



The playlists of our lives

BY KATHRYN STORRING

Imagine telling a rebellious young Mick Jagger that by the new millennium, his music would be a soothing backdrop for grocery shoppers rummaging through a pile of cucumbers. Now, to be fair, it was "Angie" being piped into Zehrs that day. "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" probably wouldn't make the grade.

Still, it's just one intriguing example plucked from the music playlists that dance through our everyday lives, some carefully chosen by us, some carefully chosen by others.

Sometimes the latter playlists are obvious, like the pounding dance vibes of a cool club or the mellow melodies that coax restaurant diners to unwind and indulge.

Sometimes the overlay is so inconspicuous it can be difficult to spot. Take these examples from one day's listening this spring:

- A GoodLife gym in Kitchener eased early-morning patrons into the day's groove with the gentle rhythms of Rixton's "Me and My Broken Heart" — played at low volume.
- At Canadian Tire in Waterloo, the folk-inflected pop of OneRepublic's "Kids" was a

palatable choice for younger shoppers and baby boomers alike. Still, on this particular morning, the volume was just enough to take the edge off the vastness of the store. There was no chance a shopper would get caught up in the lyrics while comparing brands of food processors.

- At Vincenzo's, a quiet mix of light jazz blended with the busy buzz of foodies.
- A variety of playlists unfolded at Conestoga Mall. At the Bay, the music was barely above a melodic hum. (Paul Simon's "Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes" was a nice touch.) However, at H&M, music made a discernable style statement, energizing browsers with songs such as Hector Gachan's danceable "East West." Victoria Secret Pink embraced younger women with Sabrina Carpenter's "Smoke and Fire."

It's all just a matter of music services doing

what they do well, infiltrating our lives with tunes that put us at ease — or make us shop.

"In commercial situations, the last thing they really want you to do is to stop and actually listen to the music because then you are not shopping anymore," says John Brownell, a musician who also has a PhD in ethnomusicology.

Brownell, 63, explores the psychology and cultural impact of music in his university lectures, including at Conrad Grebel at the University of Waterloo. As a percussionist, he has played with the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony, the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra and the National Ballet of Canada Orchestra, among others.

Brownell says commercial playlists are not only tailored to the image the store wants to project, but also to the image shoppers might wish for themselves. Websites for commercial music services promote a dizzying list of channels, everything from "sunny oldies" to "chill electropop."

"The choices are very deliberate even though they don't sound deliberate," Brownell says.

Why does music hook us so deeply?

He says our responses can be studied on many levels, including Wilfrid Laurier University's music therapy program and the interdisciplinary research at Hamilton's McMaster Institute for Music and the Mind, which includes neural processing and perception of music. Culturally, music underpins everything, from social interactions to rituals.

"(Music) has a lot of functions that go way beyond simple enjoyment," he says. "Most people think of music — and all the arts in general — as an extra, but it's really not when you start looking at it more closely."

And what about the playlists we create for our own use?

Well, let's just say we've come a long way from the days of the gramophone. It's never been easier to indulge our personal music tastes. We can even let a computer algorithm define our interests for us or we can waltz into the past with a newfound passion for vinyl records.

We tend to think of personal playlists as a modern phenomenon, but Brownell suggests the concept is actually rooted in the 1950s. That's when a basic record player became affordable for a middle-class family. Thanks to 45s — small vinyl records played at 45 revolutions per minute, each with a single song per side — teenagers could collect fab radio tunes and play them with a personal spin.

There was one big difference from today — a teen's playlist was not private. At any moment, mom could drop by: "Turn that Elvis racket down!"

As the technology evolved, so did personal playlists. Soon music buffs could compile their own mixed tapes and then CDs.

But Brownell believes it was the Sony Walkman that really opened the door to the future. Introduced in 1979, this cassette-tape player not only made music portable but, thanks to headphones, listeners could tune into their favourite songs while tuning out the rest of the world.

"Everything since then is improving and making it easier and cheaper, and you can now have thousands of songs instead of just

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one cassette worth," Brownell notes. "But that is when music first became personal, and you created your own world of music."

Through an ethnomusicology lens, Brownell sees another side of that shift. In the past, music often had a social dynamic, whether through a concert, a dance, a religious ritual or even the music shared in his university dorm in the 1970s. Headphones and earbuds changed collective experiences into individual ones.

