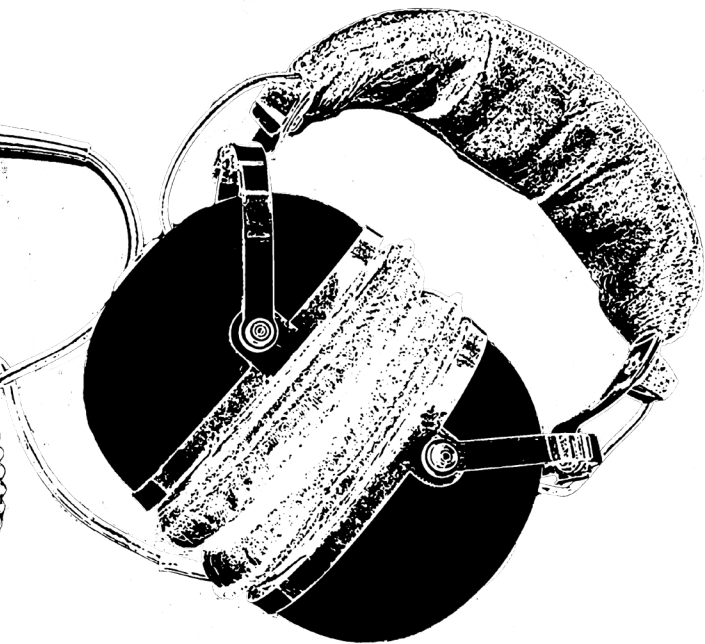


HEADPHONES



Michael Harren

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photos of Pioneer headphones by Chris Mahula

listen to the music at:
michaelharren.com/headphones

design by luke kurtis

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I remember the first time I listened to music on headphones, literally *the first time*. My dad had a pair of these massive Pioneers from 1972, which I never paid much attention to until my brother started telling me how cool it was to listen to music this way.

"It sounds like they are singing in the middle of your head," he said. "Wanna listen?"

When I agreed, he directed me to sit down in front of the receiver and turntable. He carefully picked up the headphones and placed them over my pre-adolescent ears. I

felt their weight and that strange feeling of the air being sucked out of my head when those big pleather-y pads sealed themselves around my ears. He picked up a record from the rack, carefully removed the album from its sleeve, and placed it on the turntable.

Power: on.

The turntable began to spin and he lifted the tonearm and lowered the stylus to the edge of the record. I jumped a little when the needle rumbled into its groove but then:

Tonight's the night we'll make history

Honey, you and I

Cus I'll take any risk to tie back the hands of time

And stay with you here tonight

He was right! Dennis DeYoung's voice was *in my head!* It wasn't coming from the left or the right ear, it was like the sound was coming from inside my brain. I couldn't get enough of it.

So take your seats and don't be late

Leave your spirits high

To turn on these theater lights

And brighten the darkest times

Here at the Paradise

It wasn't just the voice, though. It was a combination of things that were soon to become the loves of my life: piano, singing, and is that a synthesizer? I closed my ears to the outside world and immersed myself completely in music. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, my eyes examined the painting of the Paradise Theater on the album sleeve and noticed the ways the art reflected back what I was hearing in the music.

I found it.

Escape.

These headphones ushered in the almost comically diverse array of music that growing up in an '80s household supplied. I had already experienced a lifetime of listening to my bedroom record player, but this headphone thing was notably different. Of course, I listened to my mom's favorites like Neil Diamond and Barry Manilow, but I even managed to find the lighter side of my brother's collection, choosing Heart's "Dog and Butterfly" over their edgier cuts like "Straight On." Instead of rock and rolling all night with KISS, I got introspective with Peter Dinklage's "Beth." I wanted to listen to everything again now that I had discovered headphones.

As I traversed adolescence, my childlike confusion deepened and I became more serious. Why did I want to cry when my best friend told me about his new girlfriend? Why did that grown man call me a fag when I was just doing my job at the movie theater? Hadn't I been keeping the lid on my femininity carefully enough? Is there something really wrong with who I am?

