



## Cubans vs. Crickets

In a shabby apartment in London Ontario one evening in 1969, my friend Paul Beard and I fed our experimental 10 minute 8mm silent film into a clanky old projector and let it whirr away. It was about eyeglasses. We had dragged them behind the car; we had burned a pair lying on a piece of bread in the middle of a frozen puddle; we had set up an "O" gauge model train oval outside in the snow and attached a pair of glasses to a coat hanger wire coming out of the top of the stripped down engine, then filmed it going round and round. I did a bit of eyeglasses animation; paul froze a pair in a block of ice and photographed it melting in time-lapse photography. We edited the masterpiece a number of times, and I do believe I still have it in a box somewhere, if it hasn't turned to plastic dust. I should put it on YouTube.

In those days it was a hassle to add sound to a home movie, but we wanted to check the effects of at least putting some music to it. So we pulled out various LPs and sat back and were astonished by the powerful differences the respective selections made in the feeling of the film. But to get the effect, you had to remind your mind that the music being played was a part of the film, and not just background music to the afternoon. In those days, or maybe at that age, music was being played no matter what we did, so it took the throwing of a brain switch to hitch the movie to the music.

With a little practice, I found you could flip back and forth from having the music seem like something outside of the intended film-watching experience, like the whirring noise of the projector, to having it become a true part of the film action. Going further, I found that you could link the whirring projector sound to the film, too, if you wanted. Later I discovered while driving that I could flop back and forth from having

the music on the radio seem unrelated to the scenes filling the windshield to having the music be a soundtrack to what I was seeing.

Maybe everybody switches back and forth like this, and it took me until I was twenty years old to catch on. Sometimes I've taken it to goofy lengths, consciously trying to link the ambient sounds of the moment -- bird singing, dog snoring, clock ticking, dishwasher clinking, me breathing -- into a sort of soundtrack to go with whatever it is I'm looking at or working on. Maybe it was this new hobby of bringing music and other sound into and out of the consciousness or creative focus of the moment that eventually made it so difficult for me to be able to tolerate much in the way of background music; it became too easy to detach the music from the action. It's like when you're watching TV and suddenly realize a lamp is reflected smack dab in the middle of the screen. You hadn't noticed it for the last 45 minutes but now it's all you can see and it drives you nuts and if you weren't so lazy you'd get up and turn it off.

Recently my sister Mary forwarded an interesting article to me about Professor Tadanou Tsunoda of Tokyo, author of "The Japanese Brain." He was in Cuba at a convention, and could barely hear the speakers because of the sounds of insects. He asked Cubans what sort of insects they were, and they responded, "What insects?" Though this could be attributed to their being so familiar with the sound they blotted it out automatically, Professor Tsunoda eventually performed experiments showing that Japanese hear insects and other natural sounds -- wind, ocean waves, etc. -- on the LEFT side of the brain, which is the "language" side. Everywhere else in the world, these sounds are processed on the "music," or right side, of the brain. And that in the Cuban situation, the insect sound was to him like someone talking at the same time as the speakers were speaking. According to the Professor, Japanese hear insects as "insect voices" instead of "insect sounds."

Over the years, there has been much written about the left vs the right side of the brain. In earlier Whither Zithers,

I know I've mentioned going back and forth from the left to the right and back in songwriting, which is one of the more obvious examples of the Language and Music sides of the brain having to work together, or at least to alternate with some measure of coherence. I'm not sure that back with Paul and the projector, I was flipping from the left side to the right and back, but I know I was moving the music around from some one place to some other place in my focus. And I had never done that before, at least consciously.

All this taken together makes me wonder if I overtweaked my brain in this area once upon a time, and now music too quickly detaches from the visuals, moves out of the music side, and insinuates into the language room of my brain, interfering with the dialog. Because the problem I have with background music in TV shows and movies, and elevators and coffee shops, is perfectly described as the feeling that someone is TALKING on the sidelines. It must be the same sensation of conversations in collision that the Professor had with the Cubans and the crickets.

Later, Professor Tsunoda found experimentally that this uniquely Japanese way of hearing insects was not in the DNA but was in the language. If Japanese were brought up with Swedish or even Chinese as their first language, they didn't exhibit this trait; if Norwegians were brought up with Japanese as their first language, they DID exhibit this otherwise Japanese trait. In other words, it's a learned trait, and not innate. So that makes me wonder: Is it possible to unlearn, and to shift input from its customary part of the brain to another and thereby shift its effect on your consciousness? In my one little experience with film, yes, but I wonder how far this can be taken? Can I throw a few switches and relearn to accept background music as such? Are the secrets of digging and grokking and meditation wrapped up in this ability to move sensations intentionally into specific brain areas usually assigned to receiving something else? Is madness this same sort of trick but unintentional? Does anybody still have the manual?