

THE HUM

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One day as I sat at the breakfast table, skimming through a pile of newspapers that should have been recycled months before, I felt the vague disturbance of familiarity. As the smoke cleared, I realized that the photograph on the front page of *The Detroit Free Press* was of my old apartment in Windsor, Ontario. Apparently the sickly yellow stucco walkup in Sandwich Town had become newsworthy as a victim of 'The Windsor Hum'. Reports of Hum-like activity are global, reaching back into the 1830s, and find a push-pin presence spreading over maps throughout the 1970s. Wherever it appears, etymology melds with geolocation: the Taos Hum, the Bristol Hum, the Auckland Hum. In early 2011, Windsor developed its very own Hum, a mysterious infrasonic event spiking deep at 35Hz. When residents woke late one night to a low-frequency rumble, slashing open their curtains to yell at an idling car, booming bass—they found empty, dark streets.

In 2002, while standing insomniac-prone in that same Windsor walkup, I looked out the kitchen window to find the sky on fire. A total apocalyptic vision over Detroit. Gigantic orange plumes trailing up into a gradient of anemic ochre, wretched green, and hazy purple—a low-grade thrum prickling at the soles of my naked feet. Assuming some great industrial disaster was about to roll toxic fumes over the river, I pounded on my roommate's door and stuttered my worries about the cataclysm in the sky. This is when I first heard the (pillow-groaned) words: 'Don't worry. It's just Zzzzug Island.' Zug Island will play itself out in a moment.

Describe the Windsor Hum. A deep time bass rattle; a quivering in the gut. The creak of double-glazed windows with an angry bee caught between two planes. Night terrors. Not everyone can 'hear' the Hum, but the vibroacoustic effects of infrasound—sound that exists below the range of human hearing—can cause suffering, instigating fatigue,

insomnia, depression, anxiety, and migraines. Most victims of the Hum describe it as something felt more than heard, as their bootlegged bodies suffer incessant monotone pressure beating on their eardrums. Rational finger-pointing towards local heavy industry was counterbalanced with viral conspiracies: trending UFO reports, ionospheric HAARP interventions, and flyovers by experimental military aircraft.

The Hum and infrasound alike can mimic the tropes of a traditional haunting. In the early 1980s, scientist Vic Tandy was likely surprised to find himself collaborating with psychical researchers, tracing the cause of a recent 'haunting' outbreak in his laboratory to the installation of a ventilation fan. That recent cold-sweat feeling of dread and the shadowy apparitions stuck in the corner of Tandy's eye were linked to inaudible infrasound being produced by the fan, a steady 18.9Hz. Tandy's vibrating eyeballs were allayed by the removal of the fan.¹ The Hum is a more holistic environmental phenomena, running counter to easy solutions. In its most-close reality, The Hum is a fake-out haunting—a physiological response to the invisible effects of the discord between environment and industry—an ominous protest of the Anthropocene in the form of infrasonic terror. Salt and steel dancing on air, down into the lungs.

There are other speculative celestial events that compete with the same affecting clash of The Hum. When the Tunguska Event occurred in 1908, the pressure of its explosive power jolted the needles on barographs around the world. Decades later, atmospheric researchers visiting the forest levelled by the Tunguska shock wave discovered that locals were reluctant to talk about the event. Homegrown folklore had been etched into place, to explain the explosion as a curse from Ogdy—the god of thunder and infra-bass—who smashed the forests and chased off the animals as a punishment. Shifting now from a boom to a tinny crackle: Arctic explorers travelling into the Far North have reported experiencing sonified light displays in the sky, courtesy of the Aurora Borealis. Described by the poet Robert Service as rolling 'with a soundless sound, like softly bruised silk',² the wavering Northern Lights sometimes play samples of radio static, clapping hands, and the gnashing teeth of the *kiguruyat* spirits. Most common among Algonquian and Inuit tribes is the belief that this skyborne soundtrack is caused by spirits playing football with a walrus or a child's skull, or that the dead are trying to pass messages to the living. Engaging in an exchange with the sky has

1. See V. Tandy and T.R. Lawrence, 'The Ghost in the Machine', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 62:851 (April 1998): 360–64.

2. R.W. Service, *Best Tales of the Yukon* (Philadelphia, PA: Running Press, 1983), 43.

its consequences: when the auroral spirits whistle to the living, 'they should always be answered in a whispering voice',³ according to Arctic anthropologist Ernest Hawkes. The reality of aurora-produced sound has largely been shrugged off as an auditory illusion, placing the phenomena in the same contentious territory as The Hum. Current research seems to have settled on the explanation of 'electrophonic transduction', which is to say that the low-frequency VLF radio waves produced by aurora can turn long, thin objects—such as blades of grass, wire, and human hair—into antennae, vibrating signals into audible sound.

Coming back to the earthbound resonant mysteries of The Windsor Hum, attempts to trace its location (never mind its cause) have been an exercise in frustration. Like describing neural pain or ghost limbs, pinpointing where one flesh ends and the other ghost twin begins, the Hum's oppression seems to come from everywhere and nowhere. First, the semi-trucks idling on the crumbling Ambassador Bridge that joins Windsor and Detroit were blamed. But this theory belly-flopped into the river below.

Next, the salt mines that form a handshake between countries 1200 feet underneath the Detroit River were accused. Down there, a 1500-acre crystalline rock salt city makes a maze of itself—over a hundred miles of subterranean mining road loops itself into knots. Salt chamber walls are sheared off with explosives, crushed, and conveyor-driven up for Michigan's winter roads. The mine blasts decouple the slow capital production of the earth—but these operations were proven innocent, because they were inactive during the peak hours of the Windsor Hum.

It wasn't the salt or the bridge that were to blame, but heavy industry playing itself out as a slapback echo. In 2013, hard-nosed scientists finally captured the 'temporal and spectral' signature of Windsor's Hum, describing the process as being 'like chasing a ghost'.⁴ Accusing fingers pointing towards Zug Island transformed into tenuous high-fives: the electric arc blast furnace at the US Steel plant was haemorrhaging infrasound and VLF waves across the border. These waves have been identified as the 'likely' cause of The Windsor Hum—and are the same waves believed to cause the elusive soundtrack of the Aurora Borealis. On Zug Island, the resistance of steel being magnetized back into its base elements reverberates like the wailing of entangled souls, while offsite it bleeds over the border, damped down into a low-pressure menace.

3. E.W. Hawkes, *The Labrador Eskimo*, (Ottawa, 1916; reprinted New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1970), 137.

4. C. Novak, 'Summary of the Windsor Hum Study Results', Global Affairs Canada, Government of Canada, 23 May 2014, <<http://www.international.gc.ca>>.

The Hum continues to beat the ears of the city in unpredictable fits of biomechanical violence; the noise is always there.