Go-Go-Go Beat
From Elevator to Anywhere, There's No Stopping the Music

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Roberto Cabrera is a self-professed iPod addict. On this recent weekday afternoon, Cabrera, 22, is at one of his favorite hangouts, the Atlanta Bread Company in Greenbelt, doing some artistic sketching and listening to Billy Idol and the British popsters Pulp on his 20-gigabyte iPod. He's dark-haired, dark-eyed, slightly mustachioed and built compactly. The telltale white wires, tentacling down from his earbuds to his small white digital music player, connect Cabrera to the more than 5,000 songs that he has downloaded from CDs and the Internet.

To get a sense of how much music that is: Assuming that you listen to an hour's worth of tunes a day and each song lasts an average of four minutes, you would spend about a year exhausting the playlists on Cabrera's iPod.

Music addict Cabrera, however, listens to 14 hours of music a day. He needs two iPods -- so that one can be charging at all times.

A junior international business and studio art major at the University of Maryland, the amiable Cabrera says that music is a mega-massive part of his life. "I've always been influenced by music," he says. Now he needs it "all around me, all the time."

He chooses hard-chargers (99 All Stars or Andrea Doria) to wake to, softies (Cafe del Mar) to study by, inspirational bands (Snow Patrol or Nickelback) to exercise to, and mind-massaging performers (John Mayer or Radiohead) to help him drift off at night. He says simply, "I cannot go to sleep without music."

A freestyler on the Terrapins swim team, Cabrera packs his own tunes -- with the help of a waterproof device and headphones -- while practicing at the University of Maryland pool, which already has underwater speakers piping music to swimmers.

He listens to music of his own choosing while: eating, running, painting, pumping weights, driving. He listens to music while giving directions to someone on campus. He even listens to music in the classroom. "Like if it's a history course," he says, "I really could care less. The teacher is talking in a monotone. I turn it up. I put in one earbud and turn my head a little and the teacher can't tell."

All day, every day, Cabrera sets his waking hours to music. He is, in effect, creating the soundtrack of his life.

He is a musicholic and a classic creation of our time: the Era of the Ear, the Epoch of Omnipresent Song, this miraculous Age of Ubiquitous Music.

Surrounded by Sound
It's everywhere. There's no escaping it. Via broadcast and satellite radio and TV, an ever-expanding array of recording technologies -- such as CDs and MiniDiscs -- and the Internet, music has invaded the tiniest, quietest corners of our lives. You hear it in grocery stores, dentist's chairs, on TV commercials, whenever there's a lull in the action at sporting events, in bookstores, on the telephone while on hold, in the background while disc jockeys are talking, at restaurants and health clubs and gas stations.

We can hear the percussive *candombe* of Uruguay, the eerie throat-singing of Mongolia, raucous bush songs of the Australian outback, Gwen Stefani belting out "Hollaback Girl," or Mississippi John Hurt fingerpicking his blues guitar at any time, any place or any volume we choose.

Online music stores such as iTunes and Napster offer hundreds of thousands of songs for the downloading. Countless new bands spring up all the time, many producing tired music. Meanwhile, old bands refuse to fade away, reuniting ad nauseam for PBS concerts and producing more tired music. And TV music shows -- like "American Idol" -- spawn even more tired music.

But wait, there's more. Nascent and aggressive satellite radio companies advertise a whole new explosion of music possibilities. Sirius promises 65 channels of music; XM offers 67. Oakley's Thump sunglasses contain a tiny digital music player, and cell phones everywhere ring to the opening bars of "Stairway to Heaven."

Music is a luxurious necessity. "There has never been a human culture existing or extinct that has not had music," says Mark Tramo, a neuroscientist at Harvard Medical School who believes that music is a universal language.

Certain melodies inspire, arouse, invigorate. Others provoke, insult, infuriate. As we've learned from watching decades of movies and TV shows, effective music can move us to tears and to cheers. It pumps up the color and texture of reality; the mundane morphs into art. We subconsciously listen for resolution in music, the way we naturally yearn for color-wheel answers in paintings and solutions to well-written mysteries.

Music can be oh so social -- uniting us, family-like in a harmonious unbroken circle of fellowship. "We Are the World" comes to mind. Music can also be divisive, serving as a wedge between cultures or genders. The misogynist "Superman" by Eminem, for instance. Ever since the first Walkman appeared in 1979, social scientists have railed against the alienation caused by personal music devices. And other scientists have warned us of the inevitable deafness and cerebral distraction.

