

The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want, A Book about Noise

Garret Keizer

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Garret Keizer's first sentence gave me confidence that I was starting a book that would not be a straight polemic about the evils of noise and the wonders of quiet: "Noise is not the most important problem in the world." And so it is not, but with Garret's relentless research into history, countless interviews with the makers, receivers and analyzers of noise, and synthesis of all, noise provides a window on culture, politics, power and weakness. He goes on that noise is a "weak" issue in that it affects the weak, and if you complain about it, you're often considered weak—a "complainer" who can't deal with the way the world works. But, he warns, "...be wary of drawing pat moral analogies between noise and evil, quiet and good." Ted Bundy was a "quiet and helpful tenant."

Well, that last is a bit extreme, perhaps, but Garret throws out zingers from time to time and made me think—a lot. In considering America's influence on other cultures, has it ever occurred to you that a "...culture attempting to imitate America rarely grows quieter?" And every few pages, I found myself stopping to reflect on a linkage he'd just made. But don't pigeon-hole Garret; he admits he loves midtown Manhattan, his chain saw, and the Rolling Stones.

I suspect a lot of us are like Garret. We love our appliances, but want to get away from them once in a while. Which leads to a sad truth that he raises in many ways: the poor and disadvantaged of the modern (industrialized or industrializing) world can't get away from the noise. My wife and I lived briefly in a rather noisy suburban apartment complex, but we could get away on weekends to the pastoral quiet of York County, PA. I can imagine there are many people living in tight quarters where the noise never stops, and there's no going up the country for a quiet vacation.

Garret spends Part I of his book defining noise, how it can be both easy and hard to define. It may be unwanted sound, but unwanted by whom? Judgments of what constitutes noise may be subjective, but not always. There's nothing subjective about noise produced permanent hearing loss, but what about the fact that in some locations people report the new wind turbines are making homes unlivable despite producing only very low sound levels. Is their reaction subjective or objec-

tive? I bet you just thought, "Come on, those people are just complaining because they don't like the way the turbines look or they don't like the way the turbines were forced on them," or something similar. Are you really sure? Let me offer you a house for sale in Mars Hill, Maine (see Chapter 8, page 224). Noises can be new, noises can be old, and noise can lack meaning or be full of meaning. Noise can be the sound of power (Hitler needed the loudspeaker), or revolt ("If I had a hammer"), or joy, and much more.

Part II is a history of sound and noise. Noise as we think of it existed before urbanization. "Native Americans...were known never to make camp near fast-running water, which would have masked the sound of approaching enemies." Garret defines neighbor, as in "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" as anyone who lives within earshot. And the "...first rule of neighborhood is...doing unto your ears as I would have done unto mine..." which still is a part of discussions of noise and civility. Garret continues his discussion through the "Epic of Gilgamesh," Rome, warfare, religious rites and traditions, the industrial age and the present—"If necessity is the mother of invention, invention has proved to be a very fertile mother of noise."

Part III provides a broad perspective, relates noise and culture and, unexpectedly perhaps, noise and sustainability. On the cultural side, Garret visits and reflects on Sturgis (you know, where all Harley riders go once a year); the adjacent Bear Butte, sacred to more than thirty Native American tribes; the National Park Service's Natural Sounds Program office and the continuing twenty-three year dispute over air tours above the Grand Canyon. He reflects on how both John Coltrane and Bob Dylan lost fans when they transformed their music to what some considered noise. Garret admits, however, that there may be more potential music in Loud America's craziness than he's willing to admit. In fact, he couldn't resist the opportunity afforded him in Sturgis of paying thirty bucks for the privilege of firing an AK-47.

Having spent almost 40 years thinking about noise, its effects on people and looking for ways to help keep people and noise from conflict, I must say that Garret hasn't missed a trick, and has added perspectives and interconnections new to me. Quite a read.

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