

Silence golden, ignorance bliss — especially with these songs

By Esther Baird

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Think of the most annoying song you know.

If you're a parent of a young child, you may need to pause here and decide which of your offspring's musical dribbles you find the most galling. Perhaps it's, "Head Shoulder's Knees and Toes," or perhaps it's that Sunday school classic, "The Lord said to Noah there's Gonna be a Floody, Floody."

Whatever the case, now that you've thought of that song, even hummed a tedious bar or two of it, you're doomed. Sorry to spoil the next 76 hours of your life, but you *will* be humming that tune for at least that long, and it *will* drive you slightly mad.

But what if that madness could be harnessed for good?

Well, thank goodness for quirky educators who live to dream up new and inventive ways to teach their charges. A friend of mine, when emailing about this very topic of songs that refuse to gracefully be forgotten, introduced me to the publishing company Audio Memory. They write zillions of little jingles designed to appeal to fidgety children everywhere and, true to their name, the songs are almost instantaneously lodged deep within your memory. The twist is their lyrics are chock full of educational facts. Historical, mathematical, geographical, Biblical and grammatical — facts.

I was immediately interested and decided to try out their geography CD. I'm currently taking a class on world missions which means I need to be familiar with, the world. In fact my first exam requires me to identify every country in existence on a big, blank, map.

Perhaps some of you could do that easily, but I was intimidated by the requirement. Playgrounds of Beverly? Got it. Potties on the Northshore? Check. Starbucks? Ha, what could be easier? But despite being rather well traveled, world geography has never been my strong suit.

So I started listening to the songs. Since the tunes are designed for children they are cutesy and bothersome, uh, I mean charming. We're talking big bands, snappy singers and a variety of odd and sundry instruments designed to evoke various geographic areas. Listening to the songs is like falling into a Broadway musical that has been tangled up with the Travel Channel.

But boy, I mean *boy*, do I know my world geography now. These songs stick. I have quite literally sung these songs in my dreams. My dreams I say!! Which, while maddening, proves the point: If you're going to have a tune stuck in your head, it might as well be educational.

Naturally I felt the need to share the new sound track that ran endlessly through my mind. So, beyond playing the CD in the kitchen most afternoons, I also forced my family to listen to it on a recent road trip.

Based simply on hearing the songs off and on at home, my almost-four-year-old sang the countries of East Africa with gusto. I, in turn, tried to show off to my stoic husband by belting out the obscure and not normally well known countries of western Africa. But the song that was possibly the most gripping was the one that listed all those stan countries.

The tune was brusque and formidable. It marched through our skulls conjuring up cold winter days and a shot of vodka — OK that last part might just be me after the millionth listen. But apparently I wasn't the only one who couldn't make the marching stop.

Later that night my husband sat on our couch and sighed. "It won't go away."

"What won't?" I asked looking around the room.

"That song. I can't stop humming about the Russian Federation and Tajikistan, Turkmenistan . . ."

I nodded, compelled to sing, "Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Armenia . . ."

He joined in and we sang together, "These are the countries of the former U.S.S.R."

It's exasperating really.

Still, I have never been so happy to be so very exasperated. My exam is in one week and I am ready. I often want to claw my own ears off — but I am ready.

So if you see the girls and me in town this summer ask us to hum you a bar or two — I promise it will be educational and great, and then we can all go mad together.

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She will be taking a summer hiatus, but her column will return.