"Personally, I probably wouldn't be in the position I am in today if it wasn't for the random music listening that doesn't happen much anymore," he says. He gave the example of a youth music camp that introduced him to classical music.

And now listening habits have gone one step further. "If you allow an algorithm to choose (your music), it's based on what you already like."

Still, Brownell is quick to diffuse any judgment.

"It's easy to be the cranky old man and say,

'Oh, it was better when I was younger.' But I don't necessarily think that's true. It's just different."

It was 6 a.m. and Trish Benoit was heading out on a trail run. She was wearing Merino wool compression socks, trail shoes, lined tights, a down-filled running coat, a tuque and a headlamp. Did I mention that it was -26 C? And that she was starting an 80-kilometre race? And that portions of the looped route had almost a metre of snow?

Most of us would need more than music to distract us from this January adventure, the Yankee Springs Winter Challenge in Middleville, Mich. But Benoit, 40, had her trusty iPhone — protected in a plastic bag — tucked into a pocket in her running bra. She met her husband, Jeff, when he instructed her swing-dancing class when she was 28.

But life hasn't been without challenges. In her late teens, for example, she abandoned figure skating and an early interest in cross-country running for a "not-so-good path with not-so-good people." She even dropped out of school.

"When I was 23 or 24, I was like: What

runners on the rugged trail behind her.

Clearly there's power in her music. With a time of 11 hours, nine minutes and 35 seconds, this Waterloo resident placed first among female racers and second overall.

Benoit, a social worker who co-ordinates mental health and addiction programs for the Waterloo Wellington Local Health Integration Network, says music has always been important to her. "I've always joked that I am the most musical person who cannot play an instrument."

And music has long fit neatly into her sports endeavours, including competitive figure skating from age nine to 16. She met her husband, Jeff, when he instructed her swing-dancing class when she was 28.

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In her late teens, for example, she abandoned figure skating and an early interest in cross-country running for a "not-so-good path with not-so-good people." She even dropped out of school.

"When I was 23 or 24, I was like: What

do I really want to do? Do I want to keep living this really negative life that I am living or do I want to be happy in life — do I want to feel good about myself?"

Benoit chose the latter. She finished high school as a mature student, an accomplishment that eventually paved the way to a master's in social work.

She took up running to help beat smoking, reasoning that "if I ran, I wouldn't smoke because it would negate the running I had just done."

Battling smokers' lungs and 40 extra pounds, she started slowly, only managing about 500 metres on that first run. "It was a really rude awakening to me because I was a very good athlete when I was a teenager," she says.

As her fitness improved, Benoit signed up for the 5K run in the Guelph Thanksgiving Day Races. Pleased with her performance, she signed up for other 5K and 10K races.

Things were going well until she blew out her iliotibial band, the ligament that

runs down the outside of the thigh. She stopped running for two years, learning a hard lesson about the importance of cross-training to build muscle strength and prevent injury.

After January's endurance race in Michigan, she hit the streets in April for the Boston Marathon, staring down frigid temperatures, heavy rain and high winds. The marathon (26.2 miles or about 42 kilometres) was on her bucket list despite her new interest in trail running, so there was no holding her back.

"This is going to be wet and this is going to be cold," she recalls thinking before the run. "If there's any day that I need this music, it's going to be this day."

Despite the conditions, she finished in three hours and 34 minutes, shaving four minutes off her personal best for marathons.

How does music fit into all of this? Playlists have a strategic role in Benoit's training and racing, with different choices

for different needs.

"I know songs that get me revved up and in the right kind of place, and I know my cadence," she says.

So, for 5K or 10K races, she chooses songs at about 180 beats per minute. For marathons, the playlist mixes some of the latter with songs about 160 to 170 beats, encouraging a steady pace.

"I like rock more when I am on the trails, whereas I like electronic dance music when I am doing quick runs because it has that faster cadence."

The song "Turbulence" by Steve Aoki and Laidback Luke is a favourite for fast runs because of the way it peaks, plateaus and builds. Her favourite marathon song is "Titanium" by David Guetta.

Specific playlists are reserved just for race day, with "shuffle" giving her selections an added element of surprise and pleasure.

Training is different. In fact, she sometimes picks one band for a training mix — the Foo Fighters, for example. If

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she needs a steady, quick pace, she might just put Darude's "Sandstorm" on repeat — especially for her infrequent bouts on a treadmill.

