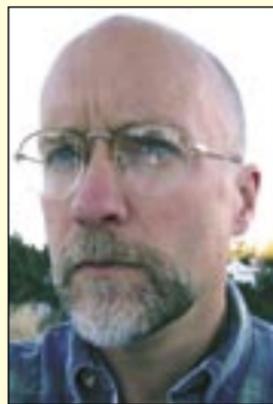


Maddog Unleashed

Mad Dog Unplugged: Time to Put a Leash On the iPod People

Music is the silence between the notes. —Claude Debussy

BY PATRICK O'GRADY



Let us discuss the iPod. I'm not saying that everyone who owns one should be executed—just the people who go out in public wearing them like pricey plastic jewelry full of noise.

These junior jukeboxes are everywhere, more than 100 million of them worldwide, making it seem as though there's been an epidemic of albino brain worms that eventually overrun the cranium entirely and begin leaking from the ears of the afflicted. This in itself does not concern me. There must be some explanation for the appalling state of the Republic, and it may indeed be albino brain worms. Better that than willful ignorance, sloth and narcissism.

But must we be plugged in all the time, tethered to Big Mama by an electronic umbilical cord? Don't we leave the house or office for a walk, run or ride in order to operate on the internals for a while, free of computers, cell phones and other distractions? To listen to the music in our heads instead of our pockets?

Apparently not. Count the ears unsullied by white plastic buds next time you're gliding along some public path. You'll come up with an amazingly small number. In a nation where every karaoke crooner dreams of becoming an American Idol, it seems that everyone's life must now include a soundtrack.

Turkish Delight. We have a new kitten here in Dogpatch, and she requires neither battery nor power cord. Turkish is tightly wound, like an old-fashioned watchspring, and scampers about attacking this and that until she finally runs down and clambers up my shins for a nap in my lap. As a consequence my legs look as though I've been wading in a piranha pond.

Turkish has tried without success to attract the attention of our older cat, Ike, who either pretends that the kitten does not exist or exudes astonishment and hostility at the slightest glimpse of her at play.

Turkish has my sympathy in this fruitless interaction, as I elicit the same reaction when I encounter one of the iPod People during a ride or run. Either I pass unnoticed, despite my best attempts to draw attention, or a hissy fit ensues.

Listen Up. I don't want their attention in a "Hey, look at me!" kind of way. I can get all of that I require and then some by writing something outrageous in this space. No, I want the iPod People to pay attention to something other than themselves for safety's sake—theirs and mine. It's one thing to tune in and drop out on a stationary cycle in a health club. These bliss-ninnies can and should be ignored. They've paid the piper, let them enjoy the tune.

But I am seeing them increasingly in public spaces—city bike paths and county single-track, afoot and on two wheels, singly and in bunches. And if it can't be downloaded for 99 cents from iTunes, they don't hear it.

Tone Deaf. The worst case I've heard of was the young woman who failed to recognize the gunshots that heralded the Virginia Tech massacre because she was all iPodded up. A close second was right here in town, when a friend rode up behind an earbudded pedestrian on a narrow bit of single-track.

My friend has one of those nifty little bells that are said to be friendlier than an abrupt, "On your left," but tinkling it had no effect on the bemused stroller. The spoken word also failed to capture his attention.

Finally, my friend managed to squeak past him, and turning, suggested that he turn the volume down a tad.

"What? says the walker.

"I've been trying to pass you for a quarter mile now," says my friend.

"Well, why didn't you say something?" And so on, as if scripted by Abbott and Costello.

Hey, there's nothing wrong with enjoying your tunes. But the great outdoors are full of music, lots more than can be packed onto an 80GB hard drive, and it's best heard live.