

Your Creative Life - *Hear Your Muse*

We often do our best work with headphones on. But why? Creativity guru Kevin Carroll examines music's influence on the design process and offers some sound advice.

by Kevin Carroll

A creative team I work with carefully selects ambient noise prior to all brainstorming sessions. A designer I know arms himself against every looming deadline with Miles Davis' "Sketches of Spain." And I just walked through a roomful of footwear designers plugged into their headphones as if they were life-giving IVs.

We all know something's going on here. Intuitively, we feel music and sound boost our creativity. And we also have a sense that it affects our health and happiness. And we're right.

That's because music can put us in a state that gets us dreaming creatively. When we really have to be creative, our hands reach for that same CD because certain tones resonate with our brains. Often, we play music instinctively when designing without knowing why. But if we understand just how profoundly music affects the mind, we can be more strategic about using it to our advantage.

Dr. Jeffrey Thompson of The Center for Neuroacoustic Research in San Diego has examined the impact of sound on creativity since 1980. He's both a musician and an expert on brainwave frequencies. "The brain looks different if you're trying to solve a creative problem than if you're trying to solve a math problem," Thompson explains.

So when you turn on the CD player, Thompson says the brainwaves attempt to time themselves to the speed of the pulses in the music. "That alters your consciousness, creating a more dreamlike state," he says. "That dreamlike state, Theta, mirrors the state of consciousness associated with creativity."

While Thompson explores the way sound affects the brain and body, Minneapolis-based Michael Gold uses the power of music to open minds and help businesses function more effectively.

After several years playing music in New York City and directing Vassar College's jazz program, Gold developed "Jazz Impact," a program that he takes into rigid corporate environments to demonstrate the value of improvisation and collaboration. "I use jazz as a vehicle to talk about the passion of exploring new space," says Gold, who's also been a corporate executive.

"We have to have passion to generate the energy to be innovative," he says. "There has to be a willingness to forego planning; to depart from a carefully sketched strategic plan in order to see what will happen; to use the underlying plan as a point of departure and a point of return, which is essentially what we're doing in jazz."

He cautions, however, that jazz itself isn't a creative cure-all because people have been taught to sublimate their innovative tendencies.

"Creativity can't defend itself against fear," Gold says. "If you're in a culture where people are fearful, they're not going to think creatively. They're going to think only in the boxes they've been told to think in. Cultures based in fear—which many corporations are—kill creativity just by their nature." How can this be undone? Gold says it starts with getting people at the top to realize that the collective imagination is paramount in a creative economy.

"There's a certain level of emotional intelligence that people need in order to play good jazz," Gold says. "You've got to be able to let go of the ego, to be exactly what you can be in that moment and learn as much as you can from the people you're interacting with. The way this translates into business is that you can simultaneously lead and support."

As Gold and Thompson illustrate, music can change the way we communicate, think and feel in ways we can't always predict. So the next time you pull a team together to work on a project and you've got to meet that pressing deadline, be mindful of the role music plays in your work. And keep your "sound Rx" nearby. Your creative soul will appreciate it.

Kevin Carroll is creative "Katalyst" at Nike. His favorite musicians include DJ Mark Farina, The Roots, Paul Taylor, Groove Armada, Thievery Corporation, Jay-Z, Yo Yo Ma and Donald Byrd. To further discuss the topic, visit The Muse thread at HOWdesign.com/forum.

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