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Background music comes to the fore

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When you go to your favourite cafe, to a fashion store, a restaurant, a shopping centre or the gym, more often than not music will be playing. It is so prevalent in our daily lives that we rarely stop to think about it. In the cafe, it's top 40 hits. In the young fashion store, rap and R&B.

When the music is chosen well, when it matches and even elevates your mood, it can positively affect your behaviour. It transforms you into a potential customer. You may browse a little longer, spend a little more. And that's exactly what businesses are hoping to achieve when they hire a music specialist to design a soundtrack for them.

Music lovers may resent the thought that their favourite bands are being co-opted as marketing tools, but the links between music and consumer patterns are well documented. In one study, dance music was found to influence students in their choice of university. Classical music can lead to perceptions of better quality and a willingness to pay more. French music in bottle shops may prompt sales of French wine.

On a sunny Friday morning, I visit one of Sydney's classiest restaurants, Quay, to find out how music stimulates the appetite. I am here to meet Jeremy Courmadias, general manager of the Fink Group of restaurants, which owns Quay, and Holly Wighton, a curator from Brisbane-based company Nightlife Music. We meet in one of Quay's private dining rooms: a sparse but elegantly furnished room with a blockbuster view across Circular Quay to the Opera House.

We have barely taken our seats when Courmadias says, "Do you want to turn the music down?"

The music in question is a swinging number, *Broadway*, by Dakota Staton — its uptempo rhythm sounds like an invitation to a long lunch. The music streams from a sophisticated sound system and is really not too loud. If it is, Courmadias says, Quay's wait staff can adjust the volume in discrete areas of the dining floor, almost table by table.

Quay engaged Nightlife Music to devise a playlist as part of the restaurant's relaunch last year. A fine-dining institution, Quay in its previous incarnation was white-linen formal and, as Courmadias describes it, stiff. "We wanted to transform that, and the music was a big part of making it far more approachable, making the service more connected and engaged," he says. (The relaunch has been a hit: *The Australian* earlier this month named Quay the nation's hottest restaurant.)

Quay has a lunchtime playlist and a dinner list that almost tracks the menu from entree to main course and dessert. Wighton says she considers things such as the demographic profile of Quay's customers, the possibility they are dining there for a special occasion, and environmental factors such as furnishings and the room's acoustic. The lunch playlist is sophisticated and relaxed. In the evenings, she mixes it up: jazz, rock, indie folk, something with a harder edge. Imagine Nina Simone rubbing shoulders with Sufjan Stevens rubbing shoulders with Joni Mitchell, Nick Cave and Tom Waits.

The Fink Group auditioned the playlist in its company office before letting it loose on Quay diners: partly to test its match with the restaurant brand and partly to remind staff of the environment they are managing for their guests. Only once, Wighton says, has the Fink Group's creative director, John Fink, wanted a track pulled from the list. She doesn't remember what it was.

The music at Quay is like a heard-but-not-seen dining companion, a convivial guest who adds life to the party but doesn't dominate the conversation. Courmadias says it's part of the overall experience of dining at Quay, where every aspect is carefully thought through — from the decor, lighting and room temperature to the service, food and wine.

"The right music will create atmosphere, it will create intimacy, it will set the tone for the experience at the table," he says. "But you'll be able to identify it when it's wrong — too loud, too slow, the wrong vibe."

The music that's put into shops, cafes, gyms and restaurants is called background music, although the name doesn't really do it justice.

Background music harks back to the bland, easy-listening music that used to be piped into stores and lifts (the reason it was also known as elevator music). Muzak, the company whose name was synonymous with background music, no longer exists. It was subsumed into a multinational called Mood Media that now puts music very much at the foreground of the retail experience.

I'm sitting with Mood Media's head of music design and playlist curation, Ray Medhurst, in his cubicle office in Sydney's Pymont. There are no windows in the room but, thanks to a vast music database on his computer called Studio, Medhurst has ears open to the world. Studio, an in-house system, is a searchable archive of music across different eras, artists and genres, from myriad varieties of jazz and classical to contemporary pop and electronica. New tracks constantly are being added.

On high rotation in many of Mood Media's client businesses is the current ARIA No 1 single, Tones and I's *Dance Monkey*. "We are so across Tones and I," Medhurst says.

Medhurst was a member of 1980s pop band the Rockmelons, and has been a DJ and record producer. By the early 2000s, however, the production business was disrupted by laptop editing software such as Pro Tools — which put multi-tracking in the hands of consumers — and by shows such as *Australian Idol* that, Medhurst says, dampened record companies' hunger to develop new talent. He branched into music curation when Mambo co-founder Dare Jennings asked him to produce a mix CD for the surf brand's stores.

Medhurst is compiling a playlist for another surf brand that wants to evoke contemporary and vintage surf culture without summoning the Beach Boys. He has been listening to local "slacker punk" bands such as Dune Rats and Skegss, and Midnight Oil's 1980 single *Wedding Cake Island*.

Companies sometimes expect that a specially curated playlist will make people spend money, but Medhurst says it doesn't work that way.

"Music does not make you buy more," he says. "It's a matter of working with the brand, working out the ambience, the energy and experience that they want to give the customer." In other words, music is part of making a retail environment conducive to shopping, and nudging an almost-buy into a sale.

The worst in-store experience, he says, is having no music at all, just the lonely sound of "footsteps on lino".

Background music is everywhere but the size of the industry is difficult to calculate because companies do not reveal sales figures. Brisbane's Nightlife Music, for example, is a private company owned by its two founders, Mark Brownlee and Tim de Souza. The music-loving engineers started out in 1989 when they invented a video jukebox. A more recent innovation is a smartphone app, CrowdDJ, that allows customers to choose music from the Nightlife playlist when they're in a client's venue. Nightlife says it has 4000 clients and revenues that have grown 20 per cent year on year. Mood Media has 500,000 clients worldwide, including local customers Myer, David Jones, Country Road and Freedom.

Restaurants, shops and other businesses require a licence, and pay royalties, for the right to play music in their premises. If they were doing it properly, they needed two licences to cover for both songwriter and performer copyrights. That has been streamlined with the introduction last month of OneMusic Australia, which requires only one licence. The new system will roll out across more than 160,000 business locations.

OneMusic has simplified music licensing, but Nightlife Music says it does not prevent businesses from using personal streaming services such as Spotify, although business use is not allowed under Spotify's terms and conditions. "The reality is that it's a devaluing of music in Australia," Nightlife chief executive David O'Rourke says.

Richard Mallett, head of music licensing at collecting society APRA AMCOS, says it is not OneMusic's responsibility to police Spotify's terms and conditions, and refusing to licence uncompliant businesses is unlikely to be effective. "That's not going to stop anybody using Spotify. It may encourage them."

Mood Media managing director Steve Hughes highlights another potential consequence of OneMusic. Licence fees for businesses with a large floor area have increased substantially, he says, with the result that at least two major retailers have opted to switch to rights-included playlists. Rights-included lists do not feature original artists and popular songs — the kind that make customers take notice — but are populated with sound-alikes and generic tracks. It's almost a return to the anonymous elevator music that gave Muzak a bad name.

While music curators such as Medhurst and Wighton use their encyclopedic knowledge to create powerful brand associations, rights-included music simply fades into the background.

“You are attempting to brand a company with sound, and it’s in the foreground,” Medhurst says. “With this stuff, it’s just filling up the silence.”

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