

The science of audio: How a podcast reveals the pleasant mysteries of hearing

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The first episode of audio-obsessed podcast *Reasonably Sound* that made me stop and think was an early entry called “Whisper Quiet.” As my introduction to Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR), and the specific auditory cues related to its reported physical reactions, I felt like someone had taken the top off my head, rummaged around in my brain, and found something overlooked inside that was suddenly useful. And not just in an ASMR sense, though the sample clips of Bob Ross hit all the right notes for that, as did host Mike Rugnetta getting into the spirit of ASMR by whispering the end credits.

Reasonably Sound is a podcast about audio and about the historical and cultural context of particular sounds and sonic experiences. In his episode about ASMR, Rugnetta not only introduces his audiences to what ASMR is, but he also contextualizes the rise of ASMR culture on YouTube within the broader history of communication technology, starting with an AT&T advertising campaign from the 1970s promoting long-distance calls as a medium for emotional intimacy. He also digs into the jargon of ASMR culture, comparing the pleasant “triggers” found in ASMR videos to the more serious triggers of trauma responses.

Research into the causes of ASMR didn't start being published in earnest until 2015, months after the release of "Whisper Quiet," so Rugnetta mentions in a later episode that he's skeptical of the phenomenon's existence. But, real or imagined, he acknowledges ASMR's memetic status and delights in exploring the cultural context that produced it.

Do you hear what I hear

Every episode of *Reasonably Sound* follows a similar structure before delivering audio-related revelations. Rugnetta starts by focusing on a single sonic concept, then dives into that concept's cultural context. For example, "Taylor Swift's White Noise" begins by explaining how white noise works and goes on to dig into the cultural distinction between noise and music, centered on an incident in 2014 in which Swift accidentally released eight seconds of white noise as a song on iTunes. "For Whom the Whistle Blows" is about dog whistles, both as literal canine-directed noisemakers and as a political metaphor from the United States' 2016 election season.

And "Molly's Misophonia" mirrors "Whisper Quiet" by explaining the opposite of ASMR: a psychiatric condition called misophonia, in which certain sounds, like chewing or paper rustling, are physically unbearable. To complete the reflection, this episode gets personal instead of exploring a broader context.

Rugnetta interviews his partner Molly Templeton about how her misophonia affects her life. Misophonia is triggered not only by sounds, but by sounds in context, and a person's misophonia is most often triggered by their family and close friends. By interviewing Templeton about her experience, Rugnetta learned how the everyday household noises he produces accidentally contribute to her discomfort.

A reasonable idea about sound

Reasonably Sound grew out of Rugnetta's previous project, a video series for PBS called Idea Channel that ran from 2011 to 2017 and explored pop culture topics in similar depth. The original idea for Idea Channel revolved more around sound and audio, Rugnetta tells Ars Technica, but the scope of the project gradually broadened. The idea for a sound-focused show was shelved until a friend of Rugnetta's at American Public Media invited him to work on his original idea as part of APM's podcast network starting in 2014.

In the mid 2010s, as Rugnetta became busier with other projects, *Reasonably Sound* became the podcast he worked on for his own edification and peace of mind. He returned to what he'd always seen as the show's goal: to "explore the less obvious ways sound frames and informs the human experience," from sound design in cinema ("The BRAAAM™") to the cultural context of applause and booing ("Put 'Em Together" and "Boo Who?") to the public safety hazards of silent electric-car engines ("Vrooms and the Lack Thereof").

While episodes of *Reasonably Sound* became less frequent as other projects took precedence and the research for *Reasonably Sound* itself increased in depth and complexity, new episodes remain "a rare treat" for fans. They're released when they're ready and not before; they're full of solid research, reasoning, and sound design; and even the most potentially stressful topics are narrated in Rugnetta's soothing voice.

Rugnetta recommends that new listeners start with his most recent episode and work backward. As of press time, his most recent episode—and the one he's most proud of—is "The World Remade," which explores the environmental impacts of vinyl record production and online music streaming. He also recommends "Helpful Mom Voices," about the history of machines that speak and the cultural reasons why Siri, Cortana, and

other digital assistants sound the way they do, as a good example of the perspective the show takes about its subjects.

I come to this review with years of fandom as a bias, I admit, but I'd argue that *Reasonably Sound* might be *the* podcast for people who yawn at the concept of podcasts. Its variety of topics, depth of research, and wonderfully pleasant production make it an all-in-one audio destination in which you can plug your ears into every detail of the audio experience.

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