



How To Do A Soundwalk

by Victoria Fenner fenner@magneticspirits.com

You can do a soundwalk anywhere. Wherever there is sound, you have the necessary ingredients for a soundwalk.

A soundwalk is a time to focus on nothing but the sounds around you. It is like a meditation, but is different because a meditation is usually about listening to the sounds inside. The soundwalk is about connecting with the outer world. Try to turn off your brain for a while. Listen to the sounds coming into your ears, rather than the things you need to do for the rest of the day, the paper you have due, or the deadline coming up.

What to Wear, What to Bring

You don't need any special equipment, unless you are recording your soundwalk at the same time. Pay attention to what you're wearing, though. Some clothes are noisier than others, so you want to wear the quietest ones you can find. Cotton and wool is good. Nylon is not. Unless you intentionally want the sound of your feet in the soundwalk, wear soft shoes instead of clicky heels. Jackets with buttons are better than jackets with zippers – zipper tabs jangle when you walk. (You can also tape them down) Empty the change and keys from your pockets.

It is also helpful to bring a journal so you can write down the things you hear. If you are an audio artist and producer, this will also help if you need to recreate a sound environment back in the studio. Keep lists, write descriptions or you can even draw a picture of the sound. Whatever will help you remember the sound.

Getting Ready

To prepare for a soundwalk, you can do some warmup exercises for your ears, much like you'd stretch your legs before a long walk:

1. Start with earplugs. Put them in for just a couple of minutes. Listen to what silence sounds like. This will help you clear your ears and begin with a fresh perspective. Your hearing will be sharper once you've taken them out because the sounds you will be hearing will be new.

2. Close your eyes. Breathe deeply for a couple of minutes. Be present in the environment to which you are listening. Calm down the excess chatter going on in your head, reminding yourself that the goal is to listen to the external rather than your internal soundscape.

3. Listen to the sound of your breath as an overlay on the soundscape. Play with your breath and listen to it in relation to the other sounds you are hearing. For example, focus on the sound of an approaching car. Pattern your breath on the sound of the car. Begin to inhale softly when you hear the car in the distance. Inhale louder as it approaches and passes, then exhale,

first quickly then softly falling away as the car retreats. Working with your breath will do two things. It will help clear your mind of the excess clutter, helping you be fully present to the sound because you are listening to your breath and the sound together.

4. Focus on one sound that you especially like. Go into the sound. Feel how the sound acts with your body – does it calm you down, energize you, or make you feel frantic? Be there with it for a couple of minutes. Don't intellectualize.

"A soundwalk is any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are. We may be at home, we may be walking across a downtown street, through a park, along the beach; we may be sitting in a doctor's office, in a hotel lobby, in a bank; we may be shopping in a supermarket, a department store, or a Chinese grocery store; we may be standing at the airport, the train station, the bus-stop. Wherever we go we will give our ears priority."

Hildegard Westerkamp from her article "Soundwalking"

5. Gradually expand your awareness to the other sounds. Imagine an orchestra tuning up – one sound after another becoming sharper and clearer until you can hear all the sounds in tune with each other.
6. Breathe a couple more times. Now you're ready to walk.

Start Walking

If you're walking in a group, don't talk. If you're walking by yourself, don't talk to yourself. That means don't talk to yourself in your head either.

The first thing you'll hear is the sound of your own footsteps. And, if you're walking with a group, the sound of their footsteps. To prevent your footsteps from dominating, walk softly. If you're with a group, spread out as much as you can.

Listen for approaching sounds. Imagine yourself walking into the sound and back out of it again. Stay conscious of your breath as you walk. Breathe in a steady pace, walk in a steady pace.

Listen for changes in the sound. Is the acoustic space the same as when you began? When you hear a change in the environment, stop and explore what makes it different. If you're walking with a group, take a few minutes to talk about what you've heard, what you've experienced. If you're walking alone, jot down a few notes in your journal.

Some things to talk about:

- * Why did you stop here? How did the soundscape change from the last place you stopped?
- * How would you describe this particular soundscape? If you recorded this environment and played it back to someone who hadn't been on your walk, what would they tell you about this place?
- * What is the most interesting sound? Least interesting? Why? If you're in a group, find out if other people in the group have the same response.
- * Think of the pitch and rhythms of the sounds. What is the highest sound? Lowest? Are there any interesting rhythms?
- * Count the sounds. How many different types are there? Is there a lot of variety in this soundscape, or are the sounds all similar (i.e. All natural sound, all machine generated?)
- * Say a couple of words very softly. Can you hear yourself? Or is the sound of your voice getting lost?

* For radio producers and sound artists – if you played this soundscape for your listeners, would they find it interesting? Can you use this in a story as is? Or would you modify or enhance it in the studio to heighten its effect?

You don't have to answer all these questions at one stop. Choose one or two questions for each stop that you plan to make. Keep walking as long as you find interesting things to listen to.

After your soundwalk, try to describe what you've heard. If you're walking with a group, take fifteen minutes to debrief. Other people will hear things differently than you, and by listening to each other you will learn new ways of hearing. If you're walking alone, write in your journal for fifteen minutes. This will help you increase your ability to remember what you've heard.

After you have learned to soundwalk you will probably find that you stop cataloguing the sounds that you hear. Instead you'll find that at all times and places you will be conscious of the sounds that surround you, whether good or bad, and will be able to identify the sounds that make you feel peaceful or happy, and the sounds that cause you to feel apprehensive or disjointed.

Above all, be with yourself. Immerse yourself in your environment. When you can understand your responses to the place where you are, you'll have a better chance of bringing your listeners along with you.

Victoria Fenner is a Canadian audio artist who has spent two decades exploring the medium of sound. Her interest in Audio Art began in 1982, at Vancouver Co-op Radio where she produced the "newsounds gallery", an exploration of the artistic possibilities of radio. She has produced many works of her own, has curated the Canadian audio art radio series "Radiant Dissonance", and has developed many projects and events involving radio and sound artists. She has worked for CBC Radio, most recently as researcher for a special series on the audio art of Quebec for the Radio One program "Outfront". She is the creator of the annual Full Moon Audio Art Camp, which has been held each year in Canada since 1999. Her web site is at <http://www.magneticspirits.com>.

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