

The Father of Acoustic Ecology

A conversation with R. Murray Schafer. Originally published in the July-August 2005 issue of Utne Reader...

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interview by Anjula Razdan



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When it comes to listening more clearly, says R. Murray Schafer, society is in need of a big old Q-tip. “Our senses are clogged with too much,” Schafer says. He should know. The septuagenarian is a pre-eminent composer—when asked to name a great music teacher, John Cage answered, “Murray Schafer of Canada”—and writer who defined the field of “acoustic ecology” in his seminal 1977 text, *The Tuning of the World* (Knopf). More than a defensive tactic to fight noise pollution or block out sound, “acoustic ecology” seeks to accentuate—and revel in—the delicate balance between organisms and their sonic environment.

“If we become too dominant and too unobservant about the other sounds in the environment—the communications systems between birds and animals, for example—then we’re ruining the richness of our whole lives,” Schafer says.

Schafer recently spoke with *Utne* senior editor Anjula Razdan by phone about the lost art of listening and how we can pay attention to—and improve—our soundscape.

Are we really noisier today than in the past?

Complaints about noise go back to ancient Roman times. There are descriptions of vegetable carts arriving in Rome early in the morning, and some of the famous poets complain about them. One of the differences is that more and more people are living in cities, so there’s a congestion of sound that didn’t exist in the past for people who lived on farms or in small villages—those places were relatively quiet, except for the festival times, when people would get drunk and whoop it up. The types of sounds have changed too. A sound that does not exist in nature is a stationary sound, a drone.

What produces this drone?

Electricity, internal combustion engines, any sound that is continuous and present. There's no novelty, and you begin to get bored with these sounds because they're not telling you anything new. Cicadas or crickets might have produced a droning noise in ancient times, but it doesn't really compare. We have a lot more of those kinds of sounds than have ever existed before.

We also have louder sounds. Nothing in nature would be dangerous to your hearing. I tell my students that God was the first great acoustical engineer. He knew, or she knew, how to produce organisms so that the sounds of, say, thunder and lightning wouldn't do you any damage; it's a loud sound, but it happens infrequently, and you can listen to a sound of 100 decibels once in a while. But if you're listening to 100 decibels all day long, you're going to destroy your hearing. Humans produce the destructive sounds, and we use them as weapons too.

You mean the way the military uses psyops?

The Army is using them in Iraq. Before they go in and root out insurgents, they'll play heavy metal music for 24 hours at 150 decibels or more just to drive people crazy. Even in ancient times, armies used to make a lot of noise when they went into battle to frighten the enemy. They beat their swords against their shields and they chanted. It's been used all through history. Noise can frighten. Noise can destroy.

You've referred to cities as "sonic sewers." Why?

By "sonic sewer," I mean an overpopulation of sounds. Instead of a hi-fi soundscape—one in which everything is clear and you can hear all the different sounds, the soft ones as well as the loud ones—in the city you tend to get a low-frequency soundscape. There's just too much happening, and you can't sort out all the details: cars going by, the helicopter overhead, people shouting, music pouring out of a shop.

Another thing that's been lost in cities is what I call long-distance hearing. When you're in the city, practically everything you're listening to is within 10 feet; otherwise, it's going to be smothered by something that is within 10 feet.

In the past, distant sounds were important because they brought information. The postman blew a whole cycle of codes on his horn to tell you whether he was bringing express mail or local mail, whether he was bringing two passengers who wanted to get off for lunch, whether he wanted a change of horses. All that would be signaled ahead from several miles away.

More and more, with the rise of audio technology we are creating and controlling our own soundscapes. Is that a good thing?

People do try to create their own soundscapes. They just aren't doing it very sensitively or intelligently. But sounds in the modern environment increasingly are being owned by someone—they're made by people who have a copyright over that sound, for purposes of taking control of the soundscape. Some sounds, like the Harley-Davidson motorcycle sound, are being copyrighted.

You're kidding.

