

Notes from the Field

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In November 2013, I submitted the final copy of my Ph.D. dissertation to the Faculty of Graduate Studies. Since then, I have worked a variety of jobs. These range from short-term positions lasting a few days to longer contracts lasting six months or more. In a perfect world, I would be using my skills to support arts- or community-related initiatives; but in reality, all of my jobs have been outside my area of expertise. This does not mean I've stopped engaging with the audible world or its representatives, however. Here are some of my encounters with music, sound, and popular culture on the job ...

Biebes at the Office

Day 1

It is my first day of work at a life insurance company. I am sitting in my cubicle, reading about the medical conditions that may affect a person's coverage.

"Atrial Fibrillation is a fast electrical discharge pattern that makes the atria contract very rapidly."

Or better yet,

"Barrett's esophagus is a metaplastic change of the mucosal cells lining the lower esophagus due to injury."

I look up at the walls of my cubicle, analyzing the fabric of each one. I still haven't met my neighbours. I can't physically see them, after all.

Day 2

I hear voices on the other side of my cubicle wall. They are all female. Voice 1 sits directly opposite me, with the wall being the only thing that separates us. She sounds a little older than the others, but no less feisty. To her right is Voice 2, a sassy 20-something. Somewhere behind them is Voice 3, who occasionally joins in on the gossip when she's in between calls. And farther down is Voice 4, whose intonation kind of reminds me of my mother's.

After another full day of eavesdropping, I deduce that Voice 1 is Adya,¹ a single 40-something who takes care of her mother at home. Her favourite conversation topics are Justin Bieber and Rob Ford. Voice two is Melanie, who likes to talk about clothes shopping. Adya and Melanie are like a comic duo; the rest of the voices (Lois, Laurette, and later myself) provide a laugh track to their antics.

Day 4

Justin Bieber really dominates the conversation around here. Usually in the morning, Adya will pull the latest gossip on Biebes from the web, and Melanie will pass it around (either verbally through the wall, or via an emailed picture). Rob Ford comes in a close second. Despite the cocaine allegations, Adya thinks he's a sweetheart with good values.

Day 5

I'm trying to decide if Adya is being ironic about her love for Biebes, or dead serious. Same goes for Ford.

Day 30

Maybe it doesn't matter. I suddenly see the point in all this. Adya and Melanie spend their day resolving the company's billing problems. Lois spends her hours working out Excel formulas, Laurette talks to angry customers, and me – I spend my day looking at death certificates. I get it now. I get why we talk about Bieber.

Irony? Earnestness? Sometimes I'm not sure, but I'll put it this way: We pass around pictures of Bieber the way we pass around pictures of durian fruit, llamas, and yes, Rob Ford. We don't talk about Bieber's actual music, just as we don't talk about a durian's nutritional value or a llama's breeding habits or Rob Ford's policies. Amidst my stack of death certificates, I am simply thankful those alternative objects exist.

Day 55

Ford admits to using crack cocaine. I think I hear Adya's voice waver as she reads an online press release through the wall.

Day 110

A member of Bieber's entourage allegedly assaults a limo driver. Adya sighs from her desk. "But those two, they were putting Canada on the map!"

My curiosity gets the better of me. "Hey Adya! In your opinion, who best represents Canadian culture, Biebes or Ford? And why?"

My question is met with a very, very long pause.

"That's an interesting question," Adya finally replies through the wall. But before I can hear her an-

swer, my phone rings. Minutes later I am making arrangements with an insurance beneficiary to send their mother's post-mortem paperwork ...

Lunchtime Polyrhythms

This is my first week on a new job contract in the financial industry. I've reached day 5 of training.

The lunchroom is...stark. But you can tell it belongs to an employer with money. A sea of slick black tables unfolds when you open the door. Like their comfy upholstered chairs, most of them are unoccupied.

I choose one in the corner. A few minutes later, my training classmate, Allison, joins me.

"Hi!" I begin.

We exchange pleasantries, then she pulls out her Android and starts browsing internet websites. I shut up and let her. That seems to be the proper etiquette for this type of lunch room.

I can hear the clock ticking as I bite into my leftovers. How many more minutes do I need to kill?

Tick ... Tick ... Tick ... Tick ...

I stare out the window, and begin spying on the condo balconies. I watch a black dog curl up on a mat.

Allison pulls a carrot out of a Tupperware container, and feeds it through her teeth.

