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“Hit me, baby, one more time.”



(Photo: Getty Images)

This week, a broad coalition of musicians got behind a Freedom of Information Act request to reveal which songs the government used while interrogating detainees. In fact, we already know some of the artists on the soundtrack to the dark side of the war on terror. Suspect Ruhal Ahmed reportedly was subjected to Britney Spears's "... Baby One More Time"; Binyam Mohamed, tortured at one of the CIA's dark sites, claimed he was forced to listen to Eminem for twenty days straight. Queen's "We Are the Champions," Nine Inch Nails's "March of the Pigs," and, of course, Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA" have come up in reports. Mohammed al Qahtani, the so-called twentieth hijacker, said that whenever he fell asleep, the guards would crank up Christina Aguilera.

The Army's Psychological Operations command didn't invent "acoustic bombardment," as it's technically known. During its standoff with cult leader David Koresh, the FBI blasted Nancy Sinatra; in their quest to smoke out Manuel Noriega, U.S. troops played Guns N' Roses's "Welcome to the Jungle" and Van Halen's (yes) "Panama." During the second siege of Fallujah, our troops played AC/DC's "Hells Bells," letting it echo off the walls of the city. ("It's like throwing a smoke bomb," the PsyOps spokesman told the St. Petersburg *Times*.)

So what is it specifically about music that gives it the potential to torture? Loud music can't be shut out in the same way that loud speech can. Neurologist Oliver Sacks, author of the book *Musophilia*, once referred to "musical brainworms, the annoyingly repetitive musical phrases that may run through one's mind for days on end." That's partly what makes effective pop music.

But, strangely, what makes effective “acoustic bombardment” is the very unfamiliarity of the music to non-Western ears. “Our brains automatically process music and try to figure out what comes next,” says Daniel Levitin, a psychology professor at McGill and author of *This Is Your Brain on Music*.

Because the brain can’t help but anticipate music’s next steps, “any Western music would have done the trick,” he says. “These were tonal structures the detainees’ brains can’t figure out. They kept trying, and they kept failing. Just as if I made you listen to Chinese opera, it’d probably drive you crazy.”

Many musicians from last week’s coalition—from Rosanne Cash to the Roots—issued statements expressing their outrage. As Tom Morello, the guitarist in Rage Against the Machine, put it: “The fact that music I helped create was used in crimes against humanity sickens me.” And it’s impossible not to sympathize with him.

But if these musicians were to be completely honest, they’d have to admit that music has a darker side, or at least a side they can’t control. “One thing that makes music so powerful is that it activates circuits in the brain that are not under conscious control,” says Richard Friedman, a professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College. “It has the power to augment all human drives, including aggression.” Some of the music soldiers used to torture detainees is the same they used to pump themselves up before battle—one thinks of that scene in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, with the fellows talking about listening to Drowning Pool’s “Bodies” as they rattled along in their tank. Whether it’s a soundtrack for a battle or one for torture, both work. “In each instance,” says Friedman, “you can use music to facilitate the process.”