

By Dr Lee Chung Horn, Editorial Board Member

Music for Your Waiting Room



Dr Lee Chung Horn, MBBS (S), MRCP (UK), FAMS, is a Consultant Endocrinologist at Gleneagles Medical Centre. He is the Chairman of the Ministry of Health workgroup for clinical practice guidelines on diabetes mellitus. For a sample of his trenchant views on music, read his magazine, *Beta* at <http://www.betamusic.com.sg>.

Lately I have been fretting over what place music has – functionally or otherwise – in doctors’ waiting rooms.

Not whether decanting music into your patients’ brains while they nervously flip *8 Days* or *Singapore Tatler* helps rid them of headaches or strange rashes, mind you. Just merely whether some songs are plainly wrong to play to the unwell, and whether or not you could get a giggle out of people when their anxiety level is threatening to go into the red.

Last week while shopping, I wondered aloud why departmental stores played music so insipid you would think their shoppers were musical retards whose tastes extended only to Richard Clayderman. This was a lament my wife had heard many times before, so she gave me a withering look, “Don’t be stupid – do you think they will play Justin Timberlake’s “Rock Your Body”? Look at all the moms here. They will fall off their high heels if they just so much as hear a bassline!”

Of course, I know it is all about the demographic. Are your clients oldsters who like their Cai Qin and Teresa Teng? Or are they hip, young things tearing to paint the night crimson at Zouk? Or perhaps they are heart attack survivors nursing new Taxus coronary stents?

So the music has to be appropriate to the establishment. Be this as it may, in every restructured hospital where I had worked, I would gnash my teeth. Why does the Chief Executive Officer allow the Corporate Communications to play this, this bad music?

And this is why I thought I would do better in my own clinic since I now work in the private sector. In my own world, I get to choose. No, I will not allow my patients to be scandalised by awful music.

I remember attending a friend’s wedding 14 years ago. Her wedding committee blithely played Billy Joel’s “Honesty” while the beaming girl stood on stage, plastic knife thrust inside her eight-tier wedding cake. For three, eternity-long

◀ Page 34 – Music for Your Waiting Room

minutes, Joel cynically crooned, “Honesty is such a lonely word, everyone is so untrue. Honesty is hardly ever heard, it is mostly what I need from you.”

So 10 months ago, I embarked on a music project that continues till today. My game plan was to play music in my clinic that was fresh, thoughtful and bold. My song list on any given day would be different, and the farthest from Class 95 FM pap.

So if you feel good music for your workplace is a desirable thing, I would stick my neck out and give you some tips.

First points: Do not play Kenny G – it is poor taste. Maybe The Essential Kenny G was the last CD you bought. If that is the case, the situation demands that you should march to the record store immediately, and get some new stuff. Steer clear of Vonda Shepard. Do not play Journey. No KC & The Sunshine Band. Also, do not just let your staff turn on their favourite radio station. The latter may turn out to be 93.3 FM where the chatter flows like the mighty Yangtze river.

If you are an ophthalmologist, do not play Etta James’ “I’d Rather Go Blind”. It is a magnificent song (and James’ version is indubitably the best), but wholly insensitive. Especially when poor Mr Lim out there with his teacher-daughter has just had his second vitreous haemorrhage.

If your patients have liver diseases, rapper 50 Cent’s “Got Me A Bottle” would be wrong. Hank Williams, Jr’s “There’s a Devil In The Bottle”, too. And be careful: critics’ darling Joni Mitchell’s tender “A Case of You” has alcohol connotations as well!

Psychiatrists, more than other doctors, I reckon, believe in the power of the subconscious. Some quiet music by Ambient legends Harold Budd and Brian Eno would be best for their waiting rooms. Not The 5th Dimension’s “(Last Night) I Didn’t Get To Sleep At All”, not the newest radio hit “Crazy” by Gnarls Barkley, not Michael Buble’s “How Can You Mend A Broken Heart”, not Lisa Stansfield’s “Symptoms of Loneliness and a Heartache” (I am not making this up!) and, most certainly not Kris Kristofferson’s “Help Me Make It Through The Night”.

I think some Barry Manilow is not necessarily out of place, but please, not the hideous “Copacabana” or the schmaltzy Vegas rehashes Mr Manilow dished out on American Idol while promoting his Greatest Songs of the Fifties album. “Mandy” is great, “Tryin’ to Get The

Feeling Again” is wonderful, if only because people find comfort in a song they had heard in earlier, healthier times.

Classic stuff like Dionne Warwick in her Bacharach and David period never go out of fashion, not even in “serious” establishments like doctors’ clinics. Sinatra is a good choice, just do not play only “My Way”, the man has got loads more of brilliant stuff. If you are familiar with old soul hits, they are also perfect – melodic, warm and bearing an attractive classicism that is absent from today’s Beyonce hits and Daniel Powter rubbish. I am talking about Bobby ‘Blue’ Bland, Donny Hathaway, Curtis Mayfield, Dusty Springfield, The Dells, and Aretha.

Plastic surgeons who cater to showbiz patients need to boost their hip quotient! If your patients do not look like the sort who would groove to Squarepusher’s “Ultravisitor” or the new space disco of Lindstrom & Prins Tomas, spinning Moby’s 1999 album *Play* or the first RoxySopp album adds just the right dash of understated sophistication.

So, you ask, what do I play in my waiting room? Well, my selection (all MP3s) is eclectic. In the last week, like it or not, my patients heard Marvin Gaye, Thelonus Monk, Nancy Sinatra, Hard-Fi, The Sleepy Jackson, Minnie Riperton, Harry Nilsson, Judy Collins, Miriam Makeba, A Forest Mighty Black, Jill Scott, Yo La Tengo, Todd Terje, Gotan Project, Nina Simone, Katie Melua, Baaba Maal & Mansour Seck, Pretenders, Diana Ross, Shuggie Otis, David Bowie, Kid Loco, VoxTrot, Gladys Knight & The Pips, and Thievery Corporation.

Sometimes when particularly vexing patients are scheduled for appointments, I would remember to slip in Swedish band The Cardigans’ “I Need Some Fine Wine and You, You Need to be Nicer”. I know Mr and Mrs Tan-Brown pay close attention to everything that goes on in my waiting room, especially how long I had kept them waiting (again). Plus they never fail to testily charge that I ought to pay their parking. Mr and Mrs Tan-Brown, this one is for you. Folks, this song is from the Cardigans’s 2005 album *Super Extra Gravity*. Get your copy today.

Of course, for many of my dear patients, the music I have on offer means nothing. It goes all over their heads. This does not bother me because – I have had my day! And, “Crazy” by Gnarls Barkley, mark my words, is going down as the best hit song of 2006. ■