

What the Ear Is For

A mix arrives. You get one first listen, and you can spend that listen once.

Mastering engineers guard the first pass. Play the thing through. Touch nothing. Write down what you notice before you know why: too bright at the top; vocal behind the guitars in the second chorus; loses energy at 2:40.

The notes are crude, made before adaptation. By the second listen, you are accommodating the record. By the fifth, you have joined its opinion of itself.

I have the same single shot inside an organisation. The first time in is the only time I hear it as an outsider. I feel the climate before I can name it, write down the crude words and keep the page. Once I am absorbed into their explanation, that page becomes the most valuable document in the work.

Listening for intent

A young engineer listens for what they would have done. With time, they listen for what the record wants. Their taste is largely irrelevant.

I ask the same question of a decision calcified inside a business: What was this trying to protect?

Most strange things in an organisation were once sensible answers to real problems under conditions that have since changed. Listening that way changes the conversation: people hear the difference between being audited and being heard.

The ear adapts, and it adapts fast

Hearing recalibrates within minutes. Louder feels better. Twenty minutes in, judgement drifts. The discipline is stopping.

Short passes. Step away. Return in the morning. Three days inside a business, I am adapting to its vocabulary and losing what I heard on the first morning. This is why my loops have gaps, and why I sometimes stop before the schedule says I should.

When the meter and the ear disagree

Meters report level, phase, spectral balance and dynamic range. They are silent on whether any of it matters.

If the analyser says the low end is fine and my ear says it is heavy, either my monitoring is misleading me or the meter measures the wrong quantity. The disagreement is information.

Engagement scores say the team is healthy; the manager says something is wrong. Everyone reaches for whichever instrument they already believed.

The disagreement is the finding. Sit inside it long enough to learn which instrument is lying. The real problem is usually standing directly behind it.

The space between

The last thing you learn to hear is space: where a fade starts, what decays, what gets cut. A record is made of its silences as much as its sounds.

In a business, the silences are the pause before an answer, the item that slips off the agenda again, the name that goes unmentioned in a meeting about that person's own department. None appears in a report. All of it is audible.

Deep listening is called a gift so often that it sounds innate, like good eyesight. It is a decision made repeatedly, at cost, by someone who wants to know.

In part three, the hand: what to do once you can hear it, and the case for doing almost nothing.

