

Headphone Hunting at 30,000 Feet

Whispering sweet nothings in airborne ears may produce sounds more birdie than Verdi

by Irving Kolodin

WHEN, and with what, did cinema and music join the jet age? It was in 1961, thanks to the enterprise of Inflight Services and TWA, that a cabin became dark for the first time and the flickering figure of Lana Turner appeared on screen in *By Love Possessed*. After the hundreds of films that have since come and gone, a select minority of travelers prefer an adjunct to air travel that is a by-product of the in-flight movie. They don the same headphones, sit back in the same relaxed state, but rather than look, they plug in to the music channels of the tape machines, to listen as they read, loll, or doze their way from here to there.

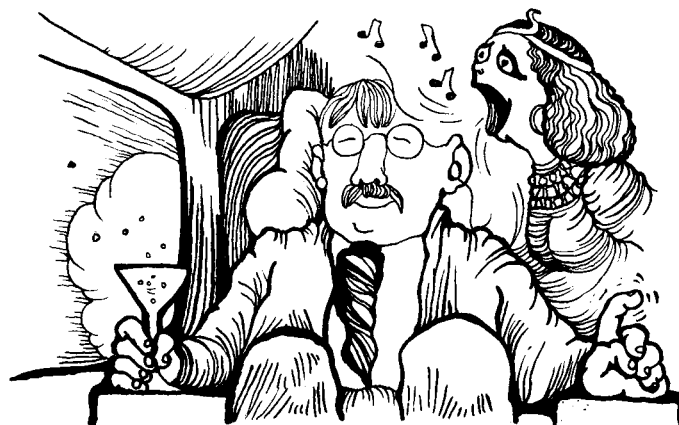
This may not identify them as music lovers, but it does qualify them as participants in the new logistics of travel, which decree that distance does not count, but time does—in other words, not how far, but how long. For the headphone hunters in pursuit of listenable quarry, both miles and minutes are passé. Their word of measurement is *content*.

For the average traveler, that could be a drink, a meal, a movie. The less average might span his journey with a cover-to-cover perusal of a novel or *SR*. But the most discriminating can combine the visual and the aural, on a scale that reckons New York–San Juan to be a novelette plus two overtures and a tone poem. Stretching it a little makes Mexico City a *Porgy and Bess* from New York, or Los Angeles a John Le Carré and an *Aida* from Boston.

For most people, “Music in the Air”—a durable phrase that came into common use as the title of a song by George F. Root that was sung by millions of Americans in glee clubs and during high school assemblies before being appropriated by Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern for a memorable musical of the 1930s—now means what is professionally known as Boarding Music. A jaunty pick-me-up when the plane is once more on the ground and the reason for the journey is about to be fulfilled, the right double-duty melody couldn’t be more welcome.

My preference among the ones to which I have been exposed of recent years was provided by Ansett, the fine domestic carrier, during a sequence of flights around Australia. The material selected fulfilled all the specifications of mood and tempo and had been artfully arranged for orchestra. The little itch in the otherwise well-caressed ear was a lack of identity, meaning the music was annoyingly nameless, though not wholly unfamiliar. (Not many hours after I typed the above words, a radio broadcast overheard by accident provided a clue: The Ansett tune turned out to be Neil Diamond’s top-selling “Song Sung Blue.”)

For a carrier looking for special identity on travel below the equator I would readily recommend an item with a built-in locale. That is, the greatly talented Antonio Carlos Jobim’s “Sambo do Aviao” (or, as translated into English



Susan Perl

for Gene Lee’s well-rhymed text descriptive of the approach to Rio’s Galeão Airport, “Song of the Jet”). Derived from a film of the Sixties titled *Copacabana Palace*, it may already have been appropriated for house purposes by a South American carrier. In such case, apologies, and congratulations for more imagination than Royal Air Maroc can be credited for its use of “On the Road to Morocco.”

Unquestionably, the traveler is at company disposal where Boarding Music is concerned. But as a connoisseur of headphone hunting, I am disposed to believe that he is promised a latitude of choice he does not always get. The numerous channels tend to be too aimlessly all-embracing, doubtless on the premise that the traveler is a miscellaneous item, and that the more general the fare, the more general the appreciation of it.

