

# LEARNING TO LISTEN

Leonie Connellan

Sometime in 2017, I moved from Melbourne, Australia to Dublin, Ireland. I'd studied and exhibited art in Australia, and in becoming an immigrant, I risked leaving my life and community behind to start somewhere else as a stranger.

My work in Australia had centred around the connections between science, space and storytelling. It had also been, as all art is, a portrait of myself, albeit a heavily buried and obscured one.

The move disrupted that work, and in my Dublin studio, I began making friends and exploring ways to make art that felt new and relevant. The dislocation that goes hand in hand with moving to the other side of the world crept into my practice. Listening to music felt like a way to time travel. I had an inkling that I wanted to write about music, but I stopped myself because it seemed so far away from the artwork that I'd previously made.

Another reason that I didn't, though, is purely that it didn't fit at the time. Now it does, and the idea I had in 2019 is back: thinking about the songs that have shaped me.

We all have unique experiences with music, but I've discovered that many of those feelings are shared. I've started a new project, writing in depth about those songs and my history with them and using that to produce a series of zines and accompanying videos.

All my life there have been albums and songs that live primarily in certain places and times. Tegan and Sara's album *If It Was You* is a hot, bright Darwin bus on a CD Walkman in 2002. The song 'Mayonaise' by The Smashing Pumpkins lives on repeat in my high school, stirring up memories of the deputy principal confiscating my red Sony Walkman because I dared to listen to it in free periods while studying.

People talk about culture shock as a thing that might happen when you move far away from home, but nobody explains the reality or feeling of it well.

Slowly but surely, music evolved as a touchstone and a way to navigate the weird hollow that culture shock imparts. Not long after the 2018 Impact Conference in Santander, we moved again, this time across the country from Dublin to Cork. The first thing I do when I move to any new town is to visit the local library, and at the Cork City Library, I found a dedicated collection of music books.

I'd grown up around music. We had an organ at home because my oldest sister took lessons and played every week at our local church. Being the fifth of six kids, though, I didn't get any music lessons and was left to figure it out on my own.



Figure 1

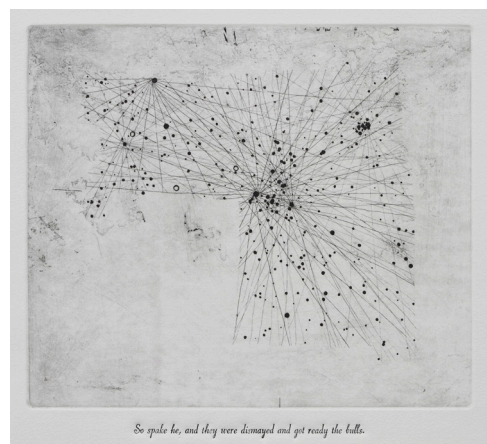


Figure 2

Figure Titles and Information

- Figure 1: Moving Truck, Leonie Connellan, 2017
- Figure 2: Taurus etching, Leonie Connellan, 2013

In 2013, I travelled to Europe for the first time to speak at the Impact Conference in Dundee, and on that trip, I started a tradition for myself of buying a musical instrument as a souvenir. In 2015, after a year spent constantly thinking about violins, I bought one from a music shop in Hobart while on holiday in Tasmania. I tried to teach myself from books for a while, and when I was in the Cork City Library that first day, I borrowed a stack of violin books and a little non-fiction book by Nick Hornby that caught my eye. It was called *31 Songs*, and in it, Nick talked about how music, and those 31 songs in particular, had influenced him as a writer.

In retrospect, that little book was a turning point for me, thanks to one throwaway line written in it somewhere, where Nick said he'd simply tried and failed to write songs. "Come on Nick, it can't be that hard," I thought. I was amazed that Nick Hornby of all people found it difficult to write something as short as a song, so decided to have a crack at it myself.

