

Brain that Tune

Books for when the music reminds you of her

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This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession

By Daniel Levitin

Dutton, 2006

The Pleasure of the Text

By Roland Barthes

Hill and Wang, 1975

Don't laugh—oh go ahead, laugh; I'm laughing too—but I recently found myself sobbing quite uncontrollably at Manfred Mann's nineteen-seventies classic, "Blinded By the Light." It was a sunny Saturday afternoon in early June, a gorgeous breezy day in the Elm City, and I had stuff to do, various projects, some more mandatory than others, and I was having a bit of a time trying to prioritize. And then there was my ex-girlfriend, recently departed and leaving me with an achy-breaky memory of the light in her eyes, that dancing, entrancing light I'd first seen when we started falling in love last spring. One of the last times I'd seen her, I worried aloud about how I wasn't seeing that light anymore, and within a few days we'd broken up.

Not long after that, the Saturday in question:

Hello! I put on the radio, the great local station WPLR, and within seconds, there I was, blinded by that freaking light.

I heard "Blinded" for the first time most likely in the summer of '75 as a seven-year-old hanging out around the block in the sultry suburbs of Long Island. The older kids, the teenage stoners in their ratty concert tees and faded Levis, were playing basketball on the streetcourt and they had a radio tuned to the old rock station WPLJ. It's a song that can take me back to that very specific moment, to a memory that just sits there, intact and encoded with all due nostalgia, and always ready to leap forth, through the great wistful musica universalis, by those first few opening notes.

There's a straightforward question at the heart of Daniel Levitin's *This Is Your Brain on Music*, a 2006 jam on the Dutton label. It's this: What is music? According to Levitin—a Berklee School of Music graduate, former record producer, and neuroscientist—it's a "type of perceptual illusion in which our brain imposes structure and order on a sequence of sounds." It's quite a lot of fun to read about how the brain responds to music; you can almost see your hearing

cells lick at the sounds as you read Levitin's book with an accompanying soundtrack of your choosing. I've been partial to Sonic Youth's *Daydream Nation* as the background music; it's a great noisy masterpiece of an album with which to try to visualize sound being caught in the ear, being synthesized, organized—a fascinating teleology, a Fantastic Journey that makes one marvel at the wonder of human biology. Back in the days of dabbling with psychedelic drugs, I never was one of those people who would have "righteous visuals, man." All of my hallucinations were aurally-based, and unbounded within a highly particularized subjectivity; I have a very distinct memory of attending a Rainbow Gathering in 1991, and marveling, in the acid-drenched aching-sunrise moment, that the chirping birds were singing their song to the tune of Black Sabbath's "War Pigs." I wept.

The key, the subjective key, at the heart of the experience of music is described by Levitin thusly: "Just how this structure leads us to experience emotional experiences is part of the mystery of music. After all, we don't get all weepy-eyed when we experience other kinds of structure in our lives, such as a balanced checkbook or the orderly arrangement of products in a drugstore (well, at least most of us don't)." I'm of the parenthetical persuasion. And there's no shame in the music of the tears. Here's where the going gets nice and psychoanalytic: Miles Davis spoke of the space between the notes as being where the real action is; there's also Thelonius Monk's eternal quest for the quartertones that are to be found in the spaces between two adjacent piano keys struck simultaneously. As an impassioned art-fuck with a head full of high-volume idiosyncrasies, I'm often speaking or thinking of the space in my mind between rage and desperation, and the professionals always suggest focusing on the desperation in times of crisis; the rage will eat you up; this note's for shit, recognize it as such and move on.

The rage? You want to know about the rage? Levitin writes of how our neural networks are programmed to respond to certain

arrangements of notes; about how we are conditioned to a certain extent to express emotion when we hear, say, minor chords (though there is nothing inherently "sad" about minor chords). It's entirely associational, a sensibility derived from hard-wiring, and our dominant culture. He writes of how newborns are actually drawn to the music they listened to while in utero—and you can hear the anti-choice Christians wailing a holier-than-thou hymn at that bit of scientific discovery, but that point merely brings us back to the rage between the notes.

The rage? And music? How about sitting on the Metro-North from New Haven to Bridgeport and recognizing with a disgusted sigh that the neural networks have not yet been conditioned to accept the sound of another person's nail-clipper at work? Those same neural networks cannot handle the incessant blaborama of mobile-phone talkers in the public sphere. The former is simply a matter of personal hygiene made public, and it's disgusting.

The latter's more interesting or engaging, musically speaking. Mobile-phone chatter can be rage-inducing because there is call but no response; and there must be the response to give the discrete music of the everyday its place on the charts. In the Patriot Act era the walls may have ears; in a public sphere that's been abused by the screaming narcissists of our disgraced common, the ears must have walls; must accept limits; must invest in some noise-canceling headphones

Desperation's more manageable, and sort of more fun too. There are plenty of songs out there to sob along to. You don't have to have read *High Fidelity* to know musical memories' stubborn and often-times horrifying persistence; we hold on to lost loves through them, and the lost love holds us out for yet another round of devastation. Lately I've been reflecting a lot on that dreaded anhedonic moment—we've all been there, in varying degrees—when a song or album that previously gave great pleasure now becomes the pain-enabler; and usually there's a girl involved, and sometimes more than one.

I'm in a no-*Reckoning* period, the second time I've had to

shelve that R.E.M. classic because of a woman. It's a record I first owned on cassette—can still recall with great mirth standing before my freshman-year dorm mirror, primping in my Wham! knockoff clothes, doing some little pussyboy shuffle in anticipation of a study-date with one of the first great loves of my life. Many years later, the album now reminds me of a morning my ex-girlfriend and I spent listening and dancing to that album in my Goatville apartment, not long after we'd started seeing one another. When we still were together, reflecting on that moment used to be one of my favorite ways of thinking of her, and us—as this couple committed to making a life together that would be fun, honest and expressive. Now the album's off-limits and tucked into a CD sleeve. One of these mornings I'll reclaim it, perhaps do that little pussyboy shuffle in the mirror again.