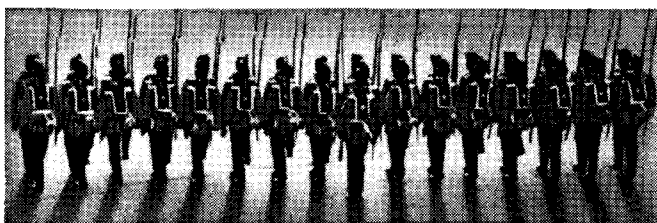
ABASIC consideration may be that few airlines prepare their own subject matter. Inflight, which started the whole thing, services many European and several domestic carriers. It prepares tapes on a six- or four-times-a-year basis (the frequency varies according to airline preference), complete with printed program listings. Several other carriers, including Pan Am and TWA, are serviced by a division of *Billboard*, the show-biz weekly. United prefers John Doremus of Chicago.

Queries pertaining to procedures in choice met with generalized answers. Are travelers surveyed as to preferences? Well, yes, some carriers do. Are records on the tapes bought, or provided gratis by manufacturers? Some are, some are not. The promotion-minded London Records readily provides a liberal cross section of its current FFRR (full frequency range recording) production of opera and orchestral material, to judge from its frequent appearance on various listings. Current best sellers are, for the most part, a self-identifying category. *Billboard*’s service shows, curiously, a pattern of variety in offering fare from half a dozen different makers.

Doubtless this suffices for the lollers and the dozers; but for those who like to read and listen, and who might even do nothing but listen if they were enticed to do so, the predetermined, industry-wide pattern of hour-long segments may be too brief—or, in some instances, too long. The

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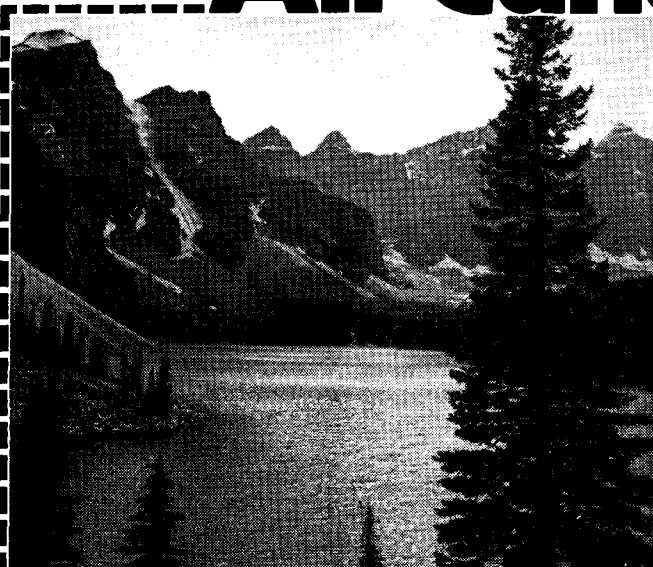
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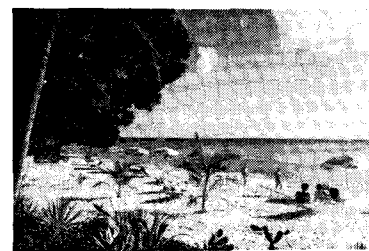
headphone hunter is, after all, using one of the most sophisticated of listening devices. The headphones screen out intrusive noises while making a concert hall or an opera house out of the skull cavity between the ears.

A question pertaining to ethnic material brought the beguiling comment that such carriers as El Al, Royal Air Maroc, Swissair, and Varig provide their own selections for the tapes. Alitalia, it turns out, has more channels (twelve) than almost any others, the reason being that for Italian travelers "ethnic" may mean Rossini, Verdi, and Puccini. One recent program included Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* on one channel (regrettably, only an hour of it); material of Leoncavallo, Puccini, and Verdi (plus Mozart, Musorgsky, and Ambroise Thomas) on another devoted to opera; two more channels with orchestral fare ranging from Glinka to Gershwin; and a fifth with Italian pop programming to get you across the ocean. While letting down, you can enjoy *L'Angolo dei Bambini* (The Children's Corner) or *Musica Giovane* (The Young Sound). Swissair, along with several others, anticipates consumer consideration by offering different tapes for west and east flights.

