

The Science Backed Ways Music Affects Your Brain and Productivity

Plus 11 artists to listen to while you work

[Chad Grills](#) Mar 7, 2017

CEO of The Mission. The Story podcast, Season 1 is available now on Apple Podcasts: <http://www.apple.co/2HEcveQ>

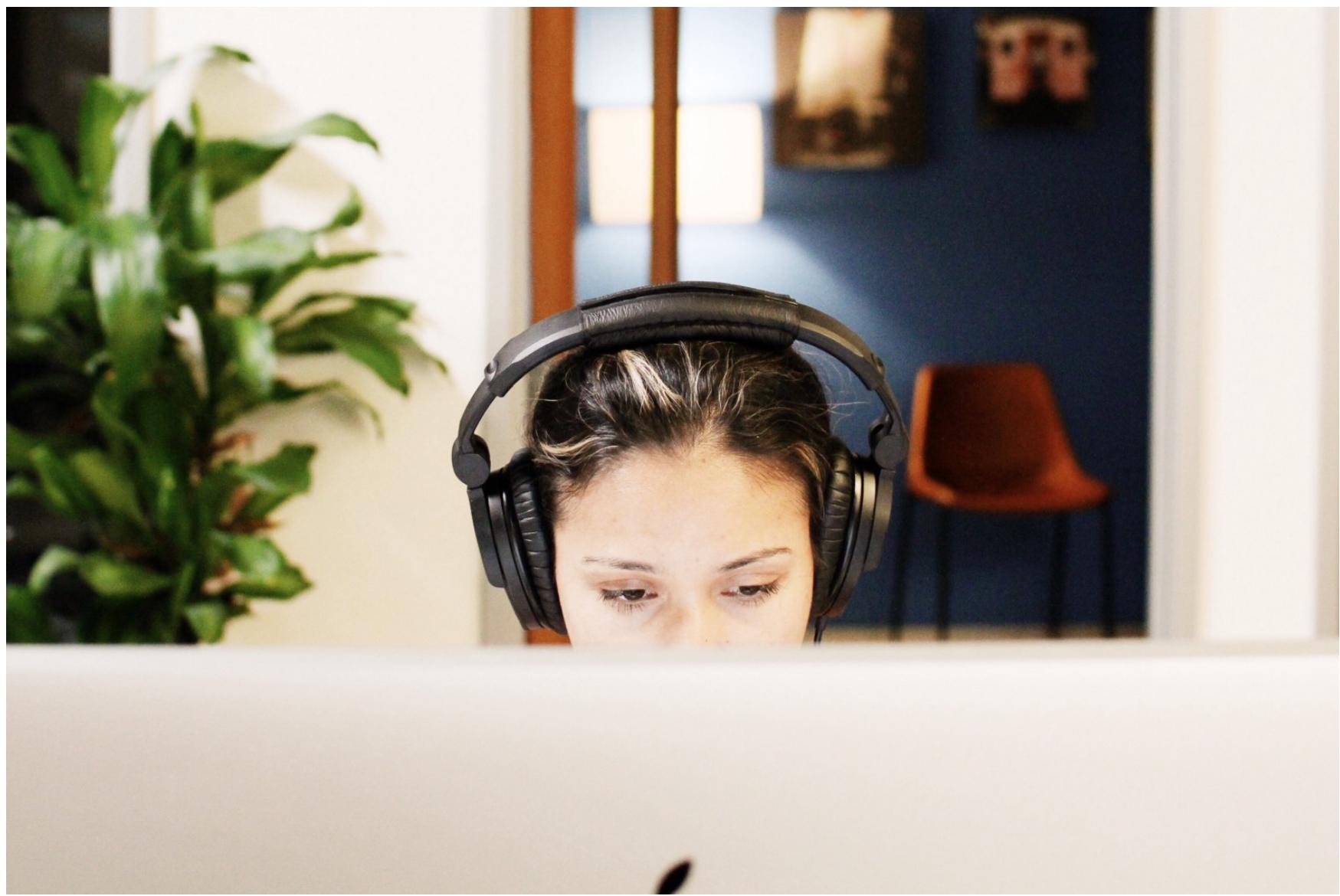


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There you sit again: browser open in front of you, the hum of your office in the background, your to-do list sprawled out on your notepad.

