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Opinion

What's that mysterious sound in Times Square? Look down.

A trip to one of the most visited yet least acknowledged artworks in the world.

By Allan Ripp

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It was Wednesday, midmorning, and I was rushing through Times Square for a meeting. Too cold for the Naked Cowboy, too early for heavy foot traffic. I passed by the branded stores, the flashing billboards and the Fantastic World of the Portuguese Sardine, a circus-like food emporium that captures the arc of this historic neighborhood, from Tin Pan Alley to tin-canned fish.

Crossing 46th Street where Seventh Avenue meets Broadway, I stopped abruptly over a grated median plaza, halted by a sound I first heard nearly 50 years ago. It was a vibrating thrum, like something generated by a giant tuning fork or a bell after it's been rung. Peering through the metal slats revealed only the black pit of a subway ventilation shaft, litter strewn 20 feet below. But I instantly knew the source.

It was “Times Square,” an all-weather, perpetually humming sound sculpture created by an experimental musician named Max Neuhaus. That there was nothing marking its aural presence at New York’s busiest crossroads is by design.



(Illustration by Petra Péterffy/For The Washington Post)

A Beaumont, Texas, native born in 1939, Neuhaus was a conservatory-trained percussionist who wore many hats. He toured the country with modernists Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen but also took jazz drum lessons from Gene Krupa. He later came into his own creating sound installations — a term he invented to describe compositional works that didn’t rely on conventional instruments, performers or score. Instead, he used electronic and acoustic equipment to generate sounds custom-pitched for a particular location.

For his 1967 piece “Fan Music,” Neuhaus amplified urban sounds rolling through rooftops along the Bowery, captured by solar-powered cells tucked behind large whirring fans. A few years later he filled the corridor of a

Brooklyn subway station with a startling mix of echoing pings and clicks, calling the experience "Walkthrough." Critics lauded him as a "pioneer of sound art." Neuhaus's own vision: "I use sound to change the way we perceive a space."

He expanded on this theme when we met in 1977. I was a junior staffer at an arts and culture magazine, assigned to cover his latest "discoverable." "The proscenium setting is fine for giving concerts," he told me of the traditional theater layout. "But so many generations of acquired preconceptions have made people believe the stage is the only place to make music. I just had to get out."

That led us to the unusual crevices beneath Midtown Manhattan. Neuhaus had been tussling for years with Con Edison and New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority to embed his homemade sound generators in the middle of Times Square, then a hub for porn theaters and sketchy arcades. Because the MTA wouldn't authorize work installed by an individual, he secured approval via a nonprofit he cheekily christened "Hybrid Energies for Acoustic Resources," or HEAR.

Donning a pair of headphones, I followed him down into the ventilation shaft. He explained that when Con Ed balked at connecting his sound machines to the MTA's high-voltage equipment, he improvised by hiring an electrical contractor to run a hookup line to a nearby streetlight. The reverberating tone was amplified by large tweeter speakers, sending a steady, Zen-like hum up to Broadway. It was hypnotic but easy to miss, which was partly the point.

Neuhaus wanted no placards announcing the piece. He preferred people to encounter it by chance without explanation that the sound was for art's sake, even if they had no idea what they were hearing or wondered if it was a subway from Mars. "I'd rather they walk through the space unaware of the vibration than force them to react with more obvious sounds or signs," he explained. How *un*-Times Square-like.

The Hum hummed merrily along for years, taking a brief hiatus in the 1990s while Neuhaus lived in Europe and couldn't see to its maintenance. By 2002, it was back in action: With support from a local gallery owner, the MTA and the Times Square Business Improvement District, he reinstalled the piece and cranked up the volume to better match the street din. Neuhaus then donated it to the Dia Art Foundation, known for supporting outdoor site-specific projects. Around 2005 the outfit converted the analog-generated sound to a digital file, which resonates up from the subway chamber with the precise acoustics Neuhaus intended.

Then, as now, no signage was ever posted, ironic given the neighborhood has since become awash in pulsating digital billboards and a neon-lit sardine shop.

Though Neuhaus died in 2009, his creation lives on, striking but obscure. Given the millions of passersby each year, "Times Square" is surely among the most heavily visited yet least acknowledged artworks in the world. A return listen after my meeting clocked scores of pedestrians, including a man in an enormous King Kong outfit, traipsing across the grate oblivious of the masterwork beneath their feet.

One art writer archly proclaimed that the sculpture's "ringing drone subtly altered the sonic environment, rendering aesthetic the area's relentless hubbub." I like to think of it as the hum that never sleeps.

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