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Without Music, Life Would Be a Mistake: What Oregon Library Employees Listen to at Work

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I've spent my career at the Oregon State Library in a variety of roles: working in acquisitions, reference, circulation, and with Oregon documents. I've been active in OLA, most recently on the 2014 Conference Committee. I have a BA in music and communications from Linfield College. In my spare time, among other things, I perform in two early music groups.

Music has been called many things: the food of love, the universal language of mankind, the highest of the fine arts, the wine that fills the cup of silence. Nietzsche said life without music would be a mistake. Music surrounds us. It may be music we wouldn't choose to listen to, like the music in grocery stores, or while we're on hold on the phone. Or it may be music we seek out, whether from live performances, or from a number of different electronic sources.

This issue of the *OLA Quarterly* is about creativity. In this article, I'll take an informal look at how Oregon library employees use the creativity of others—music—while they're going about their daily duties.

I spend a good deal of my time at work listening to music. It's sometimes to block out office conversations when I need to concentrate, sometimes to block out the sound of the HVAC system, and sometimes to encourage me to work on a hard or dull project ("You can listen to Red Priest if you will work on this boring process document"). I've been listening to music at work long enough that I first used a Sony Walkman (yup, cassette tapes!). To gather information for this article, I posted the following questions on *libs-or*, the email discussion list for Oregon libraries:

- Do you listen to music at work?
- If so, on what device(s)?
- What kind(s) of music?
- While doing what?
- What is your job specialty or specialties?
- Other comments
- May I quote you in the article?

I didn't know what to expect: 10 responses? Hundreds? I was happy to receive 40 responses from folks in a variety of Oregon libraries (and even an Oregon native now working in a library in Massachusetts). The answer to the first question was a resounding "Yes." Only two people reported not listening to music at work: one because her library doesn't allow it, and one because of IT issues. Of course, it's quite likely that those who do listen to music at work were more likely



Jey's suggestions for non-soothing classical music:

Late Beethoven string quartets, especially the Grosse Fugue. If you can listen to them without feeling stressed, please check your pulse.

Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra. If you can listen to the last movement without laughing out loud, you may need to re-boot your sense of humor.

Rodrigo's Concierto de Aranjuez. Lively Spanish music with a definite urban feel.

Anything by Gesualdo. Definitely the weirdest of the Renaissance composers. Chromatic, sometimes depressing, and rarely, if ever, soothing. Do not listen to if you are already feeling low.

to answer than those who don't. I had a pre-conceived idea of what the response would be when I posted the questions. What library specialty, I mused, requires the most attention to detail, and tends to take place away from public areas, where interruptions aren't common. Why, cataloging, of course! However, only three of those who answered the questions are catalogers. If I use the responses to construct the library person most likely to listen to music at work in Oregon, it would be a public library director or supervisor who listens to classical music on his or her computer.

Here's a closer look at what people listen to, and how they listen to it.

Put Another Nickel In

As with most of the responses, people listen to music on a variety of devices, and many respondents use more than one. Computers were the most popular (26), followed by phones (12). Other devices included MP3 players, Kindles, tablets, and CD players. Pandora is definitely popular with Oregon library folks. Jay Hadley (Multnomah County Library supervisor) says, "I love how I can hit 'thumbs up' on Pandora and hear more music like the track that is playing, or hit 'thumbs down' and never hear that track again. For free music it has a good degree of control." Other sources for music included Spotify, Grooveshark, and various radio stations.

Not all of the responses were totally serious. One respondent reported that he uses a picnic-style crank turn table to listen to Black Sabbath at 78 rpm while doing statistics.

Wagner's Music is Better Than It Sounds

—MARK TWAIN

Actually, no one mentioned Wagner, but they listed practically everything else! Many people said their tastes are eclectic and varied. Most people listed more than one type of music. As I mentioned above, classical music was mentioned most often. For some, that was generic category, although others were more specific. Mari Bettineski (Warner Pacific Tech Services Specialist) listens to Satie while cataloging. Elaine Goff (Willamette University Serials Specialist) listens to a variety of classical composers "... as long as it's not too intense or emotional like Elgar tends to be." Other mentioned classical as being soothing; see sidebar for my comments on that.