As I grew into a teenager, I'd tell myself in these confusing, upsetting, and more frequent moments: "That's okay. Tonight we'll put on headphones and turn it all off." I loved donning my Walkman and tucking myself into the plastic-y comfort of the waterbed I had inherited from my brother. I lost myself in the waves of sound and PVC-enrobed tap water.

Of course, my penchant for escape found its way into school hours as well. Unlike the kids who snuck off campus during lunch to smoke or drink, I had a much more valiant mission. Across the street from my high school was the backside of a shopping center that was home to the usual small-town shops: a hobby shop, a frame store, a diner called The Hot Biscuit, and, my favorite, the Melody Shop. A huge record store that stocked all of the latest hits on 7-inch singles. I snuck off campus pretty much every day, crawled through a hole in a chain-link fence at the back of the property, and spent the

lunch money my mom gave me on these vinyl discs. By this time I was playing piano all the time as a means of distraction, but music plus headphones was the real stuff. I found my escape by hiding out in music.

*Tonight's the night we'll make history
As sure as dogs can fly
And I'll take any risk
To tie back the hands of time*

When I came out of the closet in my late teens, I connected with the nightlife of alternative dance clubs. Not only had I found kindred spirits in the people I met there, but there was music, and it was loud enough to take me right back to that place of escape. I found a new retreat on the dance floor. As many nights a week as I could, I ventured to #’s Nightclub in Houston dancing the night away to New Order, Depeche Mode, and Thrill Kill Kult. My job as a waiter in a tiny health food cafe funded my compact disc

addiction, and cover charges to clubs—oh, and an occasional can of vegetarian chili when I couldn't eat at work.

As time went on substances became my escape. I added shots of tequila, and then ecstasy and LSD to the mix. My need for



The “Texas Dip,” and Then—

escape had become more pronounced, as did the consequences, which came fast and strong until I sobered up in my early 20s.

As an adult, I have learned to keep myself out of emotional hiding. Day by day, year by year I learned to push myself through this somewhat unhealthy form of self-care I picked up in my adolescent years, choosing closer relationships over sequestering in my apartment. It's not always easy to navigate the risks and challenges of engaging in close relationships with other humans, but with practice, it gets easier.

With practice.

I know you feel these are the worst of times

I do believe it's true

When people lock their doors and hide inside

Rumour has it it's the end of paradise.

Quarantining during a global pandemic, it turns out, doesn't afford one much of this needed practice. From where I sit—around seven months after New York City went on lockdown—I have a perspective I never dreamed I would possess. I spent a frightening afternoon receiving text messages one after another from my various teaching and performing gigs letting me know they were shutting down. Getting past the initial flood of text messages and emails from all of my various jobs that were closing abruptly in one afternoon was the first hurdle. Then:

How do I see my boyfriend if the subway shuts down?

Should I even be seeing my boyfriend?

