Dallas was hazy and damp on that particular evening in October. As I stood in a crowded, smoky club, impatiently waiting for the headlining band to take the stage, something about the atmosphere piqued my interest—something in the air, something exceptional. Beneath the clanks and clatter, the voices and laughter, the most fascinating and intricately raw music I had ever heard trickled out of the house speakers at a low volume. The foreign-sounding music eventually engulfed the room with vibrant, disorienting energy. When the band finally began their set, I found myself yearning for the otherworldly recorded music instead. After the show, the band’s sound technician informed me that Can, an experimental krautrock collective from Germany, was responsible for the mesmerizing sounds. Their music effortlessly blends and distorts whispers, enigmatic guitar lines, mechanical bleeps, looped sound recordings, fuzzy drums, and impassioned vocals. Blurry song structures and embedded noises seamlessly connect Can’s sonic ideas into one continuous experiment in sound, free of the organizational constraints of traditional music.

Traditional music typically utilizes well-known instruments and combinations of instruments, similar song structures, and pure, soothing voices. Musically and intellectually distinct from the formulaic, manufactured three-minute pop songs that we all know, Can’s music challenged and revolutionized the way I listen to music and hear noise in music. Can made me realize that the terms “noise” and “music” are highly subjective and interchangeable.

Can’s music isn’t noise itself, but it might strike the listener as a fitting analogy for noise. Just as Can’s music doesn’t comply with common compositional practices, noise doesn’t conform to society’s expectations of and preferences for sound: pleasant, common, and accessible sounds. These “acceptable” sounds create one’s aural comfort zone, where the variety of sounds is limited to the familiar. Every person’s aural comfort zone is unique because every individual has distinctive levels of experience, expectation, enthusiasm, and patience regarding sound. To some extent, noise always violates the average person’s aural comfort zone, and it is the fear of this disturbance—this intrusion of the unfamiliar—that prevents us from embracing the potential of noise and expanding our aural comfort zones. By staying within our predetermined boundaries, we rob ourselves of new insights. Noise is not only an enormous element of what we hear, it is also one of the primary yet most overlooked contributors to our thought process. Experiencing an unfamiliar sensory sensation is the only way to expand our thoughts, because everything we think about comes from something we saw, tasted, smelt, touched, or heard. At the opposite end of the sonic spectrum, music can also be a significant thought-inducer. When noises infiltrate music, as exhibited in Can’s inspired and raw recordings, the sounds become a striking representation of life itself—mimick-
ing the blissful unpredictability of our existence, in contrast to the predictable complacency delivered by the average pop song. Because noise impacts the way we think and keeps us grounded in reality, it should not be avoided. Noises, especially in music, offer a unique opportunity to see things from a fresh perspective and wake our ears and minds to the psychological benefits of a life in constant aural fluctuation.

Wherever sound is found, there is noise. According to Torben Sangild, author of *The Aesthetics of Noise*, “Noises are sounds that are impure and irregular, neither tones nor rhythm—roaring, pealing, blurry sounds with a lot of simultaneous frequencies, as opposed to a rounded sound with a basic frequency and its related overtones.” This is an eloquent technical definition of noise, but it fails to define the circumambience of noise in our lives, the way noise—those rogue sounds that rarely concede to society’s aural comfort zone—surrounds us on every street, in every classroom, and in every home. In this sense, noise is more of an atmosphere than a sound—more of a constant environment than a random tap on our eardrums. To most people, this atmosphere created by noise is unpleasant; it often alienates and irritates everyday listeners.

Unfortunately, the unpleasant characteristics of noise are usually the only ones acknowledged. According to Dr. Karin Bijsterveld, academic director for the Netherlands Graduate School of Science, Technology and Modern Culture, in the early 1900s, numerous anti-noise campaigns emerged around the country, arguing that since “the ear, unlike the eye, had no natural defense, the law should recognize and more precisely protect the right to silence in one’s own dwelling—by transforming certain noises into penal offenses.” Bijsterveld contends that the dominant philosophy of the early twentieth century consisted of the idea that "noise meant chaos, silence meant order, and rhythm meant control.” As technology advanced, noise was a byproduct of the technological advances, and noise abatement campaigns aimed to minimize the chaotic disruption of jarring noise. Noise “was not merely seen as ‘primitive’ but also as ‘inefficient’” (Bijsterveld). People considered noise a hindrance to personal thought—aural pan démônium that should be avoided. Nineteenth-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer resented noise (particularly that of a cracking whip) for distracting him from his philosophical work:

