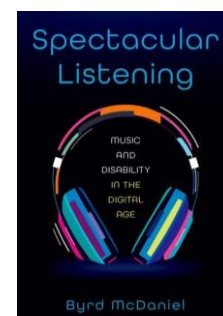


## BOOK REVIEW

# Spectacular listening: Music and disability in the digital age (McDaniel)

Reviewed by David Limmer

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**Title:** Spectacular listening: Music and disability in the digital age **Author:** Byrd McDaniel **Publication Year:** 2024 **Publisher:** Oxford University Press **Pages:** 216 **ISBN:** 9780197620465

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**David Limmer** is a Scotland-based music therapist working with adults with sensory impairments and learning disabilities in Glasgow and Fife. David also has sensory impairments, mobility difficulties, and chronic and long-term health issues, and he has spoken about what his experiences as a disabled person bring to his work as a music therapist at the 12<sup>th</sup> European Music Therapy Conference, as part of training days for the British Association of Music Therapy, and to students studying on the Music Therapy MSc programme at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh. [[david\\_limmer@hotmail.com](mailto:david_limmer@hotmail.com)]

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*Spectacular Listening: Music and Disability in the Digital Age* is written by Byrd McDaniel, music researcher, ethnomusicologist, and Assistant Director of Student Development at Brown University in Alabama. Although the author is careful to emphasise his identity as straight, white, cisgendered, and non-disabled throughout the book, the warmth, clarity, and curiosity of his writing and the thoughtful retelling of the personal experiences of the disabled individuals interviewed in each chapter consistently demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the issues being explored, as well as his deeply empathic and supportive allyship.

The book opens with a vignette from the author's own life, describing the challenges of visiting his grandfather as he lay dying in a care home during the throes of the pandemic. The story highlights the frustrating restrictions placed upon the author and their family during this difficult time, the ingenuity and creativity that was needed to manage these limitations, and how listening together in new ways helped them to reconnect. These themes permeate *Spectacular Listening*: the complex, emotionally charged, and sometimes paradoxical nature of disability and ableism; the frustrating, suffocating sense of feeling limited by things beyond your control; and the resourcefulness and imagination needed to overcome accessibility challenges. All this deftly situates the book within the current discourse surrounding disability and ableism in a broad range of music listening practices and beyond.

The author introduces the concept of *spectacular listening* as a fully embodied experience or performance of how music and sound can affect an individual, and how people share these

experiences. This is placed in opposition to what is deemed “normal listening,” which has “(1) an emphasis on ear-based engagement and contemplation, (2) a concept of sound as a bounded object for critical analysis, and (3) a celebration of meaningful listening as capable of being written or described through words” (p. 9).

In addition to the introduction and conclusion, the book is divided into four chapters that demonstrate spectacular listening within four different contexts/communities: air guitar competitions, lip syncing on various online platforms, reaction videos to popular music on YouTube, and podcasts. Each chapter contains an introduction of each phenomenon placing it in context within the disabled/non-disabled paradigm and a description of the methods used by the author to explore each phenomenon, followed by case study exploration and conclusions.

Throughout each chapter, the author is careful to highlight the social and personal dissonance experienced by so many disabled individuals, and the inevitable contradictions that are often at the heart of their lived experiences: the sense of community that can come from being ostracised; the permanent yet contextual nature of disability; and the suppression of those with disabilities on social media juxtaposed against the importance of internet forums to raise awareness and provide vital resources. McDaniel explores other important themes including the idea of “patronizingly inspirational” (p.66) online content being used to exploit disabled experiences for ableist narratives or monetary gain. He also raises the ways in which long-term health issues must sometimes be hidden for self-protection whilst at other times disclosed, or even performed, to advocate for yourself and others to ensure the support that is needed is provided. As a disabled person, to see these topics being discussed at all is powerful enough, but to have them explored with such delicacy and openness is invigorating.

Throughout the book, McDaniel’s warm, thoughtful writing creates a rich tapestry from the many complex strands of these somewhat marginalised listening practices and the wider disabled community, ultimately highlighting the vibrant multiplicity of the subject at hand. But it is the bright, golden threads of personal experience woven into each chapter from the individuals being interviewed that really shine. They demonstrate not only the highly emotive nature of the topic being explored, but also the ingenuity and incredible insight of people that are so often marginalised and misunderstood by wider society. In a reaction video to Kodi Lee, an autistic and blind musician, disabled YouTuber “Daryl” rails against the inevitable narratives that sprang up after Lee’s TV performance, which posited disability as something that must be overcome to succeed. Instead, Daryl suggests:

[Kodi Lee] is not succeeding in spite of his disability. He is succeeding because of it. His disability has given him the gifts that he has today. He wouldn’t have those gifts without his blindness and without his Autism. (p. 107)

In another interview, disability activist Alice Wong tells of her own internalised ableism after working in radio for many years as she pushed back against notions that disabled voices aren’t as pleasing or engaging:

Two years ago, I needed to start using the Bi-Pap during most of the day...  
As I attend meetings and events, I noticed a difference in the way people relate

to me. I have to repeat myself because people can't understand me. If a breath is coming in right in the middle of a speech, I have to pause, creating unnatural and awkward speech patterns... A big part of my identity, ego, and self-image is centered on my voice and writing. I had to confront my discomfort and accept my new sound and body that has become increasingly cyborg-like as time goes on. (p. 124)

Overall, *Spectacular Listening* achieves a difficult task, shining light on relatively new and under-explored listening practices while fearlessly yet sensitively exploring disabled experiences, with all their contradictions, their richness, and the strength and community that can be found by sharing your vulnerabilities and experiences with the world. As McDaniel states, "Accessibility implies someone being able to access another perspective or a conversation, and accessibility also implies someone giving oneself up to be accessed by others, through the act of sharing and revealing aspects of an interior experience" (p. 125).