"I hate treadmill running, so when I am on a treadmill, the music I listen to is very essential. . . . There is nothing else when you are on a treadmill except the music you listen to."

Through everything, whether training six days a week for a single race of 100 miles (160 kilometres) or for RunWaterloo EndurRun that covers 160 kilometres over eight days in August, there will be music. "It's very rare that you see a race picture of me without headphones in," Benoit says.

When concert presenter Isabel Cisterna Pino was a teenager, the wrong music playlist could get you arrested — or worse.

Such was life in Chile under the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet. Cisterna Pino says authorities were fine with western

music, as long as it was bubbly pop. Chilean folk music was another matter, reviled for its messages of solidarity and justice. Victor Jara, a singer-songwriter and theatre director, was among those brutally tortured and killed in the early days of Pinochet's reign in 1979.

These days, you might hear "subversive" music playing in Kultrún Market, the artisan shop Cisterna Pino, now 45, operates in Waterloo. Bands such as Inti-Illimani and Quilapayún have also played locally through Neruda Arts, the concert series Cisterna Pino launched in 2001. To western ears, it's hard to believe this heartfelt, infectious folk music could instil hatred in the mind of a dictator.

Cisterna Pino knows otherwise. "I have a very visceral association with that music — the excitement, thrill and also fear," she says. "It's something that transports you. But I have no formula."

But Cisterna Pino does hope Neruda has expanded Canadians' understanding of the world from when she arrived here at age 18.

unpredictability of everyday life heightened her sense of being alive.

"I listen to it now with nostalgia," she says. "It's not that I long for the hard days, but I long for the meaning of it. One of the things that becomes harder and harder over the years is to feel that very strong connection, where music can make you feel so passionate about something."

But that doesn't mean she's stopped searching — and audiences at Neruda concerts and her Kultrún World Music Festival in Kitchener's Victoria Park can be grateful for that. These concerts showcase music from many countries or cultures, from Chile to Brazil and from Benin to Indonesia.

"I like music that sparks some kind of emotion — happy, sad, nostalgic," she says. "It's something that transports you. But I have no formula."

Given Cisterna Pino's background, it's probably no surprise that some of the concerts come with a cause. This July's Kultrún festival marks the #MeToo movement with a strong female presence. Morena Son, featuring seven female singers from Santiago de Cuba, will pump up the opening gala. The free stages will

"One of the things that bothered me at the time was the infantilization and exoticification of music from around the world," she says. "People thought Mexican music meant mariachi. People thought that I'm Latin therefore I should dance salsa and love the tango or whatever."

"There are so many more layers to what people thought."

Some of those layers lie within Canada where cultures collide and fuse — Sonido Pesao, a "Latin urban/ Latin rap band" from Montreal; Sina Bathaei of Toronto, who combines Persian melodies with western instrumentation; or Elsa Jayne, a First Nations singer-songwriter from Kitchener.

A deep bond with music might seem counter to his professional life. Legge, who has a degree in nanotechnology from the University of Waterloo, is product manager for Thalmic Labs, a Kitchener company making waves in the wearable technology world. But when he is at his desk, the headphones are on, and musicians such as

include Eliana Cuevas, an award-winning performer from Toronto, whose latest album showcases Afro-Venezuelan rhythms.

It's all part of what Cisterna Pino sees as a continuing role for world music in promoting social change while also luring people out of their taste compartments to mingle and engage — and expand their music playlists.

Sam Legge can't imagine a day without music.

Most people I know would never leave their home for work, never mind go on a trip, without having their headphones with them to listen to music," says Legge, 29.

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Explosions in the Sky and Tycho help get him in the zone.

