

Living with Noise

Oswaldo Oyola

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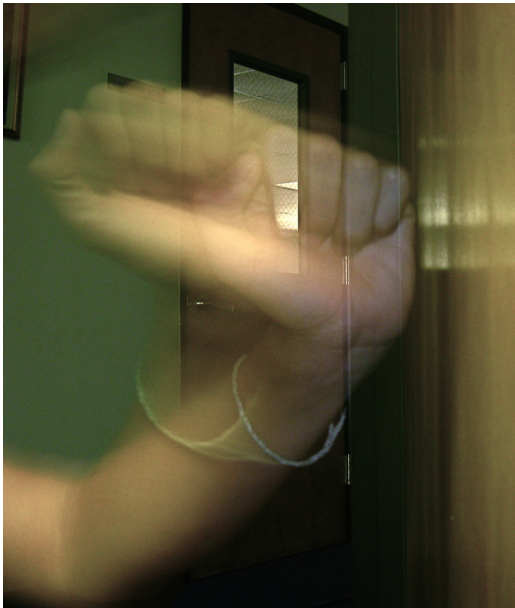
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Abstract

Image by Flickr User Bill Selak Early this past fall, my wife and I moved back to Brooklyn after three years in central New York State.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Class, Music, Noise, Place And Space



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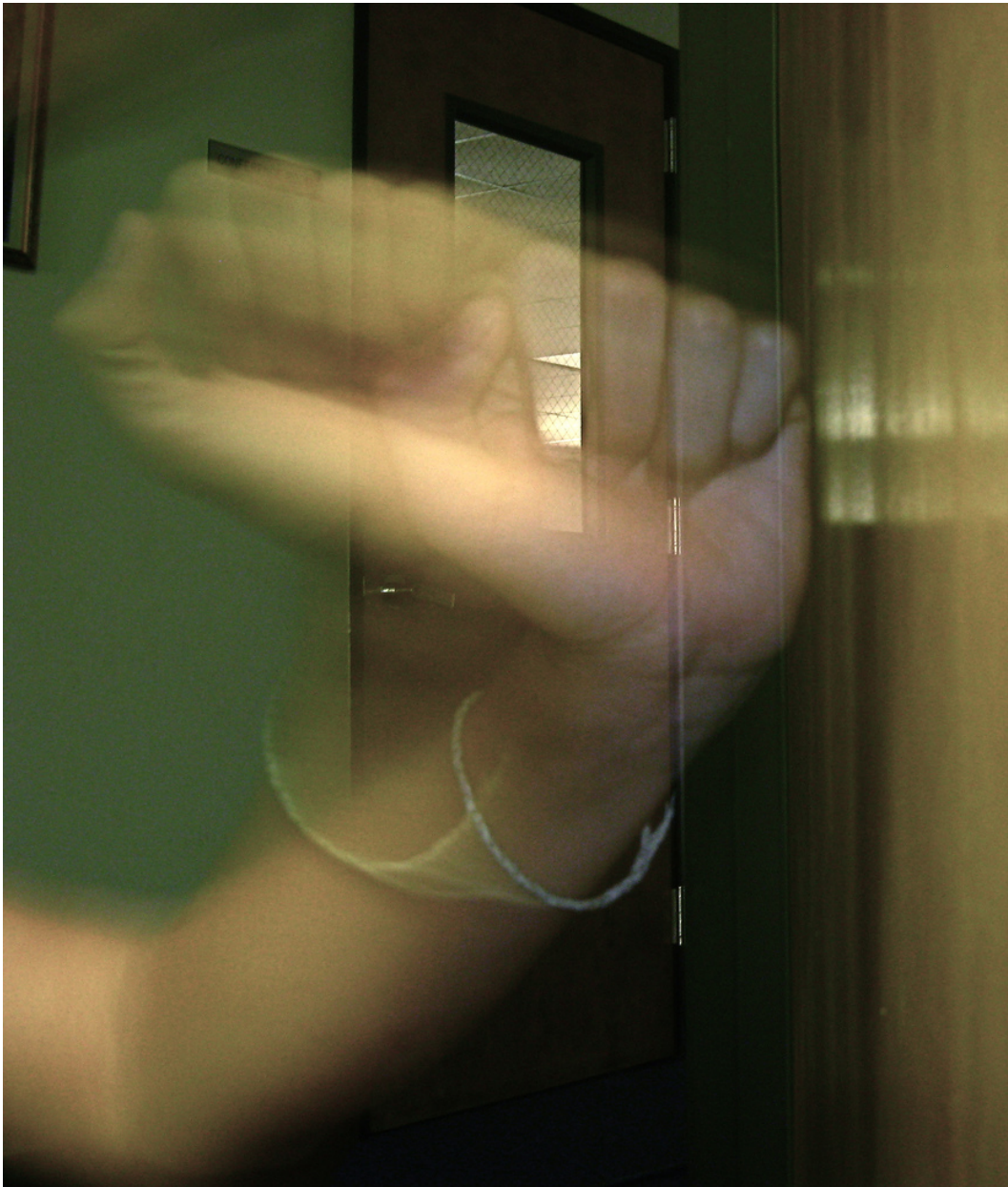


