned apartment building and saw a note with the word “NOISE” poised at the top of it in a huge bold and italicized font, assured of getting everyone’s attention as they entered the elevator vestibule. According to the note taped to the wall, there was a noise problem in the building, and it was getting worse. Would tenants *please* be considerate of the other members of the apartment community and refrain from playing music loudly after certain proprietary hours?

I thought about it. I *never* heard music being played loudly. But maybe that was because I live on of the upper floors, away from the blaring speakers of others. The noise I was privy to was the natural noise of the many babies who lived in the building, the children of grad students, probably bored to tears (and tantrums) living in this austere monolith we all call home.

But then I thought about it some more. And I considered the musical noise I heard in this building, compared to the musical noise I’d heard in my building in Manhattan before I re-located to pristine, polite Cambridge, Massachusetts. In New York, I remember the guy on the second floor, the raging theater queen, who blasted cast albums and show tunes at top volume, usually during the day, when the only people in our small West Village building were him (a theater designer), me and the “model” who lived on the third floor—in other words, those of us who lived lives outside the traditional mainstream. The “model” cranked up the volume on her club-kid techno beats, while I was probably playing [The Smiths](#) or [The Cure](#) or [R.E.M.](#) at loud volumes, re-living my college rock days while missing a freelance deadline or two.

I remember, when I lived in New York, thinking that people had no shame when it came to making



noise: people had loud conversations about personal business on the subways; vendors shouted to (at?) delivery guys on street corners; sirens blared their way through the streets; boomboxes competed with car speakers for the ears and stares of passersby. But no one complained. If anything it was a competition of soundtracks in, on and around the streets of New York. Do the lipstick lesbians outside the bar across from my apartment mind, relish in the fact perhaps, that the iconic sound of Stevie Nicks growling out of the jukebox codifies them as queer women on the scene? That kid in the business suit and expensive Wall Street shoes on the train, bobbing his head to the rhythms of Jay-Z rapping loudly through his earbuds: does he really want those of us around him to know he was a hip-hopper? The 6'4" theatrical designer from the second floor who struts down 12th Street like a linebacker: does he simply want the world to know that Barbra's star-making turn as Miss Marmelstein soothed his soul and that the *Pippin* version of "Corner of the Sky" is what gets him through the day?

And what was *my* noise telling the world? I was the queer black writer dude upstairs. But if someone had walked by the apartment, not knowing who was inside, and stopped to tap a toe or shed a tear at the mopey, fop-rock of Morrissey that so often cleared my door jamb, would *I* be what they expected? Perhaps; perhaps not.

But then I think about the times that I just *had* to hear [Martika](#). And I had to hear her *loud*. Or I *had* to hear some 80s-style deep house, especially the tracks defined by the soul-shouting diva-fied orgasmic melismas that not only date me age-wise, but most definitely queer the space that was blasting [the Rolling Stones' Let It Bleed](#) just a half hour before. I used to be self-conscious of those sonic shifts in my noise soundtrack, as if they highlighted a larger, deeper confusion about my own position, culturally-, racially-, and sexually-speaking.

But then I joined the team to start *VIBE*, a magazine once called *NOISE*. And my sensitivity over its possible name settled my own personal dilemma: We may want the world to hear our noise, because of its shorthand to who we are. But what we really want them to do is feel our noise, *vibe* it if you will, and hopefully feel our joy, pain, shame, love and contradictions in the process.

–SPB (Scott Poulson-Bryant)



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