And suddenly –

Tick Tick-croc Tick, Tick Tick-croc Tick

I stop mid-bite, and look around the room. What the ... ?

My eyes dart over to Allison. Her mouth – the carrot is still in there. I watch her jaw very carefully.

Croc. Croc. Croc. Croc.

Then I steal another quick glance at the clock.

Tick ... tick ... tick ...

I sit up in my chair.

(Tick) Tick-croc Tick, (Tick) Tick-croc Tick

(Croc) (Croc)

Suddenly it becomes clear what I'm hearing.

"Hey, you and your carrot are doing 'two against three' with the clock!" I almost exclaim.

But I don't, of course.

A few seconds later, the two rhythm lines fall out of sync with each other.

I lean back into my chair, disappointed.

Airport, Part 1

This airport shuttle service is a short-term gig I found on Craigslist. Most of my co-workers are university students or recent graduates, and we work in shifts of two or three. Compared to my office jobs, this one has the most interesting backdrop: the international arrivals area of Pearson Airport.

While waiting for passengers, we find ourselves standing for long periods of time, especially when their flights are delayed. If we are lucky, we end up doing a shift with someone who is pro-conversation.

Today I'm with Jeanne, a math student from Cameroon. We're bored.

She finally pipes up, "Did you say your degree was in music? Do you play anything?"

I gaze at baggage claim exit, thinking about how to answer. "Umm ... I used to, I guess. Mostly piano, and I dabbled on a few other instruments. That was a long time ago."

Jeanne: "And what do you listen to?"

I pause, watching passengers from Amsterdam and Abu Dhabi pour out of the sliding doors. I decide not to mention the six years of Ph.D. work.

"A lot of different stuff ... Depends on my mood, I guess. You?"

We chat about musical genres as new arrivals wheel their suitcases down the ramp. Jeanne is up-to-date on the latest alternative stuff coming out of Britain. As she talks, my ears open up. It has been months since I sought out any new music to listen to, amid the flurry resumes I've been sending out.

"... found another good one the other day, wanna hear it?"

She pulls out her iPhone, punches a few things onto the screen, and holds the phone toward me. "Here, listen."

I cock my head towards the iPhone and strain to hear the bars of trip-hop coming out over the din of hugging families and back-slapping friends.

We have known each other for only two shifts, and here we stand like two high-school friends who are exchanging a mixtape. It is a sweet, lovely moment.

I like the track. I tell her so.

She asks me for some Canadian recommendations, as she never paid much attention to Canadian stuff while in Cameroon. I tell her I'll think of a few and get back to her on that.

A week later, after the job ends, I email Jeanne a very abbreviated list of Canadian tracks, trying to represent the largest cross section of Canadian music that is possible in 15-20 selections – folk, rock, hip-hop, ethno-cultural. I end up spending way more time on it than I initially intended.

Third-Party Company, Part 1

Week 3 of a new contract has begun.

I'm done the training, and am now shadowing a more senior staff member, Matthieu. He's not like the other employees. I once saw him wearing a Grandmaster Flash T-shirt under his blazer.

Today he is making calls to various private-sector companies, and I'm listening in on a special headset. Rather than teaching me the proper business lingo, he's telling me about the hold music I will encounter with each company. "Verintide has the best. I mean, it's not stuff I'd listen to outside of work, but golden oldies is way better than that elevator muzak Bronson-Yates uses. But then again, Shine Co. doesn't even have hold music. And you're just sitting there, wondering if the agent hung up on you. Weird, eh?"

"It's cheaper," I blurt out.

Silence. He gives me an odd look.

"I mean, it probably saves them money – " I begin.

But I stop short of discussing licensing fees. I haven't told this company about the extent of my music geekdom, and I'm not about to expose myself now.

We move on to talking about proper business lingo.

The Commute

It's evening rush hour on a workday. I've just gotten off the St. Clair West subway and am running up the stairs toward bus number 90. Except I don't know whether the bus will be waiting at the top of the stairs.

I'm sure this is a common problem – people run up and down subway stairs all the time, hoping they can just leap onto their connecting vehicle if it is waiting for them. Most of the time, however, we end up halting abruptly on the desired platform once we see that the connection hasn't arrived yet. And then we are suddenly short of breath.

A mild annoyance, but one might have a resolution. When I begin climbing the bottom of the stairs, I can hear the engines of the various TTC vehicles waiting at the top. Sometimes I *think* I can hear bus number 90 waiting at the top, around the corner – but this can turn out to be number 33, which stops behind it.