I couldn't play an instrument properly then, of course. My husband, on the other hand, can play music and had guitars and things that I had never touched, but he doesn't read music and has never bothered to learn any theory. I started trying to learn guitar using his acoustic guitar. I wrote a song, but I was so bad at playing at the time that I couldn't get it off the paper and into the air, so I just kept going round and round on the same parts because I didn't have the technical ability to record it, or, more importantly, a deadline to finish it.

While I was procrastinating on my song, which, don't forget, I was using to procrastinate on making visual art, I started drawing in my sketchbooks again, this time about music. I made abstract pieces that tried to map songs, and I made little paintings in response to the music from my past. I painted that Walkman my deputy principal confiscated in high school. And thinking back to high school, I painted a banana with the phrase "I don't know just where I'm going." My brother had bought the soundtrack to the film *The Doors*, and like every good teenage art student, I started drawing Jim Morrison with flames for hair in my sketchbooks, thinking it was the most amazing thing ever. I started making drawings from those songs. One in particular that I was drawn to from the soundtrack wasn't by *The Doors*. It was the song 'Heroin' by *The Velvet Underground*. Because I was (and to be honest, probably still am) the world's most enormous square, I genuinely had no idea what the song was about, and I would play it on the stereo in our art rooms at school. Luckily for me, the art studios were in a separate building from the rest of the school, and instead of turning it off and explaining to me why I probably shouldn't be playing a song about drug addiction in that setting, my art teacher asked me what I liked about it and said that these musicians I'd never heard of before, *The Velvet Underground*, were his all-time favourite band.

Back to the drawings in my sketchbook, though: I didn't know where I was going. I was writing about music and making drawings for myself in a roundabout, personal way. I thought maybe I could make some



Figure 3



Figure 4

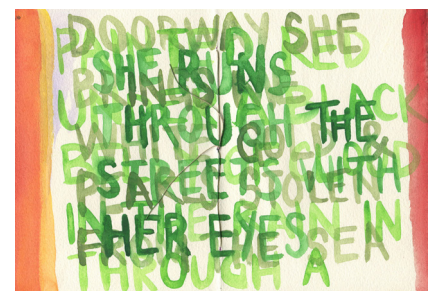


Figure 5

Figure Titles and Information

- Figure 3: Organ, Leonie Connellan, 2019
- Figure 4: Song map, Leonie Connellan, 2019
- Figure 5: Running to Stand Still painting, Leonie Connellan, 2019

zines with my writing and art, but I didn't have a deadline, and I felt I didn't know enough about music, as if I wasn't qualified enough. Who would want to read about the things I had to say?

This was 2019, of course, and at the time I went to one of the last two live gigs that I'd see for the next three years. The next day I tried to figure out one of their new songs on my guitar, videoed myself, and posted it in 15-second sections to an Instagram Story, which I mistakenly thought no one would watch, because I didn't click on other people's Instagram stories. It was bad, but my friend Gizo saw it and said, "Hey, let's Songfight". Songfight is a website that's been going for over twenty years now, where every couple of weeks a title is handed out along with an optional challenge. You write a song before the deadline and submit it, and then people listen and vote for their favourites. Gizo and I kept Songfighting every couple of weeks, and the funny thing is, I got better at making music. And by making music, I got better at listening to other people's music.

At the end of February 2020, we'd just flown to Australia for our first trip home in a few years. When we got on the plane, everything seemed fine. When we landed in Australia, the situation was well and truly a situation. For a few weeks, we saw family and friends carefully, and even though we were slightly panicking about being able to get back home to Ireland, no one had grasped what the situation would be like for the next few years. I found my very first synthesiser, a Casio SA-1 keyboard, hidden inside the most boring board game box in my parents' house. Fortunately, we got home to Ireland, keyboard and all, on our scheduled flight. We picked up our dog, went home and self-isolated for two weeks. As soon as that was over, the government announced our lockdowns, and the furthest we could travel from our house for months was 2km.

The feeling of dislocation as an immigrant became the daily life of every one of us, along with an added layer of general fear.

How do you make art when the world is falling apart around you?

How do you get people to engage meaningfully with the art that you create when there are no exhibitions?

How do you create community and make new friends when you can't go near anyone?