Image by Flickr User Bill Selak

*[O]ne of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation to time.—
Ralph Ellison, “Living with Music” (1955)*

Early this past fall, my wife and I moved back to Brooklyn after three years in central New York State. We spent two of those years on a back street in a mostly rural area of Cortland, NY, where there are more dogs than people and more cows than dogs. Those dogs were probably the most intrusive neighborhood sound—a **barker** would get going and that’d set off a chain reaction from yard to yard, like a real life version of the “[Twilight Barking](#)” from *101 Dalmations*. Still, I could get used to it, ignore it, zone out. The only other sounds that penetrated our home were the nearby freight trains, but their sounds are almost soothing—the rhythm of the clacking

rails like Paul Simon singing “[Everybody loves the sound of a train in the distance...](#)” or [a relaxation tape](#).

Now back in New York City, I am very aware of the different degree, frequency and quality of sounds I am subjected to while in my living space. Reconsidering living with noise put me in the mind of Ralph Ellison’s 1955 essay “Living With Music” from *High Fidelity* magazine. Like the living situation Ellison describes, our new place is a rear-facing apartment and we get the sound of echoing voices, car horns or yowling cats (fighting and/or making more cats) bouncing off the back wall of a garage on the next street. However, as most city-dwellers know, it is our neighbors that provide the most persistent and profound sonic disturbances. Ellison himself was disturbed at an upstairs neighbor’s overzealous singing, vocalizing “[f]rom morning until night.” In our case, another four-family apartment house abuts ours and through the two brick walls sandwiched by two layers of plaster, we can frequently hear the shrill cries of teenage anguish. The violent screaming between teenaged siblings or between one or more of them and their parents can shake the walls. It is difficult to ignore.

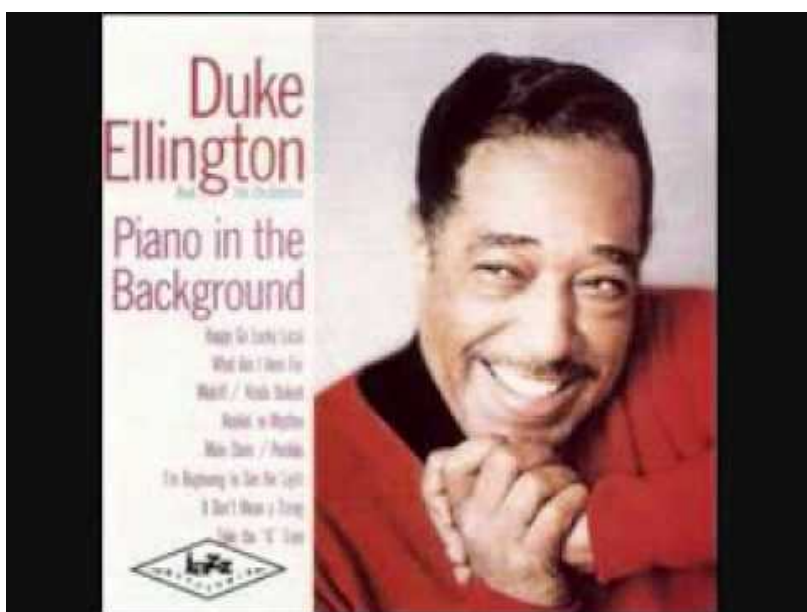


The noise of children in New York City apartments was a topic of [a New York Times feature a couple of years ago](#), but in that article the age of the children makes it easy to sympathize with the parents and to cast the complainers as insensitive villains. Little children cannot be expected to regulate their own crying or the seemingly ceaseless energy that is so easily transformed into cries of glee or the galloping of those baby shoes. In the case of my neighbors, it harder to sympathize when the sound is from near-adult children screaming about how life isn’t fair, or getting forced into frequent violent disagreements with a similarly aged sibling with which they must share a tiny part of an already tiny space—a New York City apartment.

It is easy to get angry when they get going. A teenager is not a chorus of barking dogs, a small crying child, or even some jerk honking his horn a block away who doesn’t realize how far the sound can travel, but ostensibly someone developing into a functional adult. The things they are screaming about can often seem beyond ridiculous to older people, and thus their need to scream about them is particularly offensive when I am simply trying to enjoy a evening of catching up on *Mad Men* or (more importantly) an afternoon writing my dissertation. As my wife often asks,

“Why don’t their parents regulate?” But I try to remind her, it is the attempt to regulate their behavior that often starts the screaming matches. Like a 2-year old testing the range of her voice, these teens are exploring their own boundaries. Furthermore, unlike the class entitlement permeating the *NYT* Real Estate section feature, the economic reality of living in row houses in Bensonhurst changes expectations regarding the living experience.

