

Music by the Numbers

I listen to really unpopular music.

At least that's what Nielsen tells me. According to the year-end 2014 Nielsen Music U.S. Report, Jazz accounts for just 1.4% of the total music consumption in the United States. It's in a dead tie (so to speak) with Classical, another genre on life support.

Fortunately, jazz is much more popular in our community, it sounds great in outdoor venues, and we are blessed with the nationally renowned Iowa City Jazz festival, July 2-4 this year. Nielsen measures this sort of thing as well; in 2014, 32 million people (12% of adults) attended at least one music festival.

My taste runs more toward traditional big-band jazz, and if yours does as well you should check out the Jazz Festival's side stages featuring the Suzanne Smith and Silver Swing jazz bands. On the main stage, the United Jazz Ensemble or North Corridor Jazz All-Stars are probably your best bets.

Actually, no matter what your jazz preference you can't go too far wrong whatever group you're able to catch downtown that weekend. Fortunately, I didn't see any groups billed as "free jazz" ensembles. They typically have no discernable melodies, chord progressions or consistent tempos. Entire sets sound like they are still warming up; I don't get it.

Also, according to Nielsen, the only official category that's less popular than Jazz or Classical is Children's, a genre I'm fortunate to be almost oblivious to. I'm not sure if that category benefited at all from the mind-boggling success of "Frozen," the best-selling album of 2014 (just nosing out Taylor Swift's "1989"). In case you were wondering about the most (instead of least) popular types of music, Rock leads with 29% followed by R&B/Hip-Hop at 17%, Pop at 15% and Country at 11%.

I was born and raised during the heyday of vinyl recordings, so I find it oddly affirming that vinyl LPs had another record-breaking year in 2014 with 9.2 million sales, surpassing last year's record of 6.1 million units. This is the ninth

consecutive year of growth for vinyl sales, although it still accounts for only about 6% of physical album sales. I still have a turntable somewhere, and a box full of very old (and probably very brittle) vinyl recordings.

Nearly 25% of all music listening happens in vehicles, which I had a full dose of last week (courtesy of satellite radio) as I drove singlehanded to and from Central Michigan. I was attending the four-day Midwest Banjo Camp, which is devoted to Bluegrass and Old-Time music; two genres which don't even rate their own categories with Nielsen.

To most folks, being in close proximity with about 300 banjo players of varying abilities may sound like something out of *Dante's Inferno*. I'm actually an upright bass player, which is a popular commodity in jam sessions that include dozens of banjo players who have trouble sticking to a tempo or following chord progressions. If cats played musical instruments, I'm certain they would prefer banjos.

At noontime one day, when everyone else was having lunch, I came across James McKinney and a really good guitar player working on some tunes in a designated jam session area. McKinney is something of a demi-god in 5-string banjo circles, with Wikipedia referring to him as a "true master."

Normally you'd leave someone like that alone (especially if you have marginal talents and want to avoid embarrassing yourself), but I was lugging my bass with me at the time and recognized the tune they were playing. I started playing along with them - softly at first - and then normally when they didn't seem to care.

We went along this way for four very spirited tunes before they packed up and moved on. The entire time, neither one acknowledged my presence or even caught my eye. That was actually my goal; good bass players are supposed to be pretty much invisible. If the session leader is catching your attention, you're screwing up.

Oddly, that is the best thing that has ever happened to me as a bassist; I was totally ignored by the great James McKinney. Sounds like it might make a good epitaph.

One final Nielsen statistic; the top global artist in 2014 based on social and web engagement (Facebook, Twitter and Wikipedia page views) was Shakira. If you've never heard of her, grab another grape Nehi out of the icebox and crank up your Victrola.

Writers Group Member Dave Parsons is looking forward to seeing at least 1.4% of you soon at the Iowa City Jazz Festival.