The range of music people mentioned was very broad. Ethnic and world music are popular, as is jazz, all variations of rock, new age, blue grass, blues, punk, dance, and house. The only piece of music to be specifically mentioned more than once was the soundtrack to *The Lord of the Rings*. Almost every respondent listed more than one kind of music.

A few people said they have to be careful with vocal music, since the words can be distracting when they're working. Jessica Rondema (State Library Executive Assistant) likes Arabic music "... because it is upbeat, but the words don't distract me, since I don't speak the language!" Joni Roberts (Willamette University Public Services Librarian) says "I mostly listen to instrumental music because if the music has words, I will be tempted to sing along!"

Some people listen to things other than music. A few people mentioned nature sounds as being relaxing. Other non-music mentioned includes white noise, BBC radio news, local police scanner, TED talks, and an actual water fountain. Amy Mihelich (WCCLS Cataloger) says "I've found that listening to stand-up comedy is a good way to get out of the post-lunch doldrums."



**Some of Jey’s faves
you may not be
familiar with:**

Anything by Red Priest, a British baroque ensemble with a big attitude. Try *Red Priest’s Vivaldi* to see what they do to the very familiar “Four Seasons.” My favorite is their version of the La Folio Variations on *Nightmare in Venice*.

The Oregon Guitar Quartet. Innovative arrangements, from the classics to classic rock. Among my favorites are “Saint James Infirmary” and the world’s best arrangement of “Black is the Color of My True Love’s Hair,” both on *Something Wondrous Fair*.

Bach cello suites. Go beyond Yoyo Ma and check out recordings by Hekun Wu or Angela East.

Wood N Flutes. Difficult to find, but worth searching for: *Journey*; an eclectic mix of music from the middle ages to modern, played on low-voiced recorders.

Play It [bleeping] Loud

—BOB DYLAN

Many respondents mentioned that they always use headphone or earbuds, or are very careful not to play their music loudly enough to annoy their co-workers or library patrons. Christy Davis (Klamath County Library Directory) only listens to music after other staff have gone home. “I don’t wear headphones,” she says. “I’d have to take them out and put them back in a hundred times during the day—and I’d look unavailable.”

There are some interesting exceptions to the keep-it-quiet rule, however.

John Reppinger (Willamette University Reference Librarian) has external office hours at Willamette’s departmental student hearths. “I sometimes use music as a conversation starter with students,” he says. “Once we’re talking, I sometimes ask what they’re working on and see if there’s an “in” to help with their research. Plus, it is kind of neat to hear students’ music selection and actually recognize the songs!”

Bob Jones (Milton-Freewater Library Director) has an even more out-going use for music at the library. Oldies Night @ the Library started 2006 to bring in people who would not normally visit. Bob has taken the program outside of Milton-Freewater: “Through Libraries of Eastern Oregon I have taken Oldies Night to a dozen other libraries in the state. In 2012 I gave a presentation on Oldies Night at Big Talk from Small Libraries, an online conference sponsored by the Nebraska Library Commission.” Directors of small libraries frequently wear many hats; Bob’s includes being a disk jockey.

At the State Library, the Talking Books and Braille Services Division uses music to add energy to the workplace. On occasional slow Friday afternoons, they have Journey Friday; they use Pandora to play 1980’s bands. In addition to Journey, “Working for the Weekend” by Loverboy, and “Welcome to the Jungle” by Guns N Roses are staff favorites. Joel Henderson (Talking Books Administrative Program Coordinator) says “it sparks conversations, promotes team bonding, and helps get you through those last few hours before you head home.” And there may be air guitar or drumming involved. (There must be something about 1980s pop music and Fridays: Mari Bettineski reports that it frequently turns up on her Friday afternoon play list).

*Without music to decorate it, time is just a bunch of boring production
deadlines or dates by which bills must be paid.*

—FRANK ZAPPA

We’ve seen, informally, how Oregon library staff use music in a variety of ways in the workplace, especially to help them be more efficient and focused. What came through most strongly for me is how much people love the music they listen to, and how important it is to their lives. Bonnie Brzozowski (Corvallis/Benton County Library Reference Librarian) said “I would be lost without music at work. If I’m ever grumpy and counting down the hours until I get to head home, I put on a favorite tune and it boosts my energy and motivation.”

Julie Wickham put it best: “Music and books make my life worth living!”

*Many thanks to all the people who responded to the libs-or post; I’m sorry there
was not room to include all the comments and playlists!*