> [Whip-cracking makes] a peaceful life impossible; it puts an end to all quiet thought … No one with anything like an idea in his head can avoid a feeling of actual pain at this sudden, sharp crack, which paralyzes the brain, rends the thread of reflection, and murders thought. (qtd in Bijsterveld)

Schopenhauer’s vulnerability to the sound of a whip might seem quaint to us today, where the sound of a cracking whip, though sudden, is nothing compared to the deafening roar of a jumbo jet or a crowded city. Over the years, humans have had to adapt to noise; our threshold for disruptive sounds increases in proportion to the new noises created by contemporary culture. Though modern society’s definition of noise has grown less strict, the social bias towards noise lingers today. A study conducted in Spain found that urban households would be willing to pay about 4 euros per decibel per year for noise reduction if such a program were devised and instituted. Maybe those surveyed believe a reduction in noise would translate to an increase in concentration and productivity. Though noise might temporarily slow down or disable cerebral activity, over time it *does not* prevent thought. Rather, it challenges the way we currently think and prevents us from living in a trance of comfortable, agreeable sounds in our aural comfort zone.
How noisy is the world we live in today, and how do these noises affect us? Authors Thomas J. McCarthy and Jan Koenen both warn that noise disconnects us from ourselves. McCarthy, regular contributor to *America: the National Catholic Weekly*, explores the different effects of what he labels natural sounds and commercial, technological noise have on our psyches in his article “The Culture of Noise.” He asserts that in the wilderness “the sounds carried no message; the beauty was not an image produced for consumption but, like thunder or blisters or dung, a brute fact of nature,” whereas the background noise in “a world hyper-designed to make [us] feel ‘connected’...impoverishes rather than enriches human experience” (McCarthy). For McCarthy, the pure, noiseless sounds of nature provoke no thoughts, instead cradling him in his aural comfort zone. Koenen, author of “A Starbucks State of Mind,” finds herself uncomfortably coddled by the “noise” of programmed background music. She hates when music “is played to divorce us from ourselves,” serving as “the constant slosh and trickle of background noise.” Programmed music at Starbucks, Koenen argues, contributes to a swirling whirlpool of consumerism, directing all thoughts inward towards the chief goal of purchasing a scone or latte. The music at Starbucks disgusts Koenen with its ability to seduce its listeners into a state of thoughtlessness, or rather a state of narrow, consumption-driven thought. She says herself that “meditation begins in the swirl of thought,” and for Koenen, it’s not that noise prevents thought, but that it instills a limited range of thought. However, could it be this noise that Koenen so fervently denounces is actually the fountainhead for her meditation?

Though McCarthy and Koenen argue that noises numb our thought processes, they neglect to make a distinction between noise serving to *limit* thought and noise that *distracts us* from narrow thought. Noise will distract us and it isn’t really noise if it doesn’t. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the definition of noise is “any sound that is undesired or interferes with one’s hearing of something.” No one can deny that noises will interfere with our aural surroundings. But the inability to accept the challenge of noise’s distraction and search for cognitive inspiration within that distraction is what prevents humans from ever truly connecting to this noisy culture. I made

Measured quantum noise of three coherent states
the mistake of typing this essay in a crowded study lounge. Chatter, slurps, thuds, laughter, and sneezes permeated the stillness of my thought environment. I masked the noise for a while with my iPod. Manufactured pop music shot up through my headphones, replacing the random noises with handclaps and slick harmonies. I hoped the distracting sounds would disappear so I could concentrate. However, after an hour of absent thoughts I wondered if my attitude towards the noise was inappropriate. I took off the headphones and after adjusting to the noises, the ideas began to flow. I was shocked that noise of the study lounge was more productive for me than the music I attempted to cradle myself in. But I shouldn’t have been so surprised. The study lounge was thick with the same vibrant, disorienting energy I felt at the club in Dallas—an energy created by the inspiring sounds of random noise. The same energy that challenged the way I listen to music challenged me to think from different angles as I wrote this essay. Through impure frequencies and irregular patterns, noise provides aural counterarguments to acceptable sound, possibly sparking counterarguments in our basic trains of thought at the same time.