It turned out that the online music community I'd joined on a songwriting whim in 2019 was my distraction. All through 2020 and 2021, Gizo and I made songs for Songfight from our opposite sides of the world, and this year, in 2022, I've finally embraced the idea that yes, I'm qualified enough to make music and make art about music.

Of course, the first zine I made was about John Cage. While most people are aware of John Cage from his piece 4'33", many of us printmakers came to him through his visual art. Printmaking allows us



Figure 6

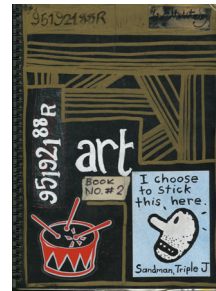


Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure Titles and Information

- Figure 6: Walkman painting, Leonie Connellan, 2019
- Figure 7: High School Sketchbook Front, Leonie Connellan, 1996
- Figure 8: Casio SA-1, Leonie Connellan, 2020



to set up parameters and see what happens, and that was exactly what John Cage was interested in as a sound artist. 4'33" wasn't necessarily about silence, but about what we notice about sound and the world around us when the noise is removed. Listening to an unrelated podcast at the time, I heard the question "Do you dream of invisible sounds?" A listener to the podcast had said she'd seen this on a poster every day and couldn't figure out what it meant, and when the hosts looked it up online, there were no results. It felt like a very John Cage moment, so over the next few weeks I began to emboss this on my paper and made concertina books inspired by the keys of a piano.

One of the nice things about a zine-making project is exactly that John Cage thing: the output is determined by the context. The content determines how each piece is made and what it will look like. So, at the same time that I was making my very minimal, abstract zine, I was working on another one about everyone's favourite song that they don't realise is their favourite song.

If I count to twelve like this — 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 — chances are you're all like, yeah, whatever. But if I say the same thing just a little bit differently, your reactions might shift.

1 2 3 4 5

6 7 8 9 10

11 12

Of all the pieces of music in my life, 'Pinball Number Count' from Sesame Street has probably had the most influence. This song is ingenious because it's so catchy yet so complex that it's likely if someone proposed it for a kids' show today they'd be laughed out of the building. The time signatures on the song shift before you can blink. Different instruments come in and leave, and a look into its construction reveals that it was made like a collage, yet it feels whole and complete. The composer, Walter Kraemer, gave it a jazz structure, recording parts separately that revolve around a main theme, followed by a sequence that leads to a turnaround, taking us back to the top. The result couldn't be more different from John Cage's 4'33", but the process for making is extremely similar, and so in line with what we do as printmakers: set up a structure and see what happens.

Of course, one of the challenges with wanting to make work about music, and thinking of music as a time travel device of sorts, is that it can be very easy and very tempting to get stuck there in the past, and that's where, for me, making music comes in. I can use the past to learn and I can enjoy listening to that music, but nothing that I make will be exactly like what came before. Even if I try to make something that sounds like a certain era, and believe me, I've tried, it never ends up sounding the same. And I wouldn't have it any other way. I learned to count with The Pointer Sisters and a pinball machine cartoon 40 years ago, but now I've learned to listen, and I'll never stop learning.