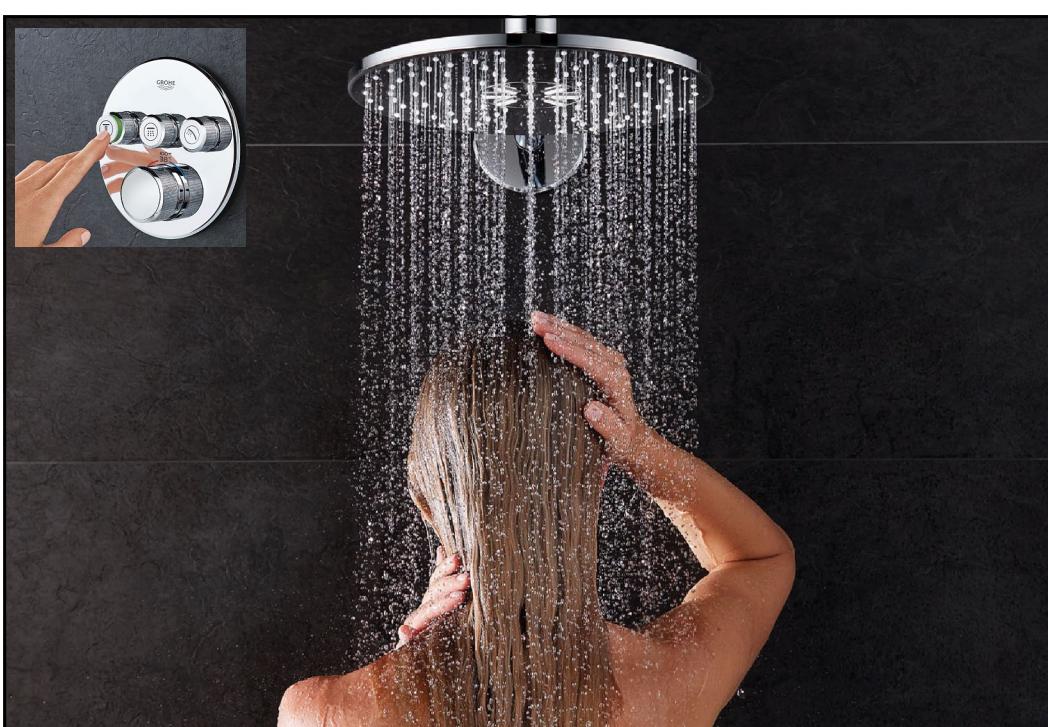
Music-streaming services from places such as Spotify, Apple and Amazon make it easy. As part of a generation that has been tech-friendly since childhood, Legge's leap from gadgets such as iPods to apps was a given.

"I can have a library of anything and everything available to me at all times, like never before," Legge notes. "What that drives is just people listening to more music because it is easier to do it."

Legge points out that "virtual assistants," such as Amazon's Alexa, also help push music to the forefront — a home cook can choose a playlist without leaving the stove. Music will also be part of the tech world's development of "hearables" — electronic in-ear devices.

But Legge says it's not just the technology that has changed, but the approach to music itself. In the past, a listener would relate to an artist, an album or a genre.

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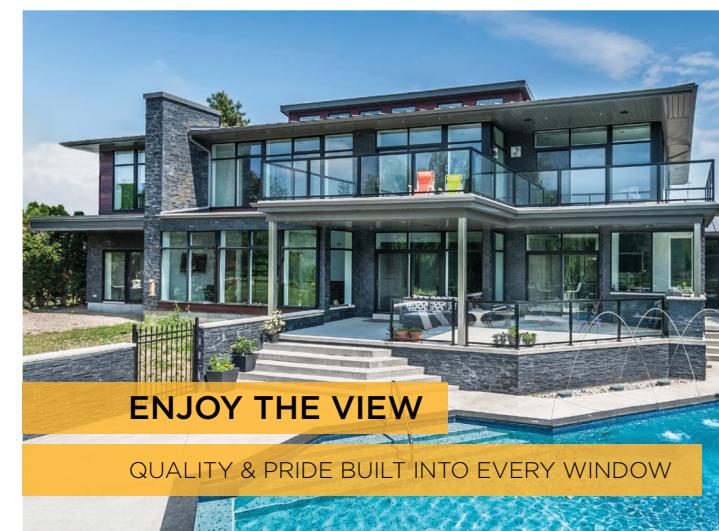
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3 Questions: Playlists of their lives

1 What was your first memorable music acquisition or gift?

2 What is your favourite music for relaxing at home?

3 Name an artist or song that you never thought you'd listen to but now love.

JOHN BROWNELL

Percussionist and ethnomusicologist



1 "My first musical acquisition I remember very clearly — 'Beatles VI.' I was 10 years old. I still have almost every recording I have ever owned — but I don't have that one. I played it so much you could almost hear both sides of the album at the same time."

2 "Music for Airports" by Brian Eno — music that is meant to be in the background. "It's actually quite beautiful if you do listen closely to it, but you can also just let it float along."

