

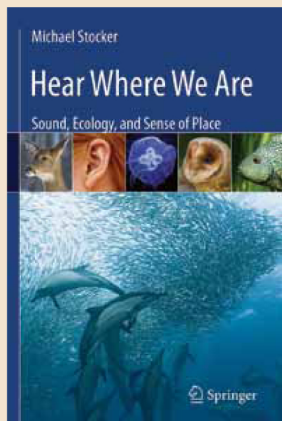
Hear Where We Are

BY MICHAEL STOCKER

Springer, 2013. \$34.99, 200 pages.

MY GOOD FRIEND Bret studies the nuanced vocalizations of neotropical singing mice. While visiting Austin last fall, I had the chance to tour his University of Texas basement lab, meet some operatic rodents, and spend a little time in a unique

anechoic chamber, or, as I like to call it, “the magic no-sound room.” These unique rooms allow for precise sound measurements because everything about them is designed to absorb, insulate, and eliminate outside sound. When we spoke it felt like the walls were robbing our very breath. My ears tried to compensate



for this total lack of sound with their own buzzing, and I imagined this was what floating in space must be like. No bearings, no sense of place, no peace, even. After a few minutes it went from novel to physically uncomfortable.

Reading Michael Stocker’s comprehensive book about sound perception, *Hear Where We Are: Sound, Ecology, and Sense of Place*, I gained some new insight as to why that room felt so wholly unnerving. He provides numerous examples of how subconsciously dependent we are on the “sounds of our environment to reveal the

hidden dimensions of our reality.” These sounds “enable us to gauge where we are, how safe or exposed we feel,” and without them, we are left groundless.

Indeed, there are a million ways sound and vibration influence humans and non-humans. We know how soothing “womb music” can calm babies in utero, and how a sharp alarm can cause a heart to flip. Crickets, chickadees, lions, and humpbacks use sound not only to communicate with each other, but also to establish acoustical relationships within their environments. As a tool, sound can comfort, communicate, or even wage war—just ask former Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, brought to surrender under the relentless blasting of twenty-four-hour American rock music.

Don’t be intimidated by the book’s scientific-journal-style cover. Stocker casts a wide net, delving into the historical, anthropogenic, psychological, behavioral, and engineering aspects of sound, and succeeds in bridging the gap between densely factual scientific writing (anchored by thirty-five pages of footnotes and indexes) and more poetic musings. The book is dense, to be sure, but accessible under Stocker’s descriptive, even surprisingly lyrical voice. Infused with a naturalist’s infectious curiosity, it makes you reconsider how we internalize a sense of place and community through listening.

Some of the more personal scenes are the most memorable: the author, in the moment, watching wasps and spiders battle under the porch eaves, or gently pushing back the face feathers of a roadkill owl to reveal its hidden ears, or skinning a beached whale’s skull, or sitting in a Sierra hot spring listening to the dawn chorus of birds. I picture him as a man with binoculars swinging from his neck and a small notebook forever fastened to his hip.

Stocker freely acknowledges that the role of sound is not limited to communication. There are, of course, myriad ways to silently communicate. But, he writes, “sound is helpful. It implies a willful inclusion, a reaching out to notify others of participation and intention; an acknowledgment that others exist and are worthy listeners.” I think that, in essence, is why that little room in a Texas basement felt so wrong to me. In it I felt indescribably, utterly bereft.

—Kathleen Yale