Music in American Life: An Encyclopedia of the Songs, Styles, Stars, and Stories That Shaped Our Culture
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Torture and Punishment through Music
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Music played very loud for even short durations has the ability to inflict pain and physical damage on the auditory system. Music played below the pain threshold (approximately 130 decibels) can elicit a variety of negative physiological and psychological responses if played for long enough or deemed unwelcome or bothersome by the listener. The U.S. military, intelligence, and law enforcement communities have used music in this fashion to a variety of ends.

Studies, both short-term and longitudinal, support the idea that exposure to noise has negative physical and psychological effects. It is well known that noise, even at levels below the hearing damage level (approximately 85 decibels), can cause annoyance, sleep disturbance, cognitive impairment, physiological stress reactions, endocrine imbalance, and cardiovascular disorders. For example, short-term laboratory studies carried out on humans have shown that the exposure to noise affects the sympathetic and endocrine system, resulting in acute physiological responses including increased heart rate, heart palpitations, raised blood pressure, vasoconstriction, and release of stress hormones (Babisch 2011).

Noise is a psychological concept and is defined generally as sound that is unwanted by a listener. Any sound stimulus can be classified as noise when it is unpleasant, is bothersome, interferes with important activities, or is believed to be physiologically harmful (Cohen and Weinstein 1981). Such sounds can fall into these categories because of their amplitude, frequency range, and intermittency, or because of their situational context. Unwanted effects of sound that are related to its physical properties include the masking of wanted sound, auditory fatigue, hearing damage, excessive loudness, bothersomeness, and ability to startle (Cohen and Weinstein 1981; Kryter 1970).

Studies also suggest that the context of music plays an important role in determining its effects on annoyance, performance, and possibly health. The distinction between music and noise is psychological and subjective, and any piece of music can be perceived as noise if it is deemed unwelcome. Thus, even fairly loud music may sometimes be interpreted as desirable, while relatively soft music can be interpreted as noise. For example, although one person might enjoy listening to an album of rock music at 110 decibels, another person might find the same stimulus quite offensive, and though a person may enjoy a favorite song at 80 decibels during day, the same person might find that same song at the same volume quite bothersome if subjected to it while trying to sleep (Cohen and Weinstein 1981).
Some researchers have claimed more informally that, because of cultural differences, playing Western music to non-Westerners (or vice versa) creates a never-ending series of musical expectation violations (Senior 2009). Because such musical violations are associated with arousal in Westerners, a heightened level of arousal might be generated in non-Westerners, creating a sense of frustration or confusion. In addition, the lyrical content of songs is often cited as a parameter that contributes to aggravation and stress. Claims have been made that a detainee’s conservative cultural, religious, or political beliefs can be challenged by songs containing explicit sexual content, religious blasphemy, or American political ideals. However, the wide variety of songs reportedly used by U.S. authorities suggests that lyrical content is not an important factor.

The use of music by the United States to coerce, torture, or punish human beings first gained notoriety in 1989 when U.S. forces played loud music outside of the Vatican Embassy in Panama City in an attempt to secure the surrender of deposed leader Manuel Noriega. Reports claim that music was played around the embassy to mask the sounds of negotiations happening inside. When it was learned that the loud music was irritating Noriega, it was continued around the clock in an attempt to harass and possibly expedite his surrender. This musical aspect of the operation was stopped once it was determined that the loud music was having a negative effect on the staff and residents of the embassy.

The second notable instance occurred in 1993, when loud music was used to aggravate and disorient members of the Branch Davidians during the fifty-one-day standoff in Waco, Texas. In this case, loud, distorted music was part of a broader program of intimidation. It is reported that these tactics may have in fact hindered negotiations (Dennis 1993) and prolonged the standoff.