We consume music and music consumes us. We are caught in the middle of a musical war. Whole industries are built on dumping music upon us, while others allow us to choose the music we want to listen to. The armies can be divided into those that overpower and those that empower. It's a battle royal for our ears, our brains, our bank accounts. As a result, never before has there been so much music -- good, bad, harmonic, atonal -- available.

As composer Libby Larsen puts it, "Recording technology has made us all digital democrats." Music today is free-flowing, intoxicating, addictive, and it's no wonder that some people, like Cabrera, just can't get enough of it.

**Music on the Brain**

They are -- Cabrera and his ilk -- the musicholics: disengaged folks with small, sleek digital players in their hands or pockets who, to varying degrees, need music like they need oxygen. They carry CD players and MP3 gadgets. Many depend on Apple iPods: 10 million have been sold since the device was introduced in November 2001. And there are more and more portable satellite radios and music-playing cell phones showing up on store shelves every day to feed the musical habit.
They are people like:

· Demisha Camp, 21, in a T-shirt and bluejeans, strolling through the Fashion Centre at Pentagon City. She's on her way to a hair salon where she works as a shampooer. She's listening to Faith Evans on her CD player. "I have to work with music," she says. "I can't focus without music or sound."

· Marsha Guery, 20, on the Green Line headed toward Howard University, where she is a fashion merchandising major. She's communing with Amarie on her Sony MiniDisc player. She likes to have music on all the time. Her parents often say to her: Get that music out of your ears! You're not paying attention! But she likes the feel of the sound. "When I walk down the street," she says, "I'm in my own little world."

· A woman in silver slippers at a back table in the upper Georgetown Starbucks. She is studying for a science exam and listening to music on her compact disc player. She loves to listen to music while doing other things, she says. On the table, a paperback textbook lies open. There is a full-page diagram of the human brain.

So apropos. The music, the brain, Starbucks.

Music is arguably the quickest, most immediate mass cultural auger into the brain. Sound streams through the ears to the auditory cortex, which links directly to the limbic system, the emotional clearinghouse. In a fraction of a second, your hearing's job is already accomplished. Then the mind and imagination take over. The sound is reshaped into more abstract representations of music. It conjures up notions of pleasure and displeasure, of desire and dissatisfaction, of memory and long-lost tinglings.

Neurologist Richard Restak says this pinball effect in the brain explains music's transcendence and power. It can "evoke an extremely intense experience," he says.

Neuroscientist Tramo says the research suggests that "all of us are able to apprehend music, that we 'get it' and that we can be manipulated by it."

And this explains why neuro-marketers -- lab-coated people who study the sweat patterns and heart rates of consumers under various circumstances -- are deeply intrigued by music's effects and how they can be used to manipulate us by the rhythm of a piece, the rise and fall of its structure, certain chord changes.

**Sonic Sales Strategies**

One of the new-school companies on the edge of manipulation-by-music is also one of the old-school originators of the idea.

Muzak, a name synonymous with syrupy, go-nowhere elevator music, has reinvented itself to take advantage of music's useful ubiquity. As we sift through the ever-expanding global jukebox to put together the soundtracks of our lives, Muzak -- along with firms such as DMX and Audio Environments -- is only too happy to help.

From its founding in 1934, Muzak has nearly always been ahead of the curve -- technologically and psychologically -- and its history tracks the ever-widening wash of available music.

In 1937 a couple of British psychologists asserted that music increased worker efficiency, and the idea of using it to bring order into the chaotic noise of factory machines really took off. According to the corporate Web site, Muzak.com, "World War II resulted in great growth for Muzak. As the whole country geared up for production, Muzak took a leading role in work-related music. Time and again, industrial psychologists
found music improved morale, attendance and production." Soft Muzak was piped into offices and stores all across America.

In the late 1990s, Muzak reinvented itself into a New-Agey "experiential-branding" concern. The company shifted its focus from background music to foreground; all of a sudden the music wanted to be noticed, to work its influence on you, to implant "earworms" -- slang for musical phrases you can't get out of your head -- into the disc changer of your brain.

Today the South Carolina-based company has 3,000 employees and some 350,000 clients, including some abroad. About 100 million people undergo a Muzak attack every day. And Muzak pushes a high-concept plan called "Audio Architecture," which means that Muzak would like to help companies use the emotional power of music to sell more products.

Audio Architecture is emotion by design, says Muzak's director of corporate communications Sumter Cox. "We are all about the future," says Cox, "and really what our product does is create an experience. We are a branding company."

