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Piped-in Music: No Longer Just for Elevators

By: Anne Kadet

It's not enough that downtown Noblesville, Ind., with its Mayberry-era storefronts and Italianate courthouse square, looks like a scene from an old movie—now it sounds like one. This spring the city spent \$20,000 to install a Muzak system in its commercial hub. Each day starting at 10 a.m., pedestrians hear big band swing, bebop or "Jukebox Gold" piped through 32 street lamp speakers. Shopkeepers say folks seem to like it, though there's been murmuring over Tuesday's "contemporary pop hits" fare. "They need to ditch the modern fast music and stick with the oldies," says Sue Roudebush, a local shop owner.

It's impossible to escape piped-in music. Muzak rival DMX says its programs play in school cafeterias, funeral homes, hospitals and auto dealerships. Doctors play music in waiting rooms to reduce perceived wait times; convenience stores blast it at the gas pump. You can even hear it—yes—at the library. Some Scottsdale, Ariz., librarians spin a mix of classical ("Bach for Book Lovers"), Native American flute and new age hits. The only refuge? A small "quiet zone" near the romance section.

I don't mind background music; my reaction tends toward curiosity. Why does Williams-Sonoma play Sammy Davis Jr. while Whole Foods plays '80s new wave? What makes Al Green's "Let's Stay Together" the most-played background tune of all time? As you might suspect, in-store playlists are highly calculated creations. Sure, Muzak still cites studies claiming that music leads to lower blood pressure, reduced anxiety, positive service evaluations, increased productivity, higher sales and more-satisfying conversations. But these ulterior goals are no longer the point. These days it's all about reinforcing the brand image.

Businesses now contract with music providers to design customized playlists that evoke the lifestyle and emotional tone they want consumers to connect with their brand. Muzak client Caribou Coffee, for one, conveys the brand attributes "friendly, organic, interesting and fresh" with songs by obscure indie artists. And the musical machinations can get complicated. Background-music provider **PlayNetwork** says some hotel clients create several playlists so customers hear different tunes as they enter the lobby, lounge at the bar and unpack in their room. Other brands even try to get their soundtrack into your house. If you want your home to sound like a midpriced casual-dining chain, you can go to **Chili's** [EAT: 15.16, +0.35, +2.36%] Web site and "pepper in some fun," streaming tunes by the likes of REM.

Backlash, of course, has ensued. Pipedown, an international advocacy group devoted to the elimination of piped-in music, includes 2,000 paying members who distribute the organization's five types of preprinted protest cards to offending shopkeepers. Founder Nigel Rodgers, a historian who especially loathes Tina Turner and "anything by Andrew Lloyd Webber," says the U.K. chapter got background music banned from the London Midland commuter trains and Gatwick Airport. The U.S. branch hasn't

been so successful. Its sole official member, Indianapolis engineer Ruth Schiedermayer, who sometimes visits stores armed with a decibel meter, says her biggest victory was persuading her dentist to turn off the music in exchange for promising him “a lot of work.”

Perhaps the best folks can do is seek out the few venues that remain music-free. Ted Rueter, founder of Noise Free America (motto: “Respect the quiet”), promotes an ambitious 53-point plan to reduce noise at the federal, state and local levels. “It’s good to dream,” says the Albany, N.Y., political science professor, who picks his chiropractor, supermarket and restaurants based on background noise. Among his favorite stores: **Target** [TGT: 46.93, +0.91, +1.97%]. The stylish discount chain stopped playing music 15 years ago in an effort to provide a calm environment. And while it reviews the decision every year, it’s sticking to its guns. Wouldn’t you know, the store says, there has never been a protest from customers wanting to hear music.