And... you don't feel like doing anything.

Faced with this lack of motivation, you start to experiment:

You try working offline. You try the pomodoro method. You take that a walk around the block, as suggested by everyone. No major improvements. You're not being as productive as you should, and you need to fix that... *fast*.

So you put on your headphones, pull up your favorite pop song or ambient rain mix and listen. Instantly, you can focus on those boring tasks on your to-do list (looking at you, *email*).

And now you got one of them done. Then another. Now you're bobbing your head and in the zone.

When nothing else seems to help make us productive, the right music can supercharge us. But in terms of our brain and work, what does music do and why does it help us?

Science, music, and your brain



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Studies about how music affects our brains and emotions have been ongoing [since the 1950s](#), when physicians began to notice the benefits of music therapy in European and U.S. hospital patients. However, humans [have been using music](#) to communicate thoughts and feelings to one another for centuries.

Today, [research suggests](#) that music can help relieve negative emotions like stress, anxiety and depression. It can even [decrease instances of confusion and delirium](#) in elderly medical patients recovering from surgery.

Furthermore, [research says](#) that listening to happy or sad music can make us perceive others as being happy or sad, respectively. All of these findings make it clear that, for better or worse, music's impact on our emotions is very real.

In terms of how music affects the brain, we can turn to a specific niche of research called [neuromusicology](#), which explores how our nervous systems react to music. Basically, music enters the inner ear and engages many

different areas of our brains, some of which are used for other cognitive functions, as well. (*If you want to know the specifics of this detailed process, [Dawn Kent explains it neatly](#) in her thesis.*)

Somewhat surprisingly, the number of brain areas activated by music [varies from person to person](#), depending on your musical training and your personal experiences with music. Therefore, how music impacts your ability to concentrate or feel a certain emotion can be expected to vary from person to person, too.

However, there are some general brain and mood patterns that modern music research reveals, and these can help us decide what kinds of music to listen to at work.

