

Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War

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In 2003, news emerged that detainees at Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere had been subjected to hours of repeated playing of songs by bands ranging from the American heavy metallists Metallica to - bizarrely - the children's puppet Barney the Dinosaur, among others.

Although it is easy to trivialise the use of music in torture, and more broadly in warfare, it is an important and neglected issue. The publication last year of Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan's *The Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence* provided a welcome introduction to the topic, and now Jonathan Pieslak's *Sound Targets* offers a serious and insightful examination of how music was used by American soldiers in the Iraq War.

Pieslak, a musicologist by training, starts with a fascinating analysis of how music has been used in TV recruitment adverts for the US armed services. Increasingly, these adverts have come to resemble rock videos, with metal music in particular providing the soundtrack to a message that combat is exciting. Once recruited, soldiers in basic training encounter a musical culture in which songs, especially marching songs, aim to consolidate their identities as fighters and build comradeship.

In the field, Pieslak notes, US soldiers in Iraq are often fanatical consumers of music, both in combat and off duty. Vehicles are decked out with improvised sound systems and loud blasts of metal and rap help to pump up fighters before they go out on patrol.

Portable music technology has also helped soldiers to compose music while in Iraq and a surprising number of recordings have been made during the war, including rap, patriotic songs and even one example of contemporary experimental art music.

Some of these recordings demonstrate a violent demonisation of Iraqi civilians and insurgents among soldiers, but others complain about the military and provide an outlet for feelings of frustration.

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Music has also been used by the American troops in Iraq both as a propaganda tool - broadcast from speakers mounted on trucks and via the radio - and during the interrogation of Iraqi detainees.

The question of torture is not a simple one and Pieslak does not unearth any unpublished revelations beyond the finding that there did not seem to be any clear codification as to how music should be used in interrogation.

The rationale behind the use of music seemed to be a) that repeating songs for hours would weaken detainees' will to resist and b) the use of culturally alien music, such as heavy metal, would be disturbing to the listener.

On the latter point there appears to have been little awareness of the fact that metal and other Western music genres had a large following in Iraq both before and after the invasion.

The final chapter of *Sound Targets* presents an extended discussion of the particular importance of rap and metal in the lives of US soldiers in Iraq. Pieslak shows how the harsh timbres of metal provide a powerful analogy to the experience of combat and how hip hop's hard-hitting lyrics are reinterpreted to apply to the Iraq situation.

Both genres, soldiers believe, help them to prepare for the reality of combat, even to the extent of inducing a trance-like state in some. This may be disturbing to those who love metal and rap but oppose militarism. Nonetheless, Pieslak points out that the very need to use music to prepare for battle does highlight the "unnaturalness" of going out to kill.

He also considers the use of music by insurgents and Islamists to show that the utilisation of music for violent ends is not confined to American soldiers.

Sound Targets provides a valuable reminder that, as the author argues, music can both empower and disempower; it can both torture and ensure psychic survival.

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Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War

By Jonathan Pieslak. Indiana University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/indiana-university>) Press 240pp, £40.00 and £13.99 ISBN 9780253353238 and 220875.

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