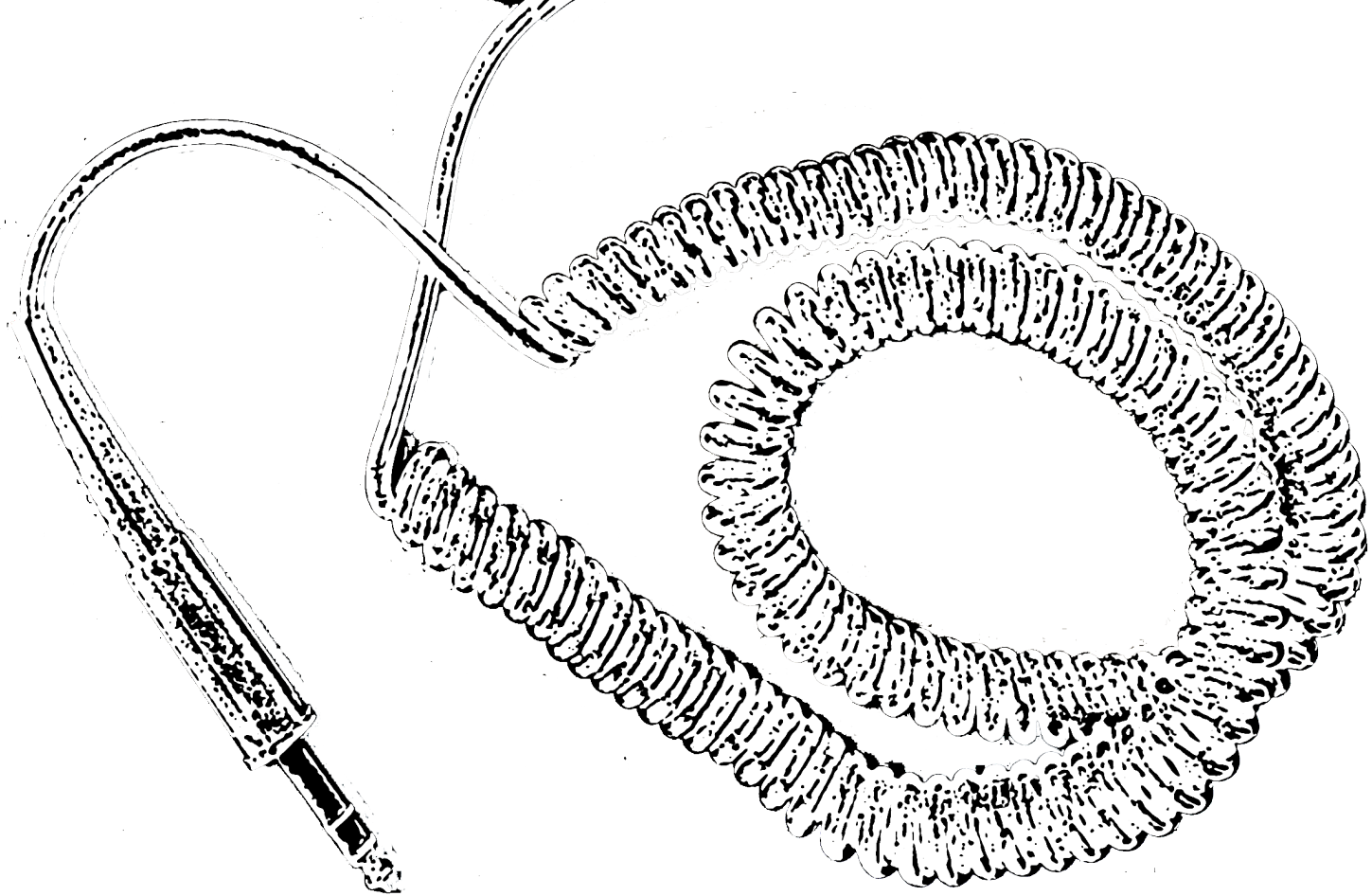
What if he freaks out and leaves the city and I'm all alone?

HOLY SHIT DID I WAIT TOO LONG TO BUY TOILET PAPER???"

What followed that weekend was both worse and better than expected. I made it through the toilet paper shortage relatively un...skidmarked, and my kind neighbors loaned me their car so I could safely visit my boyfriend in upstate Manhattan on the weekends. However, I had no way of knowing I should prepare myself for the apocalyptic feeling of wearing masks in public with him for the first time. I could not have anticipated the never-ending sound of ambulance sirens that seemed like they were inside my head, but I wasn't wearing headphones. And who could have foreseen the horror of the social media photos of refrigerated trucks outside of Manhattan hospitals for all the dead bodies.

As spring rolled into summer and the country boiled over with overdue racial unrest and the sound of ambulances was replaced with the sound of fireworks all night every night, I began my retreat back within. It makes sense, even my years of therapy and infinite recitations of the Serenity Prayer did not prepare me for this particular flavor of life on life's terms.

The city has been opening up for a while now, though as I write in November of 2020 there are some areas of Brooklyn that are closing down again. Honestly, some of the most jarring moments now are hearing myself say the word "pandemic" without flinching. The abnormal becoming normal is about as strange as something can get. In the midst of this, I realized I am feeling abandoned. In a way that needed to happen, of course, but still, something very real to work out.



The headlines read "These are the worst of times"

I do believe it's true

I feel so helpless like a boat against the tide

I wish the summer winds could bring back paradise

But I know, if the world turned upside down

Baby, I know you'd always be around

Over these last eight months, there has been a distinct shift in my ability to escape. My few close relationships have grown deeper, perhaps because of this crisis we have been living through together. A more surprising change, though, is in my relationship with headphones. The dark part of my psyche that feeds on isolation has been thriving during the pandemic, where it's encouraged to stay home as often as possible. Sure, I connect most days to my piano students via Zoom calls, but now theirs are the voices in my head rather than the voices of my favorite musicians. These headphones that used to

seal me off from the outside world are now the only thing that connect me beyond the hermetic walls of my apartment. I've found that I don't like to wear them as much as I used to, and the music that used to help me to escape doesn't do much of anything these days. I worry that I have begun a process of disconnection with this pandemic that may be impossible to reverse.

But then, maybe this is a time of rewiring. In this clear space where isolation is mostly a given, I am starting to realize that my relationship with music was not as pure as I thought. In my efforts to use it as an escape, maybe I was missing out on something else that it had to offer. If I widen that perspective, there's bound to be something I've been missing in my other relationships as well. This whole mind fuck that we are all adapting to could be just the thing many of us needed to live more directly.

When will we be able to see each other again?

Can headphones be just for music?

How can our society come back together?

How will I navigate the world that remains?

Will I know when we get there?

In this period in history when isolation is expected, when we are all simultaneously experiencing this cosmic shift, let's investigate the energy of *being*, while we have the time.





Michael Harren is a Brooklyn-based composer, performer, educator, and activist who combines elements of classical composition with experimental electronics and storytelling to create hypnotic, boldly intimate works, reminiscent of Laurie Anderson, Peter Gabriel, and Dead Can Dance.

Michael is the host and producer of the long running MikeyPod podcast. In production since 2005, MikeyPod invites you to pour a warm drink, grab a notebook (in case inspiration strikes!), curl up with your favorite blanket or four-legged family member, and prepare to be moved by conversations with activist artists who use their creativity to quite literally change the world.

This exclusive zine was created for my subscribers on Patreon who, in addition to the warm feeling of knowing they are co-creating with me, also get lots of perks - free downloads, merch discounts, exclusive patron-only podcasts, and a bunch more. Check out patreon.com/michaelharren to subscribe.

This zine is #6 in a series written by Michael Harren and edited/designed by luke kurtis.

Previous issues are:

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About A Bed (2018)

Tigger (2019)

David (2019)

Three Winters (2019)

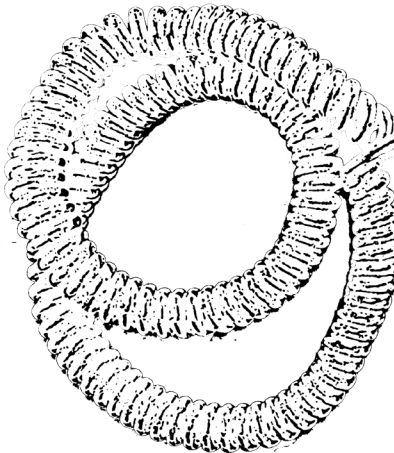
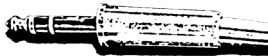
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Tentative Armor (2014)

The Animal Book (2018)



Is it easier to operate?



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