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Silent Discos Let You Dance to Your Own Beat

By COURTNEY RUBIN JUNE 17, 2015



At the South Street Seaport silent disco on May 22, partiers used wireless headphones to listen to simultaneous sets by live D.J.s. Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

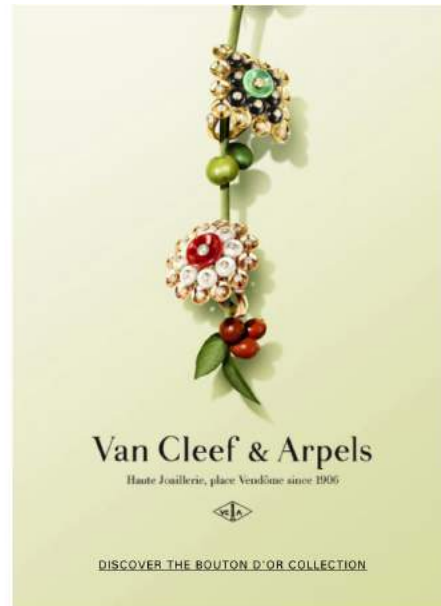
Just after sunset on a recent Friday night, what looked like a silent flash mob or a mass game of charades was taking place in a cordoned-off cobblestone square [in the South Street Seaport](#): some 300 people dancing wildly, sans music. Or so it seemed.

There were actually three D.J.s dueling for the crowd's attention, but their tunes could be heard only through wireless headphones, which glowed red, blue or green depending on which channel the reveler chose.

It was a silent disco, a phenomenon that has taken off at music festivals ([Coachella](#), [Bonnaroo](#)), bars and weddings as a way to party without running afoul of noise ordinances and curfews — or in the case of universities, studying students ([U.C.L.A. recently held one in the library rotunda in the run-up to finals](#)).

This is clubbing for people who don't want to be subjected to the will of one D.J. for the evening and, because the wearer controls the volume, clubbing for people who don't want ringing ears and sore throats the next morning.

"I used to go to clubs, but the music is too loud," said Andre Coppedge,



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38, who drove with seven friends from Allentown, Pa., to the South Street Seaport. "Here you party the whole time, and if you don't like the song, you just change the frequency."

Joshua Diamond, 30, who came with his fiancée and another couple, said the silent discos are "more PG than regular clubbing."



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D.J.s at a silent disco at the South Street Seaport compete for dancers' ears and attention on May 22.
Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

In fact, in deference to the under-13 attendees, of which there were a few, House of Pain's "Jump Around" was edited to remove offensive lyrics. "We didn't used to do that, but we got bombarded with emails from parents when we tried to make these events over 21," said Castel Valere-Couturier, founder of [Sound Off Experience](#), which ran the disco.

Those who stumbled upon the event (as many did, because there was no booming music to draw them over) may have thought it was a pop-up garden party, a cult, or the en masse equivalent of the guy who runs on the gym treadmill singing aloud to a song only he can hear.

To an onlooker with no headphones, it sounded like an impromptu a cappella battle of the bands, with a bunch of people pogoing up and down singing Kriss Kross's "Jump" while others yelled the words to Montell Jordan's "[This Is How We Do It](#)."

Whether the experience is isolating or integrating depends on whom you ask.

"This is what we've been reduced to: dancing with ourselves," said Bernadette Gay, 56, who, hips shaking and white iPhone headphones snaking out of her pocket, could have been the classic ad for iTunes.

Ms. Gay, who works for a health care company, tried the silent disco channels briefly, but returned the big black wireless headphones, deciding she herself was the best D.J. (Her pick: the Colombian singer [Carlos Vives](#).) She added: "I remember when Walkmen came out. It's isolating. Where's the connection?"

But Chanez Baali, 31, a media technology company director in Woodside, Queens, said that she frequently goes alone to silent discos. "You're in your own little world," she said. "You stop thinking about what you look like, and so you're not as shy about striking up conversations." It helps that the silliness factor makes everyone more approachable, she said.

The first major silent disco was in England at Glastonbury in 2005, whose organizers were battling noise restrictions.

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Castel Valere-Couturier, founder of the event. Benjamin Nurman for The New York Times

Though [Bonnaroo](#) in Tennessee quickly followed suit, the quiet riots took a while to take off in the United States, in part because of the technology. They used infrared headphones, which required a line of sight to the transmitter; when people moved, the sound would often go out.

