



by **Corey Zehngbot**

Whether music should be played aloud in open office environments is controversial, though few will dispute that it can be an excellent motivator. Like athletes or surgeons, designers often rely on music to put them in the right mental space to tackle a particular assignment. We see athletes amidst the chaos of an event, eyes closed and headphones on, listening to whatever helps them get their game on. Designers have their own “fired up” music, craving the right ambient sound to produce good work.

At Utile, an open-plan office with about 20 employees, there is one big table where we all sit, white walls, and—notably—no enclosed spaces whatsoever. The politics of the communal playlist can be contentious, since what is audible is inescapable.

After working in the office for a few short months, I inherited control of the office transmitter and speakers. Though initially flattered, I soon realized that playlist commando is a thankless job.

Crafting a playlist in the working world is not an academic exercise. In architecture school, headphone culture was dominant. If you so much as played a note of music aloud, objections were immediate. But relying on your own computer for music wasn't as limiting as it seemed: With hundreds of users connected to a central server, one had access to weeks of shared music.

While some made no effort to camouflage their identities, most chose more cryptic names (“smittenwithsmithson,” “discretizeMYSurfaces,” “Architecture-WOMANifestos”) for their musical catalogs. Even within this cloak of anonymity, I suspect that music was being used as a signifier, with lesser-known albums or artists included in playlists for the cachet rather than the love. Could everyone really have liked Brian Eno that much?

In a small office the soundtrack must be approached curatorially. This is further complicated when playing to an expanded

crowd, which often includes clients within earshot. Consequently, there must be a greater tolerance for headphones. Although office etiquette may frown on them, headphones provide necessary focus when a deadline is imminent or if there are meetings nearby.

So I beat on... with some interesting interludes. There was a six-month stretch at Utile when the Northeastern intern took an active role in playlist programming. When I was away at a meeting or just forgot, she would commandeer the audio jack and turn on her personal favorites. Often, this was Girl Talk, AKA Greg Gillis, the 29-year-old artist who produces high-octane mash-ups on his computer using digital samples from other tunes. This was fun for a while, but soon “normal” music began to sound bland, and I found myself wanting to hybridize everything. Not good.

When the idea was floated to create a shared Pandora Internet account, I was genuinely enthusiastic. Unfortunately, its use-value peaked right around Christmastime, when many in the office were struck by the urge to hear “Feliz Navidad” around the clock.

Recently, Utile entered a new age by introducing a dedicated WiFi network just for music. Now everyone on staff with an iPod has the power to press play. This has obviated the need for a playlist commando, about which I feel mainly relief, happy to allow others to play music when the spirit moves them or simply to have periods of (blessed) quiet. ■

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RANDOM SHUFFLE

Here are the top five songs that appeared at random on the playlists of a few area firms. Go to www.architectureboston.com to see more and submit your own.

