

Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts
**The Music of
the Spheres**

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The following is a notation – a way of marking down things heard, felt, sensed.

There is said to be a universal hum. An imperceptible vibration producing a sound ten thousand times lower than can be registered by the human ear. It can be measured on the ocean's floor, but its source is not exactly known: perhaps the hush of oceanic waves, perhaps the turbulence in the atmosphere, or the far bluster of planetary storms.

It is not seen, it is not felt. Its repercussions are unknown.

There is said to be another hum. Some can hear it, indeed are hounded by it. For many years dismissed, its existence is now acknowledged. It is called the "worldwide hum" or "earth audio resonance." Sometimes this emanation takes the name of a locality where its effect is pervasive, as if a seasonal wind. An incessant whir or drone, it has been described as an "unusual unidentified low-frequency sound" like a "motor idling down the street." It is louder at night than day; louder inside than out. The ones who hear it cannot escape, it goes where they go. Those who have attempted to measure it say the sound resonates at several percentages below typical hearing. It is possibly an internally generated acoustic phenomenon, or, possibly a natural resonance passing through minerals, reaching the earth. Perhaps this is what Pythagoras – citing knowledge he claimed was given to him by Egyptian priests – described when he named "the music of the spheres," those inaudible notes sounded by the movement of celestial bodies. But Aristotle rebutted the idea of unsounding music:

Excessive noises, we know, shatter the solid bodies even of inanimate things: the noise of thunder, for instance, splits rocks and the strongest of bodies. But if the moving bodies are so great, and the sound which penetrates to us is proportionate to their size, that sound must needs reach us in an intensity many times that of thunder, and the force of its action must be immense.¹

Whether the movements of the heavens made noise, what we saw when looking skyward entered language in unexpected ways. The philosopher Hannah Arendt reminds us that

the word revolution was originally an astronomical term ... designating the regular lawfully revolving motion of the stars, which since it was known to be beyond the influence of man and hence irresistible was certainly characterized neither by newness nor by violence.²

Those who can hear it, call it the sound of quiet. A sound that is no longer with the great many of us. It has been noted that at the time of the Battle of Waterloo, the sounds of the battlefield could be heard in the depths of England.

There is a nonuniversal hum. It is a hum that has gone unheard, barely noted.

The two girls

had gone to the headquarters to help distribute the Panther newspaper. After they were inside, she said, a man put a gun to her head and told the two to go downstairs. There, she said, they saw Mr. Napier, tied and gagged on a cot, humming, while on a nearby bed Miss Gwen Dolores Morton lay tied and humming.

The two children also were tied and told to hum.

Then, the 12-year-old witness testified, "I heard one shot, and I didn't hear Sam anymore."

"After the shot," she continued softly, almost inaudibly, "we were told to go into the backyard. I fell outside, then started smelling smoke. The fire got real hot."

There is the hum notated in the *New York Times*, reporting on the trial for the five men accused of the 1971 killing of Sam Napier, the circulation manager of the party's newspaper.

I have not spoken the names of these two girls, though their names are part of the public record. They were aged twelve and thirteen on the Saturday morning they went to collect papers for the weekly distribution. "Circulate to educate" being Napier's motto for the enterprise, each Panther was required to study the paper before they were allowed to sell it. The edition published that Saturday, April 17, 1971, announced a special supplement direct from the pen of Huey P. Newton: "On the defection of Eldridge Cleaver from the Black Panther Party and On the defection of the Black Panther Party from the black community." It was upon these defections that the men who bound and gagged and shot Sam Napier and bound Miss Gwen Dolores Morton and bound the girls and told them to hum were also speaking. They spoke in the voice of the internecine violence dividing the Cleaver faction from the Newton faction. In his essay on the defection of Eldridge Cleaver from the Black Panther Party and on the defection of the Black Panther party from the black community, Newton sometimes spoke of physics,

wherein "the internal struggle of opposites based upon their unity causes matter to have motion as a part of the process of development."

Let's keep them close for a while.

Understanding how their names have not been kept. Much is made of unknown names. Less of those whose names are known but who cannot be celebrated because what they know says too much about what is celebrated. The felt senses do not enter history. But if we attend to them, they might influence how we tell it, and what we tell, and what we need from it. Not heroes, not enemies. We needed those girls. And their hum. A sound that defines a field, barely detectable, a minor detail of a child's witness testimony. One strains to hear it and them. Their two voices. What song did they hum? Did they start off with two different melodies that eventually joined? Did their song repeat? Was it a song popular in the day, or a child's tune? Was it something that had been hummed to them as children to soothe them by a mother or father or grandmother who had loved them and whose song returned in that moment of extremity?

She continued softly, almost inaudibly.

History remembers these girls not at all.

And Sam Napier is memorialized as having been "killed by fascists." It is a murky description for what they didn't then know was called COINTELPRO. Also applied liberally in those conflicts between the Cleaverites and the Newtonites, each calling the other fascists. But the divisions were lost over time, the name-calling inaudible, undetectable. The effect is to understand that the perpetrators were not only the people who entered the room, and bound and gagged and shot the man, and bound and gagged and left the young woman and told the two children to hum, but these men were potentially acting under the influence of forces then offstage, then unnamed, perhaps sensed, but not able to be detected by all.

Humming stimulates the muscles at the back of the throat that connect the vagus nerve. The sound vibrates against the edge of oneself, against lips, cheeks, throat, cranium, heart. You hear the sound from within. The nerve sends neurotransmitters and electrical signals, lowering activity in the part of the brain that governs flight, fight, and freeze.

There is a field. Some say this is where memory resides, not in the body, nor hovering above the place where an action originally unfolded. Yet it goes where we go. To enter the field is to be in the midst of that which is imperceptible, incessant, without known origin, without end. But it can be changed. Does the hum still sound?

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1

Aristotle, "On the Heavens," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 1984), 479.

2

Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin Books, 1970), 42.

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