A Washington Ringtone Symphony

By Mike Musgrove  
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Do cellphone ringtones reveal anything about their owners? Maybe they do, and maybe that's why a lot of official Washington avoids the things.

"Please," offered political-thriller novelist Brad Meltzer by e-mail. "Only a fool isn't on vibrate at all times. Especially in D.C."

I conducted a highly unscientific survey over the past few weeks and found that while image-conscious politicians generally follow Meltzer's line of thinking, plenty of other prominent Washingtonians do not.

Fox News personality Greta Van Susteren's phone rings to "Hello Dolly" when her sister calls, the "Twilight Zone" theme song when her brother does, and the William Tell Overture when her producer rings. When her husband calls, her phone belts out the "American Bandstand" theme.

There's a thought process behind some of these selections. Her producer gets William Tell when she calls because it's a ring that sounds appropriately important, and "Hello Dolly" was a song she heard around the house as a kid. As for "American Bandstand," there's no real explanation. "It just makes everybody who hears it laugh," she said.

Emil de Cou, associate conductor for the National Symphony Orchestra, hears B.B. King's "Lucille" whenever he gets a call. The bluesman's guitar licks have, on occasion, popped up during rehearsals, de Cou admitted, when he's forgotten to turn off the phone's ringer.

De Cou says his colleague Leonard Slatkin had part of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" as his ringer for a while. "It was very strange as a ringtone," de Cou said. "It didn't make you want to pick up the phone."

Jason Caddell of the local indie band Dismemberment Plan, which reunited this weekend for a benefit gig, has a few ringtones selected as private jokes with his friends. There's Duran Duran's "Rio," Mountain's "Mississippi Queen" and Run DMC's "It's Tricky." But most of the time, he said, his phone is set to vibrate.

My calls to Washington politicos didn't turn up as much.

Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton's presidential campaign team declined to look into the matter, and Sen. Barack Obama's team didn't respond, though I did wind up on the "Obama for America" e-mail list. Rudy Giuliani's people say he has some normal default ringer on his phone -- they know this because it went off by accident while he was giving a speech Tuesday.

Also, in case you ever wondered: The White House says the president and vice president do not carry...
cellphones.

In lobbying circles, the chairman and chief executive of the Recording Industry Association of America, Mitch Bainwol, has a song by "American Idol" finalist Chris Daughtry: "It's Not Over."

As the recording industry has begun to look at ringtones as a fresh source of revenue, it has started to give gold and platinum awards for bestsellers. Last week's No. 1 track on the Billboard ringtones chart was "Poppin' " by Chris Brown, a young R&B singer from Virginia. We checked with Brown's manager and -- you guessed it -- that's the same tune that plays on the singer's phone when he gets a call.

In the sports world, Nationals Manager Manny Acta has the "Law & Order" theme -- he's a fan of the show. D.C. United player Bobby Boswell has a "Saturday Night Live" ringtone of Will Ferrell doing his Robert Goulet impersonation.

Wizards player Caron Butler has the James Bond theme song because James is his given first name. They call Gilbert Arenas "Agent Zero" after all -- "and I'm double-o-seven," Butler said.

As it turns out, chefs are big ringtones customers -- they have to stay in regular contact with their distributors, and having an unusual ringer helps them avoid wasting time by fumbling around for their phone every time somebody gets a call.

That's why Rodney Scruggs, executive chef at the Occidental, has Blink 182's "I Miss You" and chef Herbert Kerschbaumer of Jack's Restaurant & Bar, in Dupont Circle, has a barking dog -- a recording of the German shepherd for which the restaurant is named.

When Joe Raffa, the chef at Jos? Andr?s's new restaurant, gets a call from his wife, his phone plays the Auburn fight song because she's an alumna and a die-hard fan of the school's team. Raffa was raised in Hawaii, so when his mom calls, it plays a Hawaiian slack-key guitar song. Whenever anyone else calls, the default ring is the "Imperial March" from "Star Wars," also known as Darth Vader's theme. "It's sort of appropriate for a kitchen," he said.

This being the Business section of the paper, I also called a few business types. The chief executive of Sprint Nextel didn't get back to me, nor did World Bank President Paul D. Wolfowitz. Caps owner and AOL vice chairman Ted Leonsis doesn't have a ringtone.

Van Susteren admits to a sort of juvenile game she plays with a couple of her on-air brethren, CNN correspondents Ed Henry and Bob Franken. Whenever she sees them on the air, she calls them in the hope of hearing their phones ring -- and when she's doing her show, they do the same to her.

There's a steak dinner riding on this for Henry: Whoever loses and gets busted for having left the ringer on, buys.

There has only been one close call so far, so to speak. Henry might have caught Van Susteren flinching in response to a call he placed when she was on the air and when her phone might have been set to vibrate.

No matter, she says. "Ed Henry's going to lose this bet," she said. "He's feeling bold and brash right now -- I'm trying to make him feel comfortable and sloppy. I will get him."

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in tracking down a couple of these ringtones.