No. Harley-Davidson is saying that no other manufacturer will be able to make a sound that is similar. They've sued Honda because Honda was coming close to reproducing a Harley-Davidson motor sound.

What are some of the other major issues regarding sound?

The one that gets the most people angry and the most complaints is traffic noise. Surveys show that the number of people who call the police to complain about sound is much larger than the number of people who call to complain about crime, prostitution, or any other issue.

What does the frontier of noise activism look like?

The European Union has instituted some very stiff noise legislation. Public transportation—streetcars, trams, buses—is much quieter in Germany, Switzerland, France, Holland, and Scandinavia than in the United States. The limit for European-manufactured cars is 75 decibels, and the limit for North American cars is 85. European legislation is stronger, and they are enforcing it.

But we should not be concerned only about noise. The anti-noise societies tend to be just complaining about noise. What I'm more interested in, and what an organization like the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology is more interested in, is what we might call soundscape design.

How do you design a healthy soundscape?

First you decide who's going to live there and what kinds of sounds they would like to live with. The Japanese soundscape association decided to ask people to nominate the 100 most beautiful soundscapes in Japan. Thousands and thousands of people replied. They said, the way the waves hit a particular shell from a sea creature on a particular beach—it sounds very different from pebbles and sand, it's a unique sound.

The people from the association would then go and hear the sound and if they agreed, they would put it on the 100 most beautiful soundscapes in Japan. And so those places are protected. They're like heritage sites. If you wanted to put a cement factory next to one, you probably would have a great deal of difficulty. They're protecting the environment by using sound creatively—and consulting people. Pass it back to the people. I don't think people want a lot of noise. I think they're frightened to complain and say they would like it to be a bit quieter.

They're afraid to complain because of the power of what you call "sacred noise"?

Absolutely, sacred noise. Sacred noise is when you can make as much noise as you wish without being censured. It's a powerful organization within a society that can make a sacred noise. Churches in the Middle Ages could ring their bells day and night; that was the loudest sound in the city. Then, after the industrial revolution, factories could make as much noise as they wanted.

How do we step back and learn to listen?

I sometimes ask a class to stand up without making a single sound. If I hear a sound, they have to sit down and start again. You obviously can't do this quickly. They may spend 10 minutes trying to stand up quietly. The ambient noise level in the room drops suddenly, and all of them are

holding their breath and listening like crazy. We should be doing simple exercises like this with children, to get them to stop and listen.

You've staged many of your compositions in the natural world. Why?

In a simple environment—one that is not urban—you hear sounds from far away. In nature, you can use sound coming from the distance.

We perform a piece called *Princess of the Stars* at five o'clock in the morning, around and on a wilderness lake. The musicians are all around the lake; they could be half a mile from each other, and it's all done by ear. When I hear you play that note, then I play this note, and so forth. It's a very beautiful sound, and it blends with and stimulates the natural sounds. You hear the birds, and then I add flutes and clarinets playing to the birds; as any ornithologist will tell you, if you play or sing to the birds, they'll sing back. The flutes play bird calls, and the birds wake up fast when they hear their own calls. Some of the singers may be almost a mile away; the voices come across the lake, and it's so beautiful at a distance like that.

TELL ME MORE

World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (WFAE)

Founded in 1993, WFAE is an international group of individuals and organizations who study soundscapes around the world.

<http://interact.uoregon.edu/medialit/wfae/home/>
(<http://interact.uoregon.edu/medialit/wfae/home/>)

Acoustic Ecology Institute

The Web site of this New Mexico-based nonprofit offers a comprehensive look at the latest news and research from the world of acoustic ecology (including an updated list of Web sites that use sounds in interesting ways).

<http://www.acousticecology.org/> (<http://www.acousticecology.org/>)

Soundscape: The Journal of Acoustic Ecology

The professional journal of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, *Soundscape* offers thoughtful, intellectual takes on everything from ocean acoustics to audio technology to the importance of silence. <http://interact.uoregon.edu/medialit/wfae/journal/>

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