Inasmuch as travel is a hobby of those in the upper income brackets, and affordability is a factor in the purchase of high-grade equipment, a special channel might be reserved for those whose interests run to matter of greater length and higher sound quality than might be attractive to others. This could well break the hour-per category, as JAL does in listing its own ethnic matter, whose very titles are unscrutable to the mysterious Occidental.

On the whole, airlines extend much greater consideration to the physical wants of the passenger than to his spiritual needs. You may, if you wish, have Smoking or Nonsmoking seating and, if it is your wish and you so inform the carrier before departure, be fed (a) Vegetarian, (b) Dietetic, (c) Kosher. Could you, by similar token, request a spiritual diet of Bach on the organ, Ysaye on the unaccompanied violin, or Ravi Shankar on the sitar? You could, so far as I have ever heard, not. Why not "plug in" seats for cassettes, or decks on which you could use your own?

Present provisions strike me as discriminatory on behalf of food freaks rather than music freaks, a policy unbecoming to those responsible for whatever music there still is in the air. Contrary to the old contention, the way to a passenger's heart is not through the stomach but through the ears. ●



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POLAND, a land of never-ending fascination



Strafing planes in Wings, 1927 extravaganza starring "Buddy" Rogers, Clara Bow, and Richard Arlen.

Photographs: Culver

The Chairborne Aviator at the Flicks

by Judith Crist

WE ARE a nation of chairborne aviators, a movie audience that for more than half a century has shared the rites and rituals of pilots and passengers in a vast variety of flying machines, thanks to the twentieth-century coincidence of the development of films and flight.

No need even to set foot in the overgrown bus terminals that airports have become. Alone in the movie-house dark, we have shared the bloodlust of 'two wars' aerial combat, partaken of pioneer adventure, participated in heroic exploits, and even sensed the lyricism that the poet-fliers have found. The last is rarest—and all the sharing seems, these days, to be part of a romantic past. In recent years, alas, beyond a few nostalgic forays into the past, aviation films have become disaster spectacles, with huge passenger planes crammed with mad bombers, hijackers, lunatics and eccentrics, stolen treasure, stricken children, singing nuns, pregnant stewardesses, lecherous pilots, lubricious adolescents, and similar concomitants of everyday entertainment. The first film about supersonic passenger flight, the recent made-for-television *SST—Death Flight*, offered us, on the aircraft's maiden flight from New York to London, not only sabotage but also the release on board of deadly plague

germs that prohibit a landing in "civilized" territory. Was it for this that Ralph Richardson and Nigel Patrick strove to break the sound barrier?

It was not, fortunately, always thus. In the beginning it was the magnificent man and his flying machine that mattered, and the men who made the fine films about aviation spoke from the heart of their experience. It was, of course, the World War I fliers who turned to the movies in the Twenties, as this most thrilling—and visual—of inventions extended its public appeal. As early as 1921, the airplane as hero emerged, rescuing boy and girl from a burning derrick (*The Witch's Lure*), getting the star player to the football game in the nick of time (*Live Wires*), and rounding up rustlers (*The Vengeance Trail*). But it was later in the decade, with the enthusiasm for World War I movies roused by King Vidor's *The Big Parade* in 1925 and Raoul Walsh's *What Price Glory* in 1926, that the aviation film came into its own, as action moved from the trenches to the skies, where knighthood was in flower.

John Monk Saunders, the writer, William Wellman, the director, and Dick Grace, the stunt man, all World War I fliers, were the moving forces behind *Wings*, the film that in 1927 introduced the public not simply to aerial combat but to the techniques and mystique of flight, of planes rolling and banking and diving and sweeping over the land. The stars were Charles "Buddy" Rogers, Clara Bow, and Richard Arlen. The story—a prototype "buddy" saga, complete with high spirits, romantic competition and confusion, and Death, the Solver of Triangles—is the least of what remains today: the finest World War I aviation-action sequences on film, rivaled, perhaps, but unsurpassed by Howard Hughes's *Hell's Angels*, made three years later. (Harry Perry served as chief photographer on both films.) *Wings*, a year in the making on location in San Antonio, Texas, with Army co-operation, and with an ultimate cost—then staggering—of