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Conversations

"If there was a tuba soloist, there would be tuba groupies."

Daniel Levitin, Using His Head to Figure Out How That Song Got Stuck in Yours

Sunday, September 2, 2007; Page M02

As a record producer turned neuroscientist -- on a first-name basis with Stevie Wonder and Carlos Santana -- Daniel Levitin holds the title of Most Righteous College Professor. (At least until recent astrophysics PhD Brian May of Queen gets a teaching gig.) We caught up with the author of "This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession," whose rocking out is now confined to a sax and guitar gig with McGill University's Diminished Faculties.

-- Monica Hesse

You're the expert, but doesn't the B.B. King riff playing in this lobby seem kind of weird for a Westin?

When I came down for breakfast they were blasting a Steely Dan song about a drug dealer who made acid in an A-frame out in Oregon. It was really bizarre. . . . Especially since music today is becoming the new architecture. Kids under 20 are using music very differently. . . . They don't have favorite bands; half the stuff they have on their iPods, they don't care who it is or where it came from. It's more about creating an atmosphere. It's sonic wallpaper.

In your book you say music might be an evolutionary asset.

Darwin thought the function of music was to attract members of the opposite sex. . . . A man who can dance for hours on end, always varying the steps -- that shows great physical stamina and mental flexibility. Women could be subliminally thinking, "This guy is clever. This guy could bring home a bison."

And now, in our bison-free era?

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(By Andrea Bruce -- The Washington Post)

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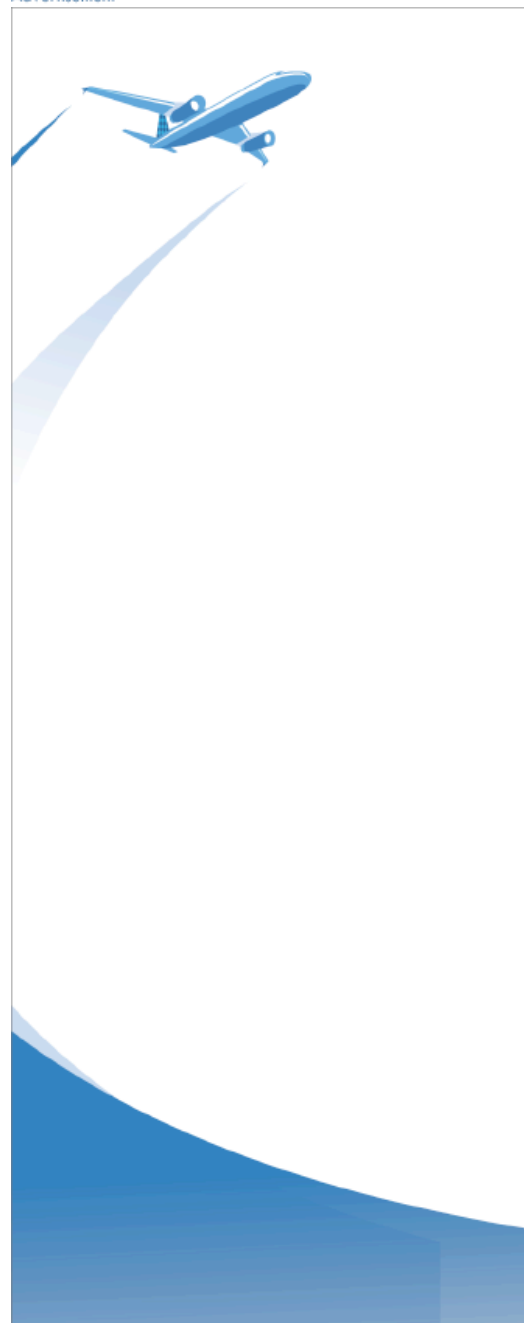
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Look at [Mick Jagger](#). There's an ancient genetic echo that musicians are attractive. . . . In one study women were asked to rate various fictional potential mates. The guys were either creative or not creative, rich or not rich. When women were at their most fertile, they wanted to hook up with the creative guy. Other times, they wanted the rich guy. So if you're passing on genes, you want the creative guy.

What if the creative guy is a tuba player? Are tuba players hot?

Tuba players are hidden in an ensemble of 90 or 100 people. I would imagine that if there was a tuba soloist, there would be tuba groupies.

Now I have "Stars and Stripes Forever" stuck in my head. Explain that to me.

Scientists call songs that get stuck in your head "earworms" after the German Ohrwurm. We don't know a lot about how or why they happen -- it's hard to get funding to study this type of thing - - but we know a little. Like, it tends not to be a whole song that gets stuck in your head, just 15-20 seconds of one, and it tends to be a simple song that even non-singers can hum without effort.

Is there a cure?

Some people get earworms so bad that it interferes with their ability to sleep or work. For those people, antidepressants and anti-anxiety drugs can help. They relax the circuits. Then again, some people become musicians because they have earworms. [Neil Young](#) told me that he started writing songs because he couldn't get rid of the tunes in his head.

Doesn't learning everything about how our brains interact with music ruin the magic of the listening experience?

Like that famous Oz scene where the Wizard is revealed as a nebbish little man behind the curtain? For me it's been the opposite. Every time I get a modicum of insight into mystery I'm overwhelmed by the intricacy and the beauty.

Where will you go next with your research?

My lab recently completed a study in which we found an area of the brain that responds to the silence in between symphony movements. It's really a study about memory, and event segmentation, and how we define beginnings and endings.

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