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Melodies in the Mind

The control and eradication of “earworms”

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In New Orleans, the German cockroach is the insect most likely to wander into a sleeping person's ear hunting for food, warmth or sex, or just because it's lost. Once in, the commotion commences. The cockroach discovers that the ear canal is a one-way street with no intersections. All six legs start thrashing. It isn't a pleasurable sensation.

During my days as an intern at Charity Hospital, patients with route sheets marked “roach in ear” were catapulted to the head of the triage line just behind gunshot wounds, stabbings and anything bleeding. Roaches in the ear became my accident room specialty. Cockroach extractions took less than a minute. A few drops of alcohol into the ear canal sent the cockroach into alcoholic stupor. The wiggling and intense discomfort ceased. I would then fish the insect out with tiny tweezers or flush it out with an ear syringe full of warm water. The relief was immediate.

While cockroaches are occasional unwelcomed ear canal guests, a much more tenacious nuisance is the earworm. These buggers insidiously slip into human brains and migrate to the brain's hearing center, causing the repetitive humming of some tune or lyric all day long. Attacks are usually brief, lasting only 15 to 30 seconds, but can reoccur for days with an annoying frequency. According to experts who published on the topic, earworms visit most human brains at one time or another.

Earworms are a prime example of an infectious malady not caused by conventional microbes or parasites. Exposure to music is often the inciting trigger, with seasonal outbreaks happening each Christmas and Jazz Fest. Most folks I knew growing up simply said, “I can't get this tune out of my head.” By now you have the drift. Other common monikers are sticky music, stuck song syndrome or simply song stickage.

My hat is off to whomever coined the term earworm. It is a perfect fit. Earworm researchers use more lofty terms, such as musical imagery repetition or involuntary musical imagery. A few lines of an old song with lyrics is the most common earworm trigger. Repetitious instrumental music runs and jingles round out the top three earworm categories.

“Certain songs create a sort of cognitive itch, the mental equivalent of an itchy back,” wrote James Kellaris, an expert on the how music influences consumers at the University of Cincinnati. He presented his paper “Dissecting earworms: Further evidence on the song-stuck-in-your-head phenomenon” at a 2003 consumer psychology meeting here in New Orleans. According to Kellaris,