So, it must be said: the Manfred Mann sob session was the result of colliding factors, a dense fugue of black-metal moodfuck—I was messed up because we'd broken up, stressed about the work, and caught up in blasted and relentlessly human loneliness we all must grapple with. But “Blinded” is a long song, and as I lay there laughing and sobbing, writhing about the bed punching the pillow, I was thinking, “Hey, I could just change the station.” But I didn't; this was the necessary catharsis and I let it ride until the callopie crashed to the ground. Until some silicone sister with the such and such, showed me she got what it takes. Does anybody actually know what the hell that song is about? Does it matter?

I'm not a man of much faith, but wouldn't you know it, the very next song was a one that has functioned as a mood stabilizer for me ever since I was a teenager dealing with the abrupt death of a parent.

The song: Van Halen's “Unchained,” with its get-up-and-go lyric about nothing staying the same, about hitting the ground running. About the fortune-cookie fact that life isn't about change; life is change. This moment, sitting up in my garret apartment with this double-shot of blasting, bittersweet classic rock bookends, courtesy of WPLR, wasn't quite on a par with Allen Ginsberg's legendary Blake vision, but leave it to David Lee Roth to get me to believing

in some kind of god—as “Blinded” faded out and those fat opening chords of “Unchained” kicked in, I was motivated to stare at the computer screen for a little while before bailing on the whole writing endeavor for the day and riding my bike to the top of East Rock. As my rocker pal Brian LaRue famously observed, “In New Haven, we rock to the east and we rock to the west.”

This Is Your Brain on Music is a book the New Haven Public Library would like back, and it's later than anything, but I'm not done yet. I'm skipping around it and re-learning some of the theory I used to have a pretty good handle on, and absorbing some of Levitin's more esoteric commentary on why we like the music we do. Just to play critic for the moment, Levitin offers a treatise that is at once accessible and mind-boggling. He spends a few chapters giving a layperson-friendly bit of music theory and nomenclature, and he takes a delightful everyman position when he writes about how an unnecessary faux-flag has been permitted to unfurl regarding those-who-play versus those-who-don't. This is exciting stuff, harking to a community-based if not outright communitarian sense of music's role in the culture, let alone in the evolution of man, maaaaan.

It's the spaces between the notes, again. I was thumbing through some Barthes the other day, *The Pleasure of the Text*. I can only do a Barthes buffet—drop the needle on grooves I can chew on, taking the dancing language in bits and pieces; I'm a wallflower amid his lindy-hopping linguistic mastery. Levitin writes about the brain science that allows us to discern between competing, colliding sounds all at once—and on that note Barthes writes

One evening, half-asleep on a banquette in a bar, just for fun I tried to enumerate all the languages within earshot: music, conversation, the sound of chairs, glasses, a whole stereophony of which a square in Tangiers is the exemplary site. That too spoke within me, and this so-called “interior” speech was very like the noise of the square, like that amassing of minor voices coming to me from the outside: I myself was

a public square, a sook; through me passed words, tiny syntagms, bits of formulae, and no sentence formed, as though that were the law of such a language. This speech, at once very cultural and very savage, was above all lexical, sporadic; it set up in me, through its apparent flow, a definitive discontinuity: this non-sentence was in no way that could not have acceded to the sentence, that might have been before the sentence; it was: what is eternally, splendidly, outside the sentence...

I think (I hope!) what Barthes is getting at here is this notion that we can free ourselves from that which binds us to ourselves; if we focus on the intervals, if we have the courage to exist in the liminal state, and let the notes be themselves, the intervals will provide glimpses of joy, a way out of the corporeal grind. If we allow, as writers, for a space in the text that's not about interpretative gestures, but merely about letting the language move you closer to some sense of eternalizing pleasure—well, you're on your way to sonic Satori, my friend. There's a terror-joy to giving it up to a space in-between; if you've the courage to face down the terror-joy, the payoff is you open yourself to a little insight, even knowledge. It's there for the taking, provided the ears don't have walls.

And the between-the-notes opportunities are legion: the spaces between seeing your lover, wondering when you'll see her again—those moments can define a relationship moreso than the tactile or broader intimacies; the space between the notes defines their relational quality, and by extension, the mood evoked by their having been plucked or struck; the space between the subatomic particles defines the atom; the space between planets defines a sun's role in nurturing or damning them.

Speaking of which, and by way of bringing it all back home: we all know how love can be. We know how music can function as catharsis machine, or anti-depressant (Levitin is deeply interested in how music and mood-altering substances target the same areas of brain function), just as it can become the revenge vehicle, if that's your style. Back in May, there was a special event at Cafe Nine. It

was In-a-Gadda-Da-Vida night at the legendary “musicians’ living room” in downtown New Haven, a night of nothing but the Iron Butterfly song, played for three hours with a revolving cast of musicians. The baseline band was local intro-skate-rockers the Vultures, with the addition of guitarist-about-town Nolan Voss—the only musician who played the entire show, very ready-steady. After over two hours of listening to the different players, that classic riff re-arriving on the scene every twenty minutes or so (this was one of the “rules” of the night), I was handed the mic and took the freak-jam back to the root, the riff: “In-a-Gadda-Da-Vida baby, don't you know that I love you”—I must have screamed it at the wall, the floor, into my eyelids, at the band, twenty or more times. It left me bruised and exhilarated, breathless and free.