3 "This question is easy. As a serious student of music (though not necessarily a student of 'serious' music) in the 1970s and '80s, I was completely uninterested in punk. It seemed to me to completely reject everything that I valued in music (artistry, technical accomplishment, complexity, etc.). As I came to better understand the power of music as a social expression, I also came to appreciate (and, in fact, like) the disruptive energy of punk (especially the Ramones) a lot more."

TRISH BENOIT

Social worker and dedicated runner, including marathons and ultra trail races



1 Joan Jett and the Blackhearts on cassette tape. "That was the first one I owned, that was physically mine. That song 'I Love Rock 'n' Roll?' I loved that when I was a kid!" Benoit says Meat Loaf's "Bat out of Hell" was also an early favourite because her mom had the 8-track tape.

2 "I am a blues girl." Benoit especially likes her husband Jeff's great "bluesy slow mix" with everything from B.B. King to Ruthie Foster.

3 "Marianas Trench is very angst-ridden teen punk music and it's totally not my deal, so that one kind of surprised me that I totally liked it." In fact, this artist is on Benoit's training and race playlists.

ISABEL CISTERNA PINO

Founder of Neruda and Kultrún World Music Festival, nerudaarts.ca



1 "When I lived in Chile, we didn't have any money to buy anything other than the basics, so the best day of my short life was when my brother surprised me for my 10th birthday with a vinyl of Earth, Wind & Fire. I will never forget that day. I was

still in bed, sharing my room with my sister, when he brought it. I jumped on the bed, smelled it and then proceeded to dance in silence because everyone else was still sleeping."

2 "I listen to all kinds of music and, depending on my mood, I choose my playlists. When I want to feel close to my mom, I listen to Frank Sinatra or Astor Piazzolla (tango). If I listen to Kool and the Gang or Earth, Wind & Fire, I immediately crave to see my brother, Adolfo, as his memory is attached to those bands. If I need inspiration, I always go back to Enya. The rest of the time I listen to world music because every sound makes me feel connected to other people and cultures and, in my mind, I can travel wherever I want to go."

3 "Since watching the movie 'Coco,' I find myself singing along with all the very traditional Mexican folk songs. The rhythm of son jarocho is on my mind all day long. The song 'La Llorona' is my son Joaquin's (age 1½) favourite song too!"

SAM LEGGE

Product manager for Thalmic Labs and occasional DJ



1 Smashmouth's "Astro Lounge" (CD) at about age 11. "I don't think I've ever listened to one CD on repeat so much since."

2 Tycho, Explosions in the Sky, Bonobo, Gramatik. "I like to throw on a

combination of these artists and ones similar to them whenever I'm trying to decompress or relax on my own."

3 July Talk. "The band's sound is very different and therefore I never quite understood the appeal until, by chance, I saw them live. After seeing them live, their music and vibe makes so much more sense to me and I'm a big fan now."

music, from my perspective, is: What mood am I in? Am I studying? Am I working? Am I going to the gym? Am I in a quiet mode?"

The individual — and certainly the music-streaming services — will have a playlist of songs to fit the mood of the moment.

For Legge, this trend feeds into his sideline as a DJ, curating theme-based playlists for friends' weddings or for events at places such as Communitech. It helps that he enjoys all sorts of music, but he believes streaming services' endless possibilities and suggested playlists help push musical boundaries for others as well.

"People are not stuck to a genre," Legge notes. "You don't have punk people any more, you don't have rock 'n' roll people any more. You have people who have a very broad spectrum of interests because of Spotify and how it works."

Still, this abundance of choice can lead to missed opportunities.

"I get upset with people who listen to a lot of music but don't spend the time to dig through and find the stuff that is really special to them," Legge says. "It is such an art form that requires some attention ... to really find what really makes you feel something versus what's fun to sing along to."

And what does music mean to him?

"I think there is definitely some sense of comfort with it just because I have grown up with so much music around me at all times," he says.

It's part of what still lures him and his friends to concerts on a regular basis.

"When I really listen to something that is (special) to me there's definitely a lot of meaning tied to it, whether it was the time I saw that person play, or it's the stories that go along with that music, or it's when that playlist was played and we had a lot of fun with it."

"Obviously not all music means something deep to me, but there's definitely a select group of things that when I listen to it, it definitely evokes a certain something in me."

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