

FEATURES

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Sound of the summer

While many soccer fans may loathe their drone, there's plenty about the vuvuzela to praise

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The most polarizing and therefore important music of the summer is not being made by Drake or Eminem or Jason Aldean. It is not being made by Lady Gaga or Paramore or Miranda Lambert.

It is being made by the thousands of fans at the World Cup in South Africa on the humble plastic horn called the vuvuzela, the distinctive B flat note of which has caused no end of discussion.

Google "vuvuzela" and you get the usual array of hits: Wikipedia entry, urbandictionary.com, a few news stories.

Google "vuvuzela" and "drone" and something very different happens. Here are some examples:

"Vuvuzela drone killing World Cup atmosphere," Associated Press international sportswriter John Leicester writes.

"How to silence vuvuzela drone on your TV," says influential tech blog Boing Boing. (Sadly, nobody has come up with a similar app to mute Alexi Lalas.)

A stack of Facebook pages are calling for the vuvuzela's ban. And on and on.

I submit that the technical term for all of these people is "wuss."

I submit that the massive, droning hum of thousands of vuvuzelas is the coolest thing to happen to the soundtrack of sports since baseball had a live organist.

Let's face it: Most music for sports is boring, fragmented, rote or nonexistent. A bit of a song for batter's walkout music here, a chorus of *Rock and Roll, Part 2* or *Centerfield* or *We Will Rock You* there. We get downright sick of the Olympic theme every two years.

And sports aren't "scored" the way a movie or a TV show is. Sound is limited to noises from the field or court, the yammering of commentary or the roar of the crowd. In some of your more delicate activities — tennis or golf, for example — dead silence is the norm while play is occurring.

This year, the World Cup comes with its own singular score.

In 1969, composer/theoretician Brian Eno was watching *Apollo 11* when it occurred

to him that it was a shame that such a momentous, surreal event didn't have some music to go with it, that the audio record for the moments when man stepped beyond his home planet was limited to the cold conversations between astronauts and Mission Control and chattering journalists.

These were strange times, moments out of science fiction. They should get some appropriate music.

Eno, along with his brother Roger and frequent collaborator Daniel Lanois, got to explore this idea on the gorgeous 1983 album *Apollo: Atmospheres and Soundtracks*. It was intended to be the soundtrack for a documentary called *Apollo* which, in its original form, was supposed to be a narration-free string of moonshot footage with Eno's music over the top.

After testing poorly, more conventional narration, editing and music were used. But the music has lived on — especially in the pieces *An Ending (Ascent)* and *Deep Blue Day* — in a variety of movie soundtracks.

I bring up Eno for a couple of reasons.

It's no moonshot, but the World Cup is momentous stuff. This might be the first and last time many of these players will participate. For good or ill, the roar of the vuvuzelas will mark the 2010 World Cup as surely as any goal or blown call.

This isn't the Los Angeles World Cup (for which the official sound might be the car horn) or the Paris World Cup (a disaffected sigh, maybe). It's on the African continent for the first time, in South Africa, wherein lives the vuvuzela.

Eno was also the popularizer of ambient music, cloudlike compositions that the listener wasn't obligated to follow the way they would follow a pop song or a classical piece. The album titles say it all: *Music for Airports*, *Music for Films*.

Are vuvuzelas ambient music? Plenty of detractors would say absolutely not, especially

if you are actually in the stadium.

Fair enough. I don't know what it's like there; I'm watching at home. And from my couch, I feel able to pay as much or as little attention as I like. This is the 21st century — if you don't have at least a small capacity for tuning out information of any sort, you have much bigger problems than what is on the TV during the World Cup.

I pay attention. Were it up to me, the play-by-play would vanish. Only the beauty of the game and the drone, the magnificent, sprawling thrum, of the vuvuzelas would remain.

Composers have been exploring drones for decades from the enormous minimalism of Tony Conrad and LaMonte Young to the guitar armies of Rhys Chatham to the soundtrack of German band Popol Vuh to the rock music of Velvet Underground and Sonic Youth.

And that's only in the West. Indian ragas, Australian didgeridoos and Japanese traditional music all explore the possibilities to be found in microtonal variations in a small numbers of notes sustained over a long period of time.

It's often profoundly subjective music — it can be boring, meditative, humbling, exhausting or ecstatic, sometimes all at once.

I find hearing the massive drone of several thousand vuvuzelas to be the last of those. To me, it is joyous, the sound of a country reminding you how far it has come in a very short time, how excited it is about being able to host the world, if only for a month or so, and how much fun everyone is having.

I love hearing the tiny changes in the sound when one anonymous fan blows the horn a little louder than the person next to him or her, or someone else stops. I love that this shifting screen of sound is made by fans rather than professionals and is improvised on the spot and no two are ever truly alike.

One vuvuzela might be annoying. Thousands of them are art. We might never hear quite their like again.

I'm sure lots of people are fine with that. But they are missing out.



Soccer fans blow vuvuzelas earlier this week at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. PHOTOS: AFP

