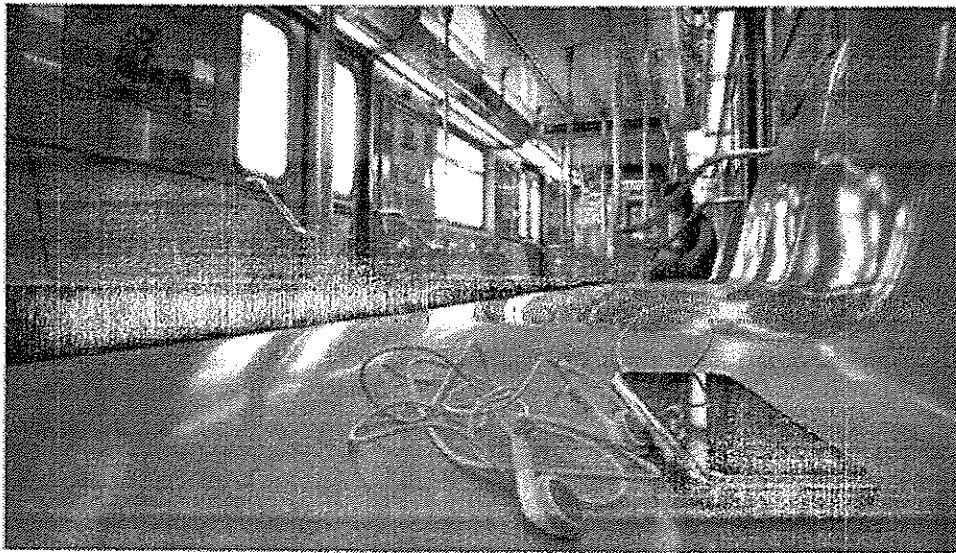


Complaint Box | iPod Volume

BY RAY RIVERA JUNE 26, 2009 7:30 AM

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Ángel Franco/The New York Times

My wife and I were on a crowded 1 train last year when a young red-haired woman turned to the woman seated next to her, who was playing her iPod way too loud.

“Hey, mind if I listen?” the redhead said, and without waiting for a response, plucked the woman’s left earbud, placed it in her own ear, and began bobbing her head to the music. The iPod owner looked mortified. The car grew silent save for the blare. I looked at my wife, who had heard me rant about this so many times, she knew exactly what I was thinking: At last, someone was taking a stand.

Of all the daily discourtesies we endure as city dwellers, none to me is more irksome than headphone leak. You know, that treble-drenched drone emanating from iPods halfway down the subway car. What puzzles me is why people do not complain more often, why we don’t rise up in numbers and insist these people turn their music down, or else. Where is Howard Beale when we need him?

Finally here was this glimmer of hope, a young woman who in her own peculiar way was shouting, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore.”

Alas, the long-awaited revolt turned out to be nothing more than an incredibly awkward pass. We knew this when the redhead breathily announced, “We like exactly the same artists,” as she followed Ms. iPod off the subway.

I say all this by way of preface because, a few months later, I made my own stand.

It was late on a Thursday night after a long day of work. I got on an uptown A at 42nd Street, already annoyed because the train was running late.

I sat down in the first car, empty but for about half a dozen people, including, of course, two teenagers blasting iPods. Each was playing different music, and the overflow collided in a discordant shrill that flooded every cubic inch of the car like a swarm of angry mosquitoes.

I sat two seats away and pulled out my crossword puzzle for the half-hour ride to Inwood. But those mosquitoes. ... I gave the boys a stern look to telegraph my annoyance. They ignored me. Finally, I said, "Excuse me," tapped my index finger to my earlobe, pointed to their headphones, and pantomimed, "Can you turn it down, please?"

"Go sit somewhere else," one of the boys said.

"You can hear it through the whole car," I said. Nothing.

Normally a resolute coward when it comes to subway confrontations, I summoned my inner Howard Beale. I inched closer and began reading aloud from the newspaper. And I mean aloud.

"Voyage of a girl moored in Brooklyn," I read. "For Berlin, a modern makeover," I continued, sounding a bit, I thought, like John Houseman in "The Paper Chase," only louder. The stories went on, past 125th Street, past 135th. At 145th, the boy farther from me exited the train, muttering something under his breath. The other stayed, and seemed to hunker down.

I kept on: "HBO apologizes for a 'Big Love' episode." The train was nearing its final stop. My voice was growing raw. I glanced up to survey the other riders: Were they secretly with me, or did they think me just another subway crazy? 181st Street. Three stops left.

"Hold on, hold on," the boy finally said. I paused and noticed that his music had gone quiet. Had I won? Had I struck a blow for the volume-conscious everywhere?

"It's between songs," the boy said. Waving his index finger like a baton, he cued me when the music resumed: "Please," he said, "continue."

Ray Rivera is a reporter at The Times. His iPod contains a mix of Hank Williams, Ella Fitzgerald, Digable Planets, AC/DC, early rap and classical.