Sundry noise does have the potential to evoke thought and challenge the boundaries of our aural comfort zones, yet most people prefer to carve out places to think by listening to silence and music over getting to know their natural auditory environment. Both silence and music are temporary vacations from reality. To Koenen, silence “engulfs the hamster-like busyness of [her] brain and frees it to spin out its manic listmaking, worrying, and free floating angst into a blank blue sky” and releases “something sharp and hard inside [her] and makes her] feel like a sixth grader on the first morning of summer vacation.” Silence liberates people from the noisy chaos of life, if only for a brief minute. Similarly, music can also be a relief from a noisy, disorderly society—another place to hide out if one chooses not to accept the distracting challenge that noise provides. Luigi Russolo, Futurist and author of The Art of Noises, contends that sound is “a thing in itself, distinct and independent of life, and the result [of this concept is] music, a fantastic world superimposed on the real one, an inviolable and sacred world” (Russolo 206). Humans in general embrace the chance to go on vacation, to take a break from reality, to hover above or outside of everyday life, “independent” (Russolo 206). The vacation to the otherworldly of music is no exception.

People occasionally need the harmonious, organized sounds of music because they provide a deep satisfaction that random noise cannot. Music moves us, evokes memories, and even has therapeutic benefits. The ability of music to soothe the mind and body is so powerful that today music is commonly used in medical therapy. Peggy Fedor, a registered nurse for more than 30 years, currently serves as a music practitioner, someone who comforts and heals sick individuals with music. Peggy Fedor highlights her first experience as a music practitioner:

An actively dying hospice patient has just been repositioned in bed. She moans loudly with every labored breath, her face taut with strain. Her eyes seem to bulge from her skeleton-like face, her hands are clenched in fists, and her arms are tight to her body. I start to play my harp softly. After five minutes, I notice her breathing has slowed. The moans have stopped. Her eyes close. Her face softens. Her hands open. Her arms relax. She appears to be resting peacefully. Her son, who is sitting across the room, begins to cry.

Music at its best holds the ability to transport us to another world, a world void of pain and discomfort. At its worst, music, like Koenen’s example of the programmed tunes in Star-
bucks, can be exploited to manipulate our thoughts. Both of these abilities are bottled when we record music. Recorded music lets us listen to the harmonious sounds whenever our souls feel exhausted, or when we just need to “get away” for a little while, just by turning on our iPod or popping a CD into our car stereo. Music replaces reality with melodies, pain with harmonies.

But do we ever experience a full displacement of reality through music? When music is recorded, the sounds created are rarely the only sounds being recorded, similar to live concerts, experiences full of extraneous noise. Noises in the recording process change our perception of music. Stan Link, music professor at Vanderbilt University, notes that up “until quite recently in the history of recording...a noticeable level of documentary and transduction was unavoidable during both the recording and playback processes.” Tiny crackles and skips, audible breaths, and noises caused by imperfections in recording mechanisms add to the instruments and voices in recordings. Ever since the inception of recording, musicians strove to rid their reproductions of these noisy blemishes. Link contends that recording technologies are “approaching a point where, given the identity of a digital source and its bit-perfect transfer, what remain[s] [is] not "recording" as much as the pure duplication of an original.”

Any noise that confuses, distracts, or challenges listeners can be removed to make the song more “pure” and harmonious. The song “Hide and Seek” by Imogen Heap is a perfect example of the magic of current recording technology. It contains no instruments, only a perfectly computer-manipulated female voice. Not one breath, one scratch, one imperfection is heard. The result is a song that sounds so otherworldly, so perfect that listener feels momentarily detached from reality. It may be the most perfect example of listeners’ desire for music to transport them to another world, but the song has an awkward effect on me. On one hand, I am thoroughly attracted to the sheer and faultless beauty of the song; but on the other, I feel slightly alienated listening to the noise-free music because it seems a little too idealistic. Some of the beauty of music is in the translation between pure sound and other sounds. Russolo asserts that “it is characteristic of noise to recall us brutally to real life” (209).

