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The Sizzling Sound of Music

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by [Dale Dougherty](#) | [@dalepd](#) | [comments: 67](#)

Are iPods changing our perception of music? Are the sounds of MP3s the music we like to hear most? [Jonathan Berger](#), professor of music at Stanford, was on a panel with me at a meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Mountain View, CA on Saturday. Berger's presentation had a slide titled: "Live, Memorex or MP3." He mentioned that Thomas Edison promoted his phonograph by demonstrating that a person could not tell whether behind a curtain was an opera singer or one of Edison's cylinders playing a recording of the singer. More recently, the famous Memorex ad challenged us to determine whether it was a live performance of Ella Fitzgerald or a recorded one. Berger then said that he tests his incoming students each year in a similar way. He has them listen to a variety of recordings which use different formats from MP3 to ones of much higher quality. He described the results with some disappointment and frustration, as a music lover might, that each year the preference for music in MP3 format rises. In other words, students prefer the quality of that kind of sound over the sound of music of much higher quality. He said that they seemed to prefer "sizzle sounds" that MP3s bring to music. It is a sound they are familiar with.

I remember wondering what audiophiles were up to, buying extremely expensive home audio systems to play old vinyl records. They put turntables in sand-filled enclosures with elaborate cabling schemes. I wondered what they heard in that music that I didn't. Someone explained to me that audiophiles liked the sound artifacts of vinyl records -- the crackles of that format. It was familiar and comfortable to them, and maybe those affects became a fetish. Is it now becoming the same with iPod lovers? Our perception changes and we become attuned to what we like -- some like the sizzle and others like the crackle. I wonder if this isn't also something akin to thinking that hot dogs taste better at the ball park. The hot dog is identical to what you'd buy at a grocery store and there aren't many restaurants that serve hot dogs. A hot dog is not that special, except in the right setting. The context changes our perception, particularly when it's so obviously and immediately shared by others. Listening to music on your iPod is not about the sound quality of the music, and it's more than the convenience of listening to music on the move. It's that so many people are doing it, and you are in the middle of all this, and all of that colors your perception. All that sizzle is a cultural artifact and a tie that binds us. It's mostly invisible to us but it is something future generations looking back might find curious because these preferences won't be obvious to them.

On a related note, a friend commented recently that she doesn't understand why people put up with such poor sound quality for phone calls on cell phones, and particularly iPhones. "I can hardly hear the person talking to me," she said. "I don't think smart phones are making any improvement to the quality of the phone call," she added. "Is it not important anymore?" She wondered why people accepted such poor quality, and so did Jonathan Berger, but a lot of people just don't hear it the same way.