

I Couldn't Hear the Crickets

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"I can't hear the crickets" I whispered to my wife as I lay in bed trying to fall asleep. It was a sweltering and sticky July evening, and she was already half asleep. "Hmmm?" she mumbled back. "The crickets," I said again. "I can't hear the crickets."

I began that evening tossing and turning from one side to the other, and when I finally landed on my left side I couldn't help noticing that the room became a little quieter. "What's missing?" I thought to myself. When I turned back onto my right side, it was as if someone opened a vault and waves of sound came rushing in. Waves of crickets! I turned back to my left side where it was much quieter and fell fast asleep.

Now, when I climb into bed, I instinctively always lay on my left side. Not that it's more comfortable, it just seems that life is a lot quieter, softer on that side. I eventually realized that my right ear was the culprit and I had been experiencing mild hearing loss. You see, I'm a musician and since the early 1970s I've spent a lot of time rehearsing, recording and performing with various bands in bars, clubs, outdoor festivals, frat houses, and recording studios with the volume cranked up to eleven (see "Spinal Tap"). Like every other band, we played loud. Really loud. And like many other middle-aged musicians, I'm paying dearly for it now.

When I was in my early 40s, I noticed that my right ear was a little "duller" than my left, and when it was very quiet, mostly at bedtime, a faint high pitched frequency was echoing in my head. I made an appointment with an ENT, and he recommended an MRI to rule out a brain tumor. Brain tumor!? I panicked as I remembered Woody Allen going through the same thing in "Hannah and Her Sisters." Now, for those of you who haven't had the pleasure of sitting through an MRI, let me tell you, it's about as much fun as being buried alive. I had to lay horizontal on my back with the upper half of my body inside a dark tunnel. "Please don't move for the next 45 minutes," the voice from beyond scolded, and of course, as soon as I heard that I shouldn't move, I had to move. My shoulders were becoming stiff, my legs cramped, I had to crack my neck. I minded the voice and played dead while the entire machine grunted and shook so vigorously I thought it would start coughing up nuts and bolts. Oh, yeah, and they piped in some music, which along with the industrial noise made for a totally enjoyable experience. The Eagles meet Sonic Youth. In the end, the MRI revealed nothing--no brain tumor--and the doctor said I have a mild form of tinnitus in my right ear that is causing hearing loss within a small frequency band. The same frequencies that those crickets are screeching out. He recommended I start wearing some sort of noise filtering ear plugs when I'm performing or recording to prevent further damage to my hearing.

I purchased a pair of hi-tech ear plugs for working musicians that filter out damaging frequencies but had a hard time getting used to them. Have you ever listened to music with ear plugs stuffed in your ears? Well, try *playing* music with them. It's like you're under the ocean or very drunk. Or both. In a fuzzy bubble, a half a beat behind everyone

else. The visceral energy is always a few steps removed. Is this what Pete Townshend feels like? Well, needless to say, I didn't use the ear plugs very often.

In addition to the ringing and the loss of certain frequencies in my right ear, I noticed that my ears were gradually becoming more sensitive over time and I couldn't tolerate live music concerts anymore. I remember going to see Pat Metheny wrap up his "The Way Up" tour at the Beacon Theater in NYC in 2005, not even thinking I should bring my ear plugs. Big mistake there. The concert was awesome *and* very loud. My ears did penance for the next few days as I walked around in my fuzzy bubble. I can't tell you how many concert invitations I've declined over the years just to avoid the hangover.

Now in my early 50s I have learned to take better care of my ears. In studio sessions I record and mix at lower levels, which I've found over the years provide a more accurate representation of the music anyway. I've lost interest in attending large rock concerts in favor of smaller venues where the performances are more intimate and the volume levels tolerable. The side effects from 50 years of rock 'n roll music has not only finally caught up with me and my musician buddies, but all of us baby boomers. Rock 'n roll casualties of a different sort.

So here I am laying in bed again on my left side. It's another hot summer evening, and as I turn over to my right side my left ear is assaulted by the sound of a million crickets. It's deafening. I roll back over to my left side where things are quieter and think to myself, "I can't hear the crickets." And then I fall fast asleep.