“You’d never lose yourself in the music because the minute it would hiccup or crackle, you’d go out of it,” said Ryan Dowd, formerly a tour manager for bands like [Widespread Panic](#) and [Drive-By Truckers](#), and now founder of [Silent Events](#), which has organized noiseless festivities for clients including Bonnaroo and Gawker Media. (They now use short-range radio frequency headphones, which don’t present the same problem.)

There are more than a dozen companies orchestrating silent parties, with names like [Hush](#) Concerts and [ZERODb](#) (as in decibel), most of whose founders stumbled on the concept while abroad.

Mr. Valere-Couturier tried it beachside in Israel. William Petz, founder of [Quiet Events](#), based in Astoria, Queens, spotted it four years ago while on a cruise with family to Bermuda.

“My girlfriend and I were like, ‘This sounds really stupid, but what else is there to do on a ship?’”

He conceded it was fun and promptly invested in 350 pairs of headphones, planning to sell them on eBay if the business failed. He now has more than 6,000 pairs, bookings as far away as China and a standing night [at the beer garden at Bohemian Hall in Astoria](#), which draws up to 1,000 people. The bar’s manager Andrew Walters said the disco is indeed an attraction. “He has his own list of people and they come out just for this,” he said.

Weddings, particularly destination ones, are a new market. Mr. Dowd estimates he has gone from one or two a year to a few a month in the last year, especially since [Martha Stewart Weddings approved the trend](#) in February. Besides the live D.J., guests can choose between the bride’s channel and the groom’s channel (after the first dance, of course).





There's music fit for any age.
Benjamin Norman for The New York Times



"You get calls from people trying to do these very cool destination weddings like Maui and the Cayman Islands where you rent these villas and you think it's carte blanche, but they're going to shut you down at 9," Mr. Dowd said.

He also recently received a call from a well-known production studio requesting a silent disco for a scene in an upcoming film. "They're not making fun of it, so we're going to do it," he said.

The newest frontier for these silent companies is fitness: yoga, boot camps and spin classes, where headphones mean the instructor doesn't have to shout and no one needs earplugs.

At a silent version of a high-intensity interval workout called [Shakedown Fitness](#), held at Black River Studios in Harlem, students from the ballet class downstairs popped up asking if the class had been canceled, because they were used to complaining about the D.J.'s hip-hop tunes drowning out their Tchaikovsky.

Mr. Petz has even tried silent comedy, which pits two entertainers against each other. "If you see the other guy has all the listeners, you have to be very visual to get people to switch over," he said. "Like taking a shirt off."

Kim Scolaro, 31, otherwise known as [DJ Kharisma](#), said working silent discos is more challenging than any other party.

"When you're the only D.J., you can do what you want, take it easy sometimes," said Ms. Scolaro, who worked the Seaport event. "But here you have to constantly give it your all. You're getting instant about what songs people like and don't like." (At some music festivals, there is just one channel because organizers don't want to subject the talent to battle. But Mr. Dowd said that happens infrequently.)



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Back on the dance floor, the D.J. on the green channel said, apparently without irony, "Let's make some noise." And a woman yelled, "I remember dancing to this song at someone's bar mitzvah." (It was the Isley Brothers' "Shout.") A conga line seemed to form out of nowhere, though a quick switch of channels revealed that, in fact, Gloria Estefan's "Conga" was also playing.

Just before 11 p.m., Decodar Loney, 23, took off her black boots with six-inch heels to twerk on the cobblestones.

"I couldn't have enough fun with them on," she said. (Thanks to the headphones, earrings were actually the most-removed accessory.) Ms. Loney, who is from Trinidad, added: "When I'm home, people tell me I have no rhythm. But I can do anything here." In other words, who can tell if it's bad rhythm or she's just dancing to a different beat?

Nearby, Nicole Lancia, 34, and her friend Kelly Washburn, 33, alternately laughed, danced and people-watched.

"It's hysterical," said Ms. Lancia, who happened on the event after a sushi dinner a block away. "It feels like you're singing in the shower."

She and Ms. Washburn watched a woman dancing with her two sons belt out Whitney Houston's "I'm Every Woman."

"I want to be on the same station as *her*," Ms. Lancia said.

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