

Playing a Different Tune For Your Dog

Calming music soothes stressed-out dogs, advocates say.

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A few years ago, Lynn Johnson, a kennel owner in Lemon Grove, Calif., left her business in a sitter's care for an evening. When she returned hours later, she immediately noticed something was wrong.

The dogs were barking; some, howling. Many paced in their runs, while several others trembled with fear. All had soiled their bedding areas.

Her mind raced: What had happened? Had there been an intruder? Was the dog sitter OK? Were any dogs hurt?

She looked around, expecting to spend hours solving the mystery. But in less than two minutes, her eyes and ears zeroed in on the problem: The radio was playing rock 'n' roll.

A dog handler who has played music in kennels more than 30 years, Johnson believes music affects dogs much the way it does humans. While there's no scientific evidence to support her theory, shelter operators, breeders and owners are beginning to agree. Perhaps, as William Congreve wrote in 1697, music indeed "hath charms to soothe a savage breast."

When Johnson first turned on the radio at a 500-dog kennel in her native South Africa, dog owners and co-workers told her she was batty. She explained the theory: Since dogs often hear the radio at home, it should calm them when they are in a strange place. Within months, she said, her hypothesis was proven.

"We get all types of dogs here," she said. "Some are claustrophobic, many don't like being in a cage. Some miss home. Siberian Huskies are the worst. They are very restless. They will howl for hours. But if I play jazz or classical music, they mellow out."

Many types of music ease doggie distress, including classical, jazz and adult contemporary, she said. Rock 'n' roll, however, is out.

"I like rock 'n' roll myself, so I'm not judging it by my own likes and dislikes," she said. "It really stresses them out."

As an example, she cited a nightclub down the street from her kennel. On the evenings the bar leaves its door open, allowing loud music and bass vibrations to be heard at the K-9 Lodge, the dogs bark until last call.

Dogs react to music much as humans do, said Danette Grady, education director of Living Free Animal Sanctuary in Mountain Center, Calif. A steady tempo and calming melody can soothe.