The declaration of the “Global War on Terror” in 2001 ushered in a new era of the use of music by the military and intelligence agencies in an offensive capacity. The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (2001), the establishment of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base (2002), and the invasion of Iraq (2003) were all underscored by the military’s use of aggressive interrogation techniques against detainees in an attempt to gather information about security risks facing the United States. In 2003 reports began to emerge about the use of music in such interrogations and questions arose about whether or not such a use of music amounted to torture. The BBC reported that detainees in Iraq were being exposed for prolonged periods to music from children’s television programs and from rock bands like Metallica (active 1981–present). The U.S. Psychological Operations Company (PsyOps) said that loud music was being used to break down prisoners’ resistance through sleep deprivation and aggravation.

The largest amount of evidence of music’s use to facilitate interrogations comes from investigations into claims of detainee abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq (U.S. Department of Defense 2006). During the time in question (October to December 2003), Abu Ghraib was under the authority of the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF)-7. The declassified CJTF-7 “Interrogation and Counter-Resistance Policy” explicitly states that music can be used to increase a detainee’s fear level to an extremely high degree, a state called “Fear-Up Harsh.” These policies were revised in October 2003, and the use of loud music was prohibited. In declassified documents, however, interrogators specifically request an exception to CJTF-7’s policy in order to subject a detainee to “loud music” over a seventy-two-hour period in conjunction with sleep deprivation and stress positions (U.S. Department of Army 2003). It is
unknown how many such exemptions were requested or granted. A 2006 Department of Defense investigation of detainee abuse found evidence that detainees had been subjected numerous times to loud music in violation of the CJTF-7 policy. Although most evidence that loud music was used related to the Abu Ghraib scandal, there are numerous claims that the practice is prevalent at detention facilities in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay.

The United Nations defines torture as “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity” (United Nations General Assembly 1984). Torture is illegal in the United States and in all U.S. territories. In an attempt to comply with international and domestic law, the Bush administration adopted a policy commonly referred to as “stress and duress,” which used enhanced interrogation techniques on detainees. These included (but were not limited to) waterboarding, loud music, light control, sleep deprivation, stress positions, and controlled fear (U.S. DoD/Office of the Inspector General 2006). This policy was based in part on a 1978 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The Irish government sued the United Kingdom, claiming that Irish citizens had been subjected to five interrogation techniques that amounted to torture. The techniques were wall standing, hooding, subjection to noise, deprivation of sleep, and deprivation of food. The ECHR ruled that “the five techniques amounted to a practice of inhuman and degrading treatment;” but did not meet the definition of torture (Ireland v. United Kingdom, 1978). Numerous human rights organizations believe that the “stress and duress” program does meet the definition of torture and is therefore illegal under both domestic and international law (Grieve 2004).

Testimony from former detainees, as well as military and intelligence personnel, describes music being used to prepare detainees for interrogations (Johnson and Cloonan, 2008, 152). Detainees would be prevented from sleeping and subjected to loud music for periods ranging from ten to ninety-six hours. This could be combined with being chained in a stress position or being forced to stand and being subjected to extreme cold or heat. The idea that music used in this context represents abuse is supported by numerous scientific studies on the physical and psychological effects of sound and noise.

The public reaction to learning that music was being used in interrogations was mixed. Many people decried the practice as a clear example of abuse and inhumane treatment, whereas others treated it as a humorous footnote to a serious national security effort. Proponents of enhanced interrogation techniques dismissed the practice of using loud music, paradoxically as both necessary for national security and harmless. The music reportedly used at the Guantanamo Bay facility ranged from the “Sesame Street Theme Song,” to Eminem’s (1972–) “White America,” to Barry Manilow’s (1943–) “Mandy.”

In 2009 a number of high-profile musicians endorsed a Freedom of Information Act request for the declassification of all records pertaining to the use of music in interrogation practices (Heim 2009). Condemnation of the practice has been nearly universal among artists. Some of the most outspoken of these artists are Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails (active 1988–present), Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine (active 1991–2000, 2007–present), Pearl Jam (active 1990–present), and Rosanne Cash (1955–).

See also: Children’s Television Music; Metallica; Morello, Tom; Pearl Jam; Psychology of Music; Rage Against the Machine

Further Reading
Health." *Journal of Social Issues* 37, no. 1: 36–70.


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**MLA**