Nearly every retail shop, he explains, has a logo and a certain look. Muzak wants to put a musical face on the place. Muzak consultants sit down with companies like Applebee's and LensCrafters and listen to their ideas of what they want to communicate about their brand image. Do they want to be perceived as macho or feminine, young or old, country or urban? Muzak then selects a specialized music program that helps "tell" the company's "story" and, as a result, enhance the consumer experience. The song list for Red Lobster, for instance, contains music that "embraces customers and makes them feel cared for and loved." The Muzak playlist includes Marvin Gaye, Sade and Simply Red. For LensCrafters, Muzak found music that exudes "assurance and independence," such as that of Norah Jones and Sting.

Popeyes fried chicken franchises are pre-wired with zydeco and upbeat rock. In these joints you can hear a cheery-voiced singer singing, "You're paying now, but it's all right!"

For some companies, such as Old Navy, Muzak sets up each store's sound system -- Klipsch speakers, Bose amps, etc. The "energy flow," Sumter Cox says, "is supposed to be a smooth consistent experience." An automatic timer lowers the volume in the morning hours and cranks it up for the midday onslaughts.

At lunch hour, the Aeropostale shop in the Fashion Centre at Pentagon City is resonating. Very loudly. A chain of ultra-casual clothing stores, it is one of Muzak's customers. Patrons, mostly young women, flit in and out of the shop like sparrows. Through the speaker system, the British duo appropriately named Frou Frou sings a light, airy "Must Be Dreaming." Nearby there's disco music at Sephora. Hip-hop at Up Against the Wall. Rap music bursts out of a kiosk selling XM Satellite Radio subscriptions. More music rains down from overhead speakers in the corridors. Cacophony rules.

Starbucks, with a small shop in the food court, is hoping to provide more and more music for your personal soundtrack. The Seattle-based coffee company reported in late May that it had sold 21,000 copies of Antigone Rising's "From the Ground Up" in 12 days from 4,400 U.S. stores.

Some of the businesses not only have tunes playing overhead but specially packaged music for sale. Williams-Sonoma sells its own CDs -- in a wall bin near the cutlery -- including one to play while you're eating dinner. Victoria's Secret has a rack of "road trip" CDs on its checkout counter. The Godiva shop offers, no kidding, a $12.99 disc titled "Melt: Music to Eat Chocolate By."

An Island of Sound

There is far too much music in the world, the late composer Virgil Thomson wrote in London Magazine. "I
do not feel this because I get tired of musical sound itself. Musical sounds are always a pleasure. It is unmusical sounds masquerading as musical ones that wear you down, and the commercializing of musical distribution has given us a great many of these as a cross to bear. It has also given such currency to our classics that even these the mind grows weary of. Because though musical sound is ever a delight, musical meaning, like any other meaning, grows stale from being repeated."

He wrote that in 1962. Imagine how he would feel today in the halls of the Pentagon City mall.

Milan Kundera, author of "The Unbearable Lightness of Being," writes that public music today has become "a flood of everything jumbled together" so that we don't know who composed it or when it begins or ends. It is "sewage-water music in which music is dying."

Neurologist Restak is sometimes overwhelmed. He rails against bookstores, for instance, that play loud, incongruous music. "They'll have something on there by the Doors," he says. "I can't look at a book in that situation."

As for shopping in the supermarket to Beach Boys music, Restak says, "To me it's dissonant. There is an emotional disconnect, a physical disconnect."

Music is fire. It can be warm and comforting. Or it can spread fast and move dangerously through the landscape. The musicholics have learned to fight fire with fire.

At the Georgetown Starbucks, as the silver-slippered woman listens to a CD while studying the brain, she is apparently oblivious to another layer of music in the caffeinated air -- the misty sounds of Antigone Rising.

At the Greenbelt Atlanta Bread Company, musicholic Roberto Cabrera listens to the technopoppish Rasmus on his iPod as he waits for his lunch. Overhead Muzak's classical music plays.

And when he goes to a mall and shops at Abercrombie & Fitch or Urban Outfitters, where music can be bursting through giant speakers, shaking the room and pressing on the chest as the stores and the corporations and the philosophies infiltrate his ears and seek out the tiniest, quietest corners of his life -- he likes to wear his iPod.

That way he gets to listen to the music he wants to, while walking at the pace he wants to, while choosing the polo shirts and jeans he wants to buy. And, he says, there is added value: Salespeople leave him alone.

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