The sonic disturbances often come when I am trying to get some writing done, so it is not hard to think about Ellison’s essay, since writing was also what he endeavored to do when bedeviled by his neighbor’s practice of “*bel canto* style.” The way noise can carry in these apartments creates a form of anonymous intimacy. Think of Duke Ellington’s “Harlem Airshaft,” a musical representation of just that urban intimacy.



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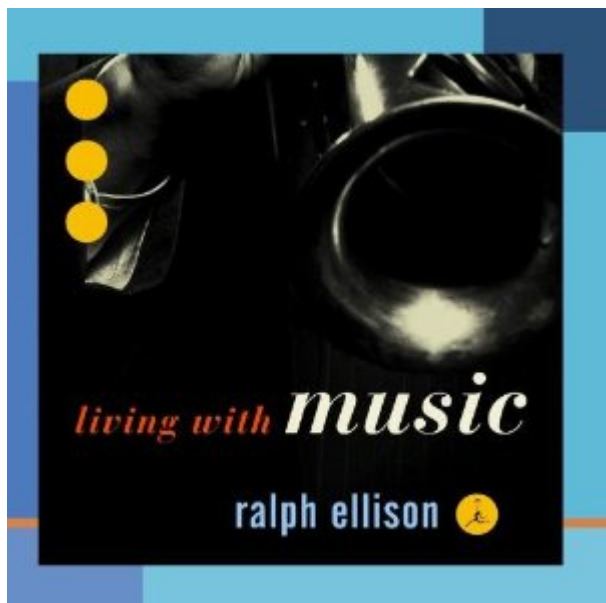
[As he said of the apartment airshaft](#) that inspired that piece,

You hear fights, you smell dinner, you hear people making love. You hear intimate gossip floating down. You hear the radio. An air shaft is one great loudspeaker, you hear people praying, fighting and snoring.

While I don’t know my neighbors better than a polite nod of hello when I pass them sitting on the stoop, I am ear-witness to their dramas, and more than that I am sometimes drawn into them, finding myself banging the wall with a forearm and calling through the wall “enough already!” Or spending time discussing the family’s private affairs with my wife, speculating about the arguments. Similarly, Ellison’s trepidations about trying to silence his neighbor come from how her practice makes him intimately aware of her aspirations, even as that same intimacy drives him to build a stereo to blast at her in an attempt to conquer their shared sonic space.

Urban sonic intimacy is tightly tied to Ellison’s assertion regarding music and our orientation to time. However, Ellison’s observations can be expanded beyond music, because remember one person’s music is another person’s noise, as Scott Poulson-Bryant discussed in his *Sounding Out!* post on music and New York City apartment life in [“The Noise You Make Should Be Your Own”](#)

(August 2010). A noise can likewise orient me in time: the sound of freight trains will bring me back to my time in Cortland, and more profoundly, that teenaged screaming brings me back to my own volatile adolescence, asking me to reconcile that version of me with the one I am now.



In Ellison's essay, he arrives at two conclusions regarding music. The first is the above-mentioned orientation to time and the second is deep sympathy that arises from that realization, as he associates his upstairs neighbor's intrusive singing practice with his own childhood attempts to master the trumpet. The orientation to time he discusses is not only a matter of looking back and making associations with a younger self's relationship to music, but also comes from an adult understanding that there were those "who were willing to pay in present pain for future pride. For who knows what skinny kid. . . might become the next [Louie] Armstrong?" The anonymous intimacy of city-living has made me reflective regarding these screaming matches and I have begun to develop a sympathy that lets me tolerate the disturbance, to understand it in a context of living and growing. For how do I know that those volatile teenaged emotions might not develop into the sensitive and thoughtful adult attitude I try to have in my own life? There is no need to imagine that these kids will grow into anyone special (though the world could certainly use a couple more Louis Armstrongs or Ralph Ellisons), but their noise is a signal for the need for empathy, to remember our own ability to make noise not only through simply living but in trying to grow, to become. . .

Ellison may have thought that "the enjoyment of music is always suffused with past experience," but I think enjoyment is just the tip of an iceberg of sonic experience, because it also holds out the possibility for an affective relationship with sound that can shift from annoyance to understanding without actually having to *enjoy*. It is not just music, but *noise* that "gives significance to all those indefinable aspects of experience, which. . . help to make us what we are." Noise transforms in the cramped urban setting from a residue of life into a connective tissue that signals a challenge to boundaries, requiring greater empathy and patience. The very noise that endangers our peace is also a reminder of how close and alike we really are. It is only time that separates me from the screaming of a teenager and it is only time that stands between me and a screaming teen of my own.

[Osvaldo Oyola](#) is a regular contributor to Sounding Out! and ABD in English at Binghamton University.



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