



Sound affects

WE'RE BOMBARDED BY NOISE, BUT WE'VE FORGOTTEN HOW TO LISTEN. SWITCH ON YOUR EARS AND GO IN SEARCH OF SOUND FOR A MINDFUL DAY OUT, SAYS CLARE GOGERTY





"Seek out places where noises are likely to be relaxing or energising"

For those of us who live in a bustling and thriving city, ignoring the cacophony of sound that engulfs us daily can feel like a matter of survival. Too much subjection to traffic noise, pneumatic drills and restaurants and bars where you have to shout to be heard, can be exhausting and wearisome. Noise is a nuisance – something to be ignored or drowned out with a pair of headphones and a podcast.

Or so I thought until I came across the work of 'urban phonographer' Ian Rawes. Rather than rail against the city clamour, he has made listening to the streets of London an art. A few plays of his recordings on the London Sound Survey website (soundsurvey.org.uk) and my ears were pricked. There I heard the clatter and chat in a greasy spoon, the 'mind the gap' announcement on the Underground, car sirens, and market traders. They evoked the places and people of London and transported me there in a trice.

My next city walk took me along London's South Bank. I 'switched' my ears on and imagined I was making a recording like Ian Rawes. Instead of being overwhelmed (and annoyed) by a scramble of noise, I concentrated on one sound at a time and walked slowly and deliberately. A rich variety of sounds started to

reveal itself. I listened to the rattle and screech of the skateboarders by the Royal Festival Hall; the squawk of a gull circling above the Thames; the slosh of the river as it washed ashore; the chatter of a group of Japanese girls enjoying ice-creams. Instead of battling with the bombardment of confusing sounds, it was good to give my brain a rest and focus on one enriching thing.

Elsewhere, the phenomenon of Classic Album Sundays (classicalbumsundays.com), where a single LP is played in its entirety to a room full of silent people, are growing in popularity, with regular events around the country. DJ Ben Gomori's Pitchblack Playback events (pitchblackplayback.com) feature hour-long mix-tapes played on a high-quality sound system to an audience sitting in the dark. These immersive gatherings are part of the growth of the 'deep listening' movement. Spearheaded in the 1980s by sound art pioneer Pauline Oliveros, who created, among other things, 25 sonic meditations for a women's group who met in silence, deep listening is a way to notice and enjoy your immediate surroundings more, and also to reap the psychological benefits that they can give.

You can do it anywhere and at any time, you just need your ears. Once you are alert to the sounds that surround you, a different experience awaits. Seek out »



"Birdsong creates a state where the body relaxes and the mind is alert"

places where the noises are likely to be relaxing or energising, and a meditative and mindful experience is there for the taking. That's the power of sound: it can affect your emotions and your mood immediately and without explanation.

A LITTLE BIRD TOLD ME

Unlike many man-made sounds, birdsong is 'stochastic' – made up of lots of random notes that cannot be predicted. Unlike the dreaded ear worm, there are no repeating patterns to focus on and it doesn't get stuck in your head for eternity. This creates a state where the body relaxes and the mind is alert. Listening to birdsong is also, of course, an uplifting and transporting thing to do, and as bird populations are on the decline, it's truly one of nature's most precious and valued sounds. Fortunately, there are still plenty of places where birds gather in noisy communication. Head to an RSPB reserve (rspb.org.uk) when migrating birds return in spring for maximum birdsong opportunities. The National Trust website (nationaltrust.org.uk) also has a helpful guide to places where you can hear birdsong. Folk singer Sam Lee is running his 'Singing with Nightingales' events from April to May: after

songs around the campfire, you can step into the woods to listen to these magical birds in full song (singingwithnightingales.com). And International Dawn Chorus Day, on Sunday 3 May, sees people gathering at dawn to listen to the birds as they greet the rising sun (wildlifetrusts.org).

