**Route du Silence**

**With traffic rushing past on the highway, silence reigns supreme in your car – a cocoon for creating the soundtrack of your own road movie**

by Warna Oosterbaan

Were we really still part of that a minute ago? And do we have to get back in soon again? You always pause and wonder, when stopping briefly at a gas station along the French *Autoroute du Soleil*, the highway from Paris to the Mediterranean sun. A parade of thumping trucks, rushing family cars and rattling trailers roaring past. A trail of blaring noise meandering through the valley. After refueling you don’t know how fast you should get into your car. You close its door, and you’re back in your own silent cubicle. You enter the highway again, and you don’t even realize in fact that you, too, provide a contribution to the pandemonium.

It is sufficiently quiet now for a little music. Or for traffic updates, a lecture about the history of the universe, or for the novelist you like who reads from his latest book. No, rather a country song now. And instantly you’re beating along on your wheel, following the rhythm of the music.

Or, better still, when on a sunny country road, with tree tops reflecting in your car’s shiny hood, go for a nice piece of film music. Nino Rota, Ennio Morricone, Angelo Badalamenti – it’s all perfect. Or Miles Davis who plays ‘Sur l’Autoroute’ once more. The slow music from *The assassination of Jesse James* by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis? Highly suitable! The scenery gets its own soundtrack, and the drive turns into a road movie. The car driver puts on his sun glasses and imagines himself to be Marcello Mastroianni.

It is a whim of fate that the car, powered by a combustion engine, has become one of the few spots where in all silence we can enjoy music or a fine radio play. A private listening cabin moving at a speed of 75 mph, among thousands of fellow-drivers. The car as cocoon, the cabin as capsule. In *Sound and Safe*, a recent book by four researchers in sound and technology studies from Maastricht and Eindhoven, the Netherlands, it is possible to read how all of this came about. Listening has always been important in cars. Until into the 1920s, however, it was important in particular to listen to the car itself. The first automobilists were urged continuously to drive with ears cocked, so as to be able to detect the cause of every strange rattle, thump or ticking of their car.

This changed only after the auto industry began to serve a wider audience. After having been an experimental coach powered by an engine for several decades, the car evolved into a room on wheels. The new drivers of the 1940s and 1950s had other things to worry about than the ticking of the camshaft; or, rather, they just didn’t want to hear about it. A silent engine became a sign of reliability. Car technicians and coachwork designers began to put in a serious effort. They equipped the transmission’s gear wheels with cogs that did not screech. They added thick layers of felt between the engine compartment and the cabin. The muffler was greatly improved. Cars became more silent, even though each intervention also revealed sounds that previously were masked by others.

Eventually a comforting buzz would remain. A car ride has meanwhile taken on a new meaning: it has turned into a filmic experience. Driving a car has evolved into a relaxed form of looking out on a landscape whizzing by – an outdoor space whose temperature you do not feel and where there is no wind blowing in your face either. You are sitting smack in the middle of it, and yet you remain a spectator behind tempered glass.

When cars grew quieter, car radio soon made inroads. Symphony orchestras and news bulletins easily found their way into the car’s interior. In a Philips ad from 1936 an elegant lady sits behind the wheel. It’s dark outside already, but she is pleasantly listening to a violinist playing a romantic melody. ‘Alone but never lonely with Philips Autoradio’. Car radio kept you awake and accompanied you on your solitary trips, Philips suggested. Other manufacturers promoted it as a means to stay calm amidst the hectic of traffic.

More recently, cars also have begun to talk themselves. They’ve started issuing a warning signal when you forget to put on your safety belt. They release a ping when you are almost out of gas. They help you navigate the Boulevard Périphérique, the always crowded circular route around Paris. And would you prefer to hear ‘Try to turn around’ from a woman’s mouth? This proved possible, too.

In time, car radio got company from other audio equipment and this made it possible for the automobilist to furnish his domain with his own preferences to an even greater extent. Today you can listen without being bothered by anyone to lectures, audio books, podcasts and of course your own complete music collection stored in a tiny box or on a USB stick. And when you get stuck in traffic by the time you reach the tunnel of Lyon, while the temperature is rising, despair is growing and the kids in the backseat start to misbehave, a pulsing rhythm from your loudspeakers will bring relief. At least something is moving, if only the drumsticks and bass guitars of an invisible orchestra.

The authors of *Sound and Safe* point to an additional motive to put on some music or the latest news and weather updates from the outside world: sound walls. Many car drivers, apparently, find it scary to drive on a highway closed off on both sides by such high walls. As if driving through a gutter. And also: where did the wonderful scenery go?

In such a situation, music, the soothing voice of a celebrity reading an audio book, or, for my part, any sports programming will be a bearable way of fighting the boredom. With the air-co on and cruise control at 75 mph, the automobilist behind tinted glass will gradually manage to escape from the road indeed.

Most drivers who rush past us in their listening cabin may hardly notice, but while our car may have grown quieter on the inside, as a collective we still produce a deafening noise. Every pit stop we make testifies to it. And this is why we have sound walls and, as a byproduct, an endless boring road ahead of us. And this is why we still need Merle Haggard to bring us at least some relief. *White Line Fever / The years keep flying by like the highline poles / The wrinkles in my forehead show the miles I’ve put behind me.* To be sung along loudly.

Karin Bijsterveld et al., *Sound and Safe. A History of Listening Behind the Wheel*. Oxford University Press, 2014 (29.99 euros)

**HIGHWAY CLASSICS**

1 **Stand by your Man** Tammy Wynette

2 **White Line Fever** Merle Haggard

3 **Sur l’autoroute** Miles Davis

4 **The Locomotion** Little Eva

5 **Ballad of Forty Dollars** Tom T. Hall

6 **Diane** Charles Mingus

7 **The Sidewinder** Lee Morgan

8 **Love for sale** Cannonball Adderley

9 **Move it on over** Hank Williams

10 **Changing of the Guards** Bob Dylan

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**BACKSEAT HITS**

1 **Summer** Calvin Harris

2 **Ta fête** Stromae

3 **Prayer In C** Lilly Wood & The Prick

4 **Budapest (Sunset Hills remix)** George Ezra

5 **Hideaway** Kiesza

6 **Scream (Funk my life up)** Paolo Nutini

7 **Clean Bandit feat** Jess Glynne

8 **Happy (Neus remix)** Pharrell Williams / Electro Posé (not on Spotify, see YouTube)

9 **Help me lose my mind** Disclosure feat. London Grammar

10 **Salsa tequila** Anders Nilsen

**Jan Vollaard**

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