How music affects your brain and mood at work

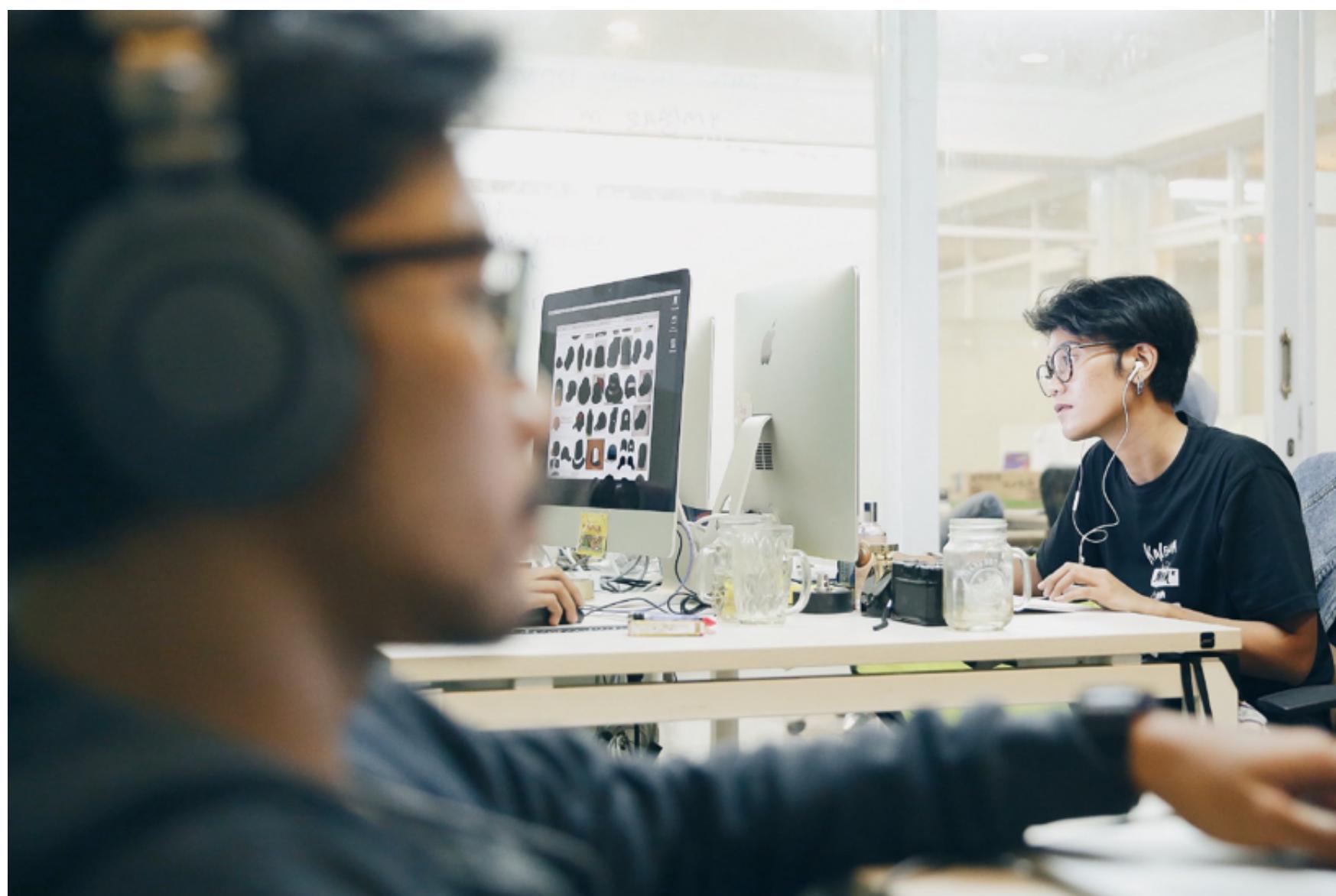


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For the most part, research suggests that listening to music can improve your efficiency, creativity and happiness in terms of work-related tasks.

However, there are stipulations to these benefits. For example, studies seem to agree that listening to music with lyrics is distracting for most people. Therefore, it's often recommended that we avoid listening to music featuring lyrics when working on tasks that require intense focus or the learning of new information.

In contrast, listening to music with lyrics may actually *help* people working on repetitive or mundane tasks, perhaps because the distracting nature of lyrical music can provide a kind of relief from the monotony of boring work.

For a greater understanding of how music affects work, here are just a few of the many studies conducted on workplace productivity and music in recent years:

In 1972, a study published in *Applied Ergonomics* suggested that people doing repetitive tasks worked more efficiently when background music was played.

In 1994, *The Journal of the American Medical Association* published a study showing that surgeon accuracy and efficiency improved when surgeons worked with music playing. Music selected by the participants had the best results and, even when working with music selected by researchers, the surgeons performed better than those who worked with no music at all.

A 1999 study in the journal of *Neuroscience and behavioral physiology* showed that playing classical or rock music allowed study participants to identify numbers more quickly and accurately.

In 2005, research from the journal of *Psychology of Music* showed that software developers experienced more positive moods, better quality of work and improved efficiency when listening to music. The study also notes a

learning curve for participants using music to alter their moods.

These examples are merely a snapshot of the research that has been conducted on music's affects on employees, but we can already start to see the benefits music has on work.

Science shows some ambient and natural music can boost your productivity



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To some extent, one can make the case that music is a form of ambient noise.

Research suggests that ambient noise, or ambient music as we may prefer to think about it here, could be the best kind of music for work productivity.

[A 2006 study from the journal of Ergonomics](#) found continuous noise to be the least annoying background noise, while distinguishable speech was “the most disturbing, most disadvantageous and least pleasant environment” for participants. The study also included a “masked speech” variable, which proved to be the most effective means of arousing participants’ mental states, while (somewhat surprisingly) continuous noise was the least effective.

In 2012, [The Journal of Consumer Research published a study](#) investigating the effects of ambient noise on creativity. The study suggested that creative processes improved when participants listened to ambient noise at a moderate volume — about 70 decibels, approximately the volume of [a vacuum cleaner](#). The study also found that creativity suffered in the presence of high-volume ambient noise — about 85 decibels, slightly louder than a garbage disposal.

Additionally, research in 2015 [from the The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America](#) found that using ambient natural sounds like a flowing stream was an effective way to