LISTEN TO THE OCEAN

Lying on a beach in the warm sun listening to the surf gently lap ashore is almost guaranteed to send even the most bedevilled insomniac to sleep. Waves travel at a cycle of roughly 12 per minute – approximately the frequency of a sleeping human's breathing. This could account for the soporific impact of listening to the ocean, and why so many recordings of waves are marketed as sleeping aids. (Try 'Ocean: Pure Nature Sounds', which includes the evocative squawk of gulls.) The sound of pebbles being rhythmically shifted about by waves on a shingle beach is equally calming: the ebb and flow is said to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which slows us down and allows us to feel much more engaged and relaxed. For a more thrilling and energising experience, head to the coast in February, when the seas are at their stormiest, and »

**Become a field recorder**

One way to listen more closely to your surroundings is to record it with a recording app – your ears will prick up, alert to the noises that surround you. Filed away, then played back later, these recordings are a valuable record of what you experienced on that day. For more inspiration, check out the Sound Archives at the British Library (sounds.bl.uk), which include soundscapes of thunderstorms, lighthouse foghorns, falling rain and the croaks of a thousand frogs. Alternatively, podcast 'Field Notes' (@thisisfieldnotes) is a weekly recording of sounds found in a specific spot in nature.

A voice in the ear

Audio commentaries to accompany you as you walk:

The St Magnus Way: an app to accompany walkers along a pilgrimage route in Orkney, Scotland; see 'Advice for Pilgrims' at stmagnusway.com.
Talking statues: voiced by actors and activated by a smartphone, the people behind the statues are brought to audio life. Listen to Alan Turing and LS Lowry in Manchester; an owl, a lion and a hound in Leeds; and James Joyce and Oscar Wilde in Dublin; talkingstatues.co.uk.
Buzzard Trails app: the story of Leighton-Linslade narrated at different locations. leightonlinslade-tc.gov.uk/buzzard-trails
Chester's talking walls: swipe a plaque with a smartphone and the walls of cathedrals, restaurants, music venues and shops tell you their stories; talkingwallschester.co.uk.
In the footsteps of Jane Austen: walk around Bath while listening to extracts from her novels; visitbath.co.uk.





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listen to the boom of the distant ocean and the crash of tumultuous waves pounding onto a rocky shoreline.

WEATHER REPORT

The sound of rain pattering on a roof when you are safely installed somewhere warm and dry is one of winter's more satisfying experiences. Rather than moaning about the downpour, paying attention to the rhythms of rainfall, whether it falls on a caravan roof, a bus shelter, against a window, or dropping through trees, can be a calming and meditative experience. Similarly, find a snug café to shelter in as a storm builds, then concentrate on the sounds it brings, from the ominous rustle of the wind in the trees, the pelting rain that follows to the thunderclap finale. For inspiration, listen to sound recordist Chris Watson's 'Storm', a collage of sounds recorded with BJ Nilsen in 2000 as a storm front crossed the North Sea, or his 'Ocean Soundscape' played on the main stage at Glastonbury in 2019, prior to David Attenborough's iconic address.

HEAR THE LAND

Set off on a country walk and, rather than charge through fields and over stiles, be quiet and focus on what you hear. Silent walks and walking meditations

reveal easily ignored sounds, from the crackle of twigs beneath your feet, to the susurrant of trees as a breeze blows past, to the hoot of a distant owl. Sound artists We're All Bats (wereallbats.co.uk) organises land listening walks in various environments around East London, including Waltham Forest, with the aim of switching on participants' awareness to the sounds that surround us. Bring along a stethoscope and, in early spring, you can even hear the sap gurgling as it rises – choose a tree that is at least 15cm in diameter with smooth, thin bark: birch, beech and cherry are good.

GOING FOR A GONG

Gong baths offer a rare opportunity, to lie down, wrap yourself in a blanket, and be enveloped in a cocoon of sound. Once thought of as esoteric or eccentric, they are now becoming more mainstream and provide an escape from the commotion of modern life. The Facebook group 'Find a Gong Bath' will point you to one near you. Sounds range from the loud and thunderous, to delicate and tinkling, sonorous and booming. Layers of noise build in waves, then vanish. At times it feels like floating in the ocean or sinking softly into the earth. It is a chance to tune in to sounds unheard elsewhere, that have a calming and moving resonance. S