Figure 9



Figure 10

## AUTHOR

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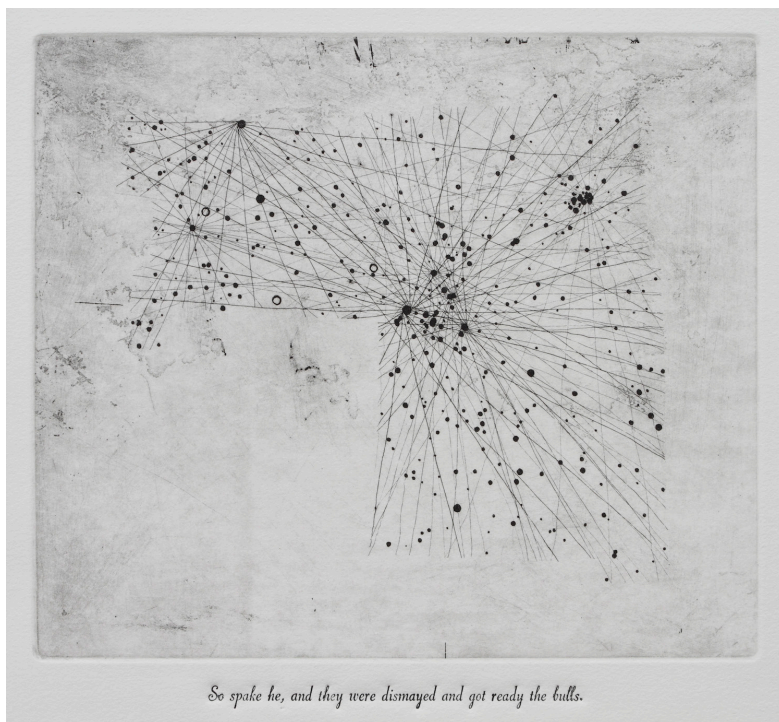
Leonie studied printmaking at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, and graduated with her MFA in 2011. In 2017 she moved to Dublin, Ireland, and now lives in Cork. Over that time, she's been figuring out ways to build community and adapt to change. Alongside her printmaking practice, Leonie makes art and tutorial videos as Spines & Splines on YouTube, with a focus on DIY and alternative printmaking, drawing and painting techniques. She also writes and produces songs as Hot Pink Halo, and is now trying to fold all those disparate parts into an artist book and zine project about the impact of sound and music.

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IMAGE GALLERY



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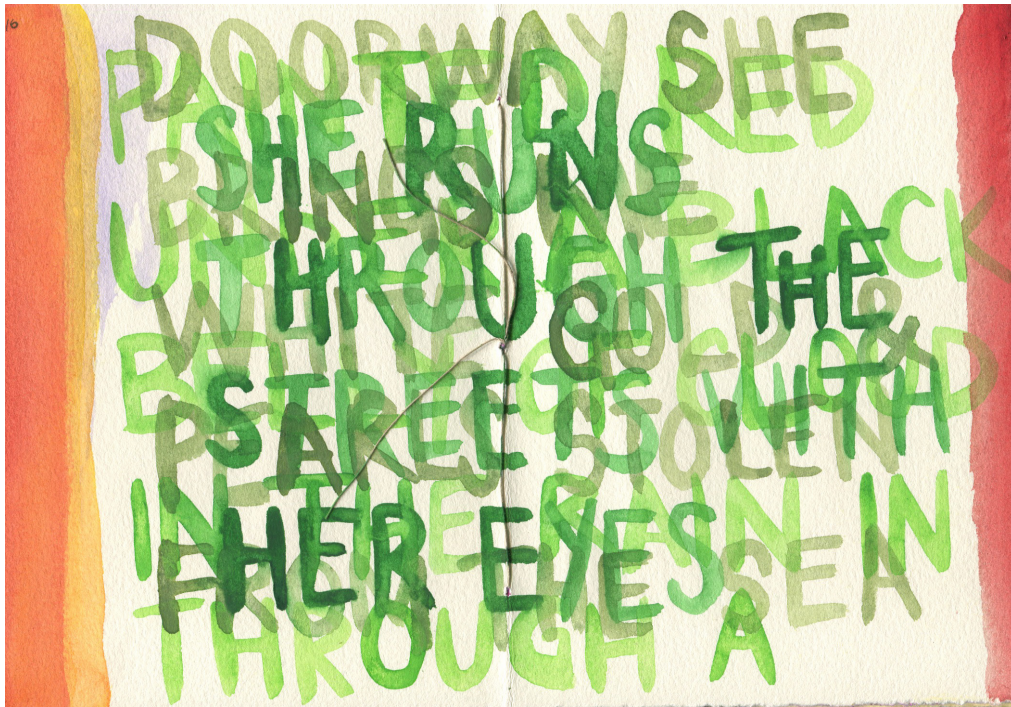
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Figure 5: Running to Stand Still painting, Leonie Connellan, 2019  
Figure 6: Walkman painting, Leonie Connellan, 2019