Although I can't see bus number 90 from the bottom of the stairs, maybe I can train myself to hear it when it's there, and to separate its sound from the other buses – especially that annoying bus number 33.

Lately, then, I've started paying attention to the engine sounds as soon as I hit the first stair. Is there one closer to me, roughly at my back? And another one behind it? Or does the air sound a bit emptier today? I then check my guess when I reach the top of the stairs.

... Months later, I think I'm starting to get the hang of it. Whenever there's a deep, full sound with a generous halo around it, my bus is *usually* waiting at the top ... but once in a while I'm wrong, and it's number 33.

Tricky earwork, but I believe I can tweak it some more ...

Airport, Part 2

Four months have passed since my last airport stint. My former boss has sent out an email to everyone – he needs people for the winter rush. On December 27, I waltz into Pearson, this time in my boots and parka.

I know the drill. I march straight over to the International Arrivals and station myself in front of the dinosaur statue. There, I wait for my boss to show up with some supplies.

As I wait, I watch the doors of the baggage claim, where people and their suitcases are exiting in large numbers.

And ... is that Christmas music coming out of the loudspeakers?

Yep – "Jingle Bell Rock". Aha! I've often wondered what the standard cut-off date is for Christmas music in public places. With four scheduled shifts between now and January 4, I will be able to keep close tabs on the Christmas music procedure of Pearson International Airport.

The next day, my entry to the Arrivals area is marked by strains of "Silver Bells". I make a mental note in my head: "Three days after, and still playing." Maybe tomorrow will be the cut-off?

But ... alas. My shift for tomorrow is unexpectedly cancelled because of low shuttle bookings.

I do not enter the airport again until January 3. And when I do go back, there are no more good tidings coming out of the loudspeakers.

I feel like I've been cheated out of more than just a \$75 shift. Now I will never know if Pearson plays Christmas music between December 28 and January 2.

A hypothetical tear runs down my cheek.

Third-Party Company, Part 2

There is a new development at the office. Our clients are now using the services of a provincial ministry, and my colleagues and I must facilitate conference calls between our clients and ministry agents.

Located in a Western Canadian province, this ministry quickly becomes notorious in our office for having the longest phone queues – often up to half an hour, sometimes more. This means we are sometimes stuck on hold with our clients before an agent joins in. The hold music is so loud that we cannot speak to our clients in the meantime.

Initially I was intrigued by their hold music, as it doesn't have the sleepy, meandering vagueness of standard "elevator music". It's a looping eight-bar tune with distinct phrases, played by a small rock

ensemble, with clear call-and-response between the synthesizer and bass. Most of the band members sound like they're aiming for an antiseptic, "governmental" tone, but the bassist – especially in his "response" – is slapping out the notes with such fervour, you'd think this was his dream gig.

Since the eight bars loop over and over, I listen to one to two hours' worth of it every week.

Each time, I sit there wondering what parameters musicians are given for composing ministerial hold music.

And each time, I try to find something new in the eight bars.

Epilogue

Some days, I would pat myself on the back for "keeping up" with music and ethnography in my non-musical work hours. I felt proud of myself for not losing what I'd built up.

But recently, I was writing a chapter for an upcoming music publication. Since the article was based on my Ph.D. research, I went online to check the citation details of that big fat dissertation I completed exactly two years ago, in November 2013.

Upon entering my first and last name into the York University catalogue, I found only my 2007 M.A. thesis. Nothing else.

I went to Library and Archives Canada, and tried the same thing. Nothing came up.

Hmm, I thought. Have my research skills regressed so much that I can't even track down my own work?

I phoned the York University library. Upon their recommendation, I emailed the Faculty of Graduate Studies. After no response, I began phoning them, explaining the situation in multiple voicemails.

After one more follow-up, I finally reached someone who told me that my inquiry has been forwarded to the appropriate person and they are "looking into it".

This is a rather odd situation, and of course I am miffed. Most likely, this was a preventable human error occurring within the university administration, with the 350-page document being misplaced while in transit to its next destination.

But I also feel a sense of superstitious poignancy. After two years of toasting Justin Bieber, listening to relentless hold music, and hiding my academic background from others, have I somehow willed six years of research on an historic music festival to go up in a puff of smoke?

Notes

¹ Names have been changed throughout to protect privacy.

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