Though recording technology today is at a point where noise can be totally eliminated from recordings, an interesting countermovement has emerged in recent years. The very technology that was created to rid musical recordings of noise is often used to put noise back into the recordings. Iron and Wine’s stellar cover of The Postal Service song “Such Great Heights” puts the imperfections back into the recording. The song is full of cracks, a constant background hum, and deep, noisy breaths. These noises bring the song closer to the human condition by embracing the imperfections of life, which explains the human urge to put noise back into music. Most music without noise seems fraudulent, like it’s robbing our minds of something new and fresh. Noises assail us when we least expect it, spiraling in around our ears, and music that is totally free of these attacks sounds unfamiliar to me, leaving my human curiosity unfulfilled. Noise bridges music and the real world, connecting recorded music to its roots—roots embedded in the pure expression of creativity, not the pure expression of sound. Noises in music, like those that the musicians of Can implement, connect ideas, provoke thought, and catapult us back to the grittiest aspects of life, back to the world we think and live in. The disharmony of noise in music provides arguments and counterarguments to our current way of thinking about sound, and these aural debates spark cognitive growth in all facets of life, according to the previously mentioned proposal that all thought is the product of our senses.
Noise is displeasing as a sound because it is not doctored up in a predictable variety of tones, pitches, and patterns like music. Whereas noise is sound that is disagreeable and unsystematic, music is the pleasurable and manufactured arrangement of sound. But what differentiates harmony and noise? Just as there is a fine, almost imperceptible line between art and non-art (for example, the difference between abstract art and finger painting), there is a fine line between noise and music. In that sense, noise has distinctive formal qualities like standard music—sounds with vibrant harmonies and conventional patterns. Echoes of tornado sirens harmonize with each other and follow a consistent pattern, even though most regard the sirens as noisy. If one listens attentively with a creative and adventurous ear, even noisy sirens can be viewed as music. Luigi Russolo validates this proposition:

Noise in fact can be differentiated from sound only in so far as the vibrations which produce it are confused and irregular, both in time and intensity. Every noise has a tone, and sometimes also a harmony that predominates over the body of its irregular vibrations. (Russolo 210)

Since tone and frequency are the core of all music, what differentiates noise and music is intention. Music is created by people who have intentional reasons for using the sounds they do, whereas noise is a mostly unintentional product of society. Artists are slowly embracing the unintentional powers of noise. As music “becomes continually more complicated, strives to amalgamate the most dissonant, strange and harsh sounds” (Russolo 206), new rationales for harmony are created and previous auditory barriers challenged.

Humans believe that deliberate musical creations affect the listener more profoundly than the full orchestra of noises coming from the cars, the street, the birds, and the wind. It’s the form of music that people are comforted and transported by, not the actual sounds of the music. Russolo affirms the importance of musical form on our perception of music, stating, “all [musical] sound carries with it a development of sensations that are already familiar and exhausted, and which predispose the listener to boredom” (207). Listeners relate this boredom to comfort, because they do not hear anything invasive in there. People remember patterns of notes, pleasing musical flourishes and ornaments, soothing phrase—not the literal sounds that make up music. Most listeners would be made uncomfortable by the free flow of noise created by the disappearance of structure in music. But nature itself is not rational and organized like music; it is frenzied, uncontrollable, and constantly changing—and so is its sound. When we listen to recorded noise, especially noise in music, we are forced let the noise consume us and overwhelm our senses. John Cage, an extremely influential experimental musician and theologian, believes music can “open the mind to divine influences,” especially when noise and irregular patterns are infused in the music (15). To Cage, the purpose of music is “not an attempt to bring order out of chaos, nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we are living” (17).

Noise in music carries a tension that challenges our notion of harmony. Torben Sangild explains further:

When you reverse a disturbance into a part of the music itself, it is not smoothly integrated but infuses the music with a tension. There is still a play on the formerly negative relation between noise and signal when a noise is legitimated. This tension is an important part of the musical power of noise.

Noise is not an easy stimulus to accept as music, especially if it is seen as invading something as structured and pleasant as traditional music. Yet accepting the challenge and jour-
neying outside of our aural comfort zones and experiencing music that incorporates noise is imperative to developing well-rounded cognitive perception. Someone’s thought created those sounds, that music. One doesn’t have to enjoy another’s music or agree with the reasons for creating it. But by agreeing or disagreeing with the ideas presented in music, we can make the noises speak through our cognition. We must jump into the adventure of noise to achieve a better understanding of our surroundings.

We are subliminally, and perhaps sublimely, connected to noise; it a part of our lives, constant and disorienting at the same time. When I stuck the Can CD into the player, an awkward sense of disappointment consumed me. While the music was still amazing, organic, and intensively creative, it was missing the “life” it had at the club. Perplexed, I realized those other noises were missing from the music, and concluded that those clanks and clatters, those voices and laughter must have contributed to the music’s impact on me; the noises enhanced my enjoyment of and cerebral interest in the music. Should we fear the attack of noise? No. Embrace it.

**Works Cited**