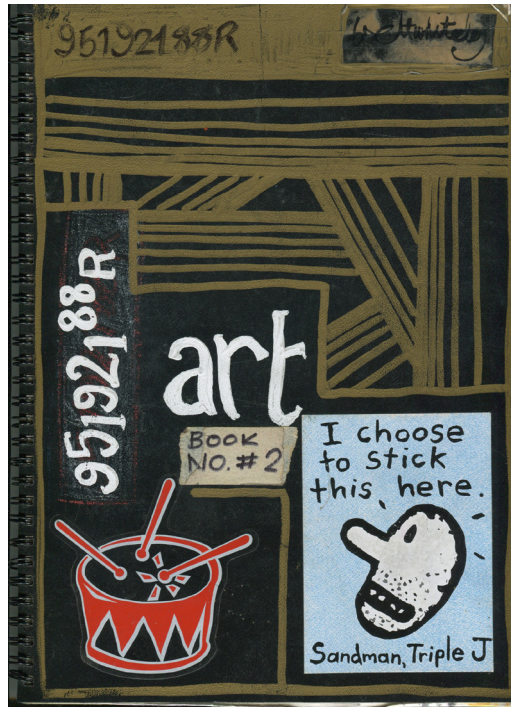
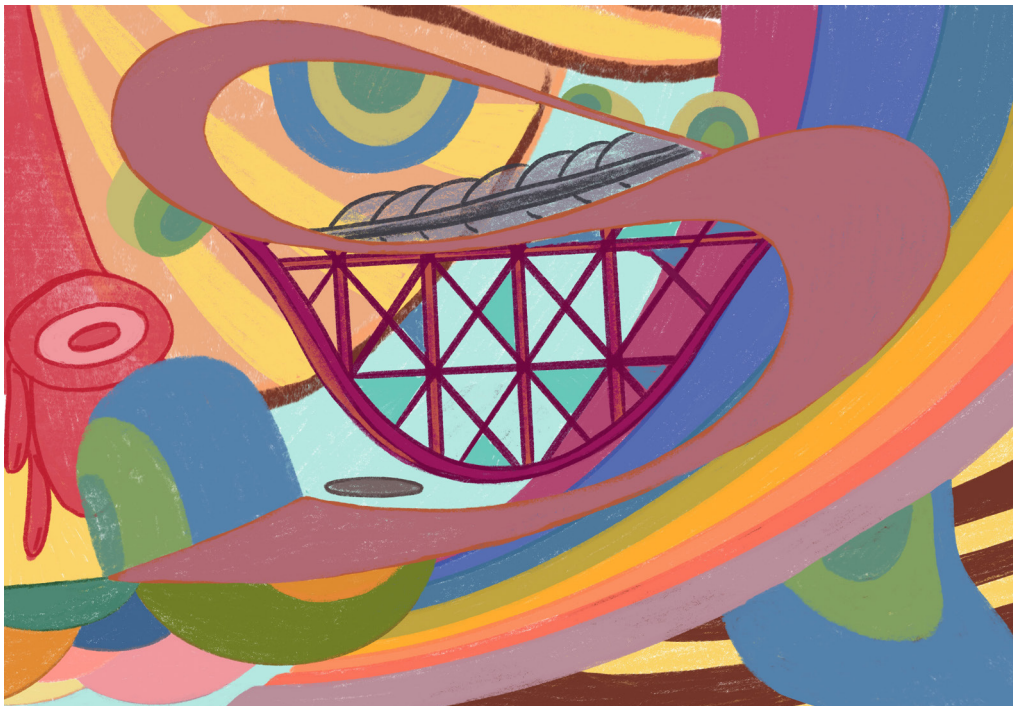


Figure 7: High School Sketchbook Front, Leonie Connellan, 1996

Figure 8: Casio SA-1, Leonie Connellan, 2020



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Figure 9: John Cage zine 1, Leonie Connellan, 2021  
Figure 10: Wild Lines 1, Leonie Connellan, 2021