

Zen and the Art of Grooving

My first introduction to the word “groovy” was back in 1966 while listening to “The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovy),” by Simon & Garfunkel, included on their album *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme*. At the time, that beautiful song seemed to express the yearning for escape I felt as an adolescent living in that crazy decade of revolution and constant turmoil which was the 1960's. Similar feelings were also expressed in some of the other tracks on that great album.

Later, as that decade progressed, I assimilated the more profound sense of the word in its verbal form of “grooving” as used by my contemporaries and their precursors of the Beat movement. More on this later; but first, a little historical background:

The word “groovy” originated in the jazz culture of the 1920s, in which it referred to the “groove” of a piece of music (its rhythm and “feel”), plus the response felt by its listeners. Radio disc jockeys would announce playing “good grooves, hot grooves, cool grooves, etc.” when introducing a record about to play. Recorded use of the word has been found dating back to September 30th 1941, when it was used on the *Fibber McGee and Molly* radio show. It has been found in print as early as 1946, in *Really the Blues*, the autobiography of jazz saxophonist Mezz Mezzrow.

Of course, the word “groove” also refers to the physical groove of a record in which the pick-up needle runs. Alas, while grooving on the music I never asked myself how does the music get onto the record's grooves? Here are some answers:

Beginning with the technology of the telephone, information contained in sound waves were converted into electrical signals, transmitted as electromagnetic waves, to a receiver. At the other end, the electromagnetic waves carrying the information were converted back to sound waves received by the listener. The idea of using electricity to record sound was first proposed by Thomas Edison, who attached a small stylus to the diaphragm of a telephone receiver, let a telephone signal vibrate the stylus, and used these vibrations to cut the groove.

To engrave a record's grooves, one uses a magnetic cartridge. It consists of a needle and two electromagnets. The needle is on springs that allow it to rock up and down and side to side. The needle touches the grooves and transmits the motion to the two electromagnets. If the sound is in the centre, the same motion goes to both. If the sound is different on each side, the grooves will be different and each groove's sound will go to each electromagnet.

From a broader ethnomusicological perspective, “groove” has been described as an unspecifiable but ordered sense of something that is sustained in a distinctive, regular and attractive way, working to draw the listener in. Musicologists argue that a “groove” is an understanding of rhythmic patterning or “feel”, and an intuitive sense of a cycle in motion that emerges from carefully aligned concurrent rhythmic patterns that stimulate listeners. “Groove” can be exemplified by the sorts of ostinatos that generally accompany diverse genres of music of African derivation.

However, I believe that “grooving” means something much deeper and transcendental than this. Essentially, grooving is a form of Zen.

In his conference on *Zen and the Art of Music Listening*, musician and composer Donald J. Funes explained that: “The ultimate experience [is] the ecstasy of music. A hint of this... experience is described in [Eugen Herrigel’s book] *Zen in the Art of Archery* [1948]. The archer struggles to conquer the physical limitations of the body –struggling to send the arrow on a straight path– but we must learn to *loose* the arrow, not guide it. The ultimate Zen experience is to become the bow, the arrow, the shooter, the target and the path. This is the experience I seek with music. Body, mind, and spirit at oneness with the music. All activity and learning must contribute to that state or it is a distraction. It is the beginning, middle and end.”

For those readers who may not be acquainted with Zen, it may be important to explain that Zen is the Japanese form of the Chinese word Chan (meditation), from the Mahāyāna tradition –itself derived from the older Indian word Dhyāna.

In the oldest texts of Buddhism, written as far back as the first century BCE, *jhāna* (Pali: 𑖕𑖯) or *dhyāna* (Sanskrit: ध्यान), is a component of the training of the mind (*bhavana*), commonly translated as “meditation,” meaning to withdraw the mind from the automatic responses to sense-impressions, leading to a state of perfect equanimity and awareness (*upekkhā-sati-parisuddhi*). *Dhyāna* leads to perfected mindfulness and detachment. In the later Theravāda, *dhyāna* is also equated with “concentration,” –a state of one-pointed absorption in which there is a diminished awareness of the surroundings.

Starting in the 1950’s Zen Buddhism influenced the founders of the Beat movement, which is evident in the writings of its key leaders such as Ginsberg and Kerouac. One could argue that Zen influence is also evident in the music and lifestyle choices of the Beat generation. Especially in the evolution of Jazz, we see a preference for emotionally-cool sounds, smaller ensembles and more instrumental improvisation. Audiences in smaller clubs could better groove to the music without being distracted by the environmental chaos typical of the big bands.

Returning briefly to my personal experience, I avow that from the year of my arrival in Montreal in 1968, and for the next few years, grooving to music, either as a musician or as an avid listener, was a lifesaver at a time of personal uncertainty and angst. There were days when I eliminated all mental verbalization of plans, decisions or worries, and simply grooved to my own internal soundtrack. I became naught but the pick-up needle riding on the electromagnetic vibrations of the neural pathways of Zen.

Still today... Just... grooving.

© Pascual Delgado, October 19th 2022.

All quotes from: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zen> and https://music.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2646:zen-and-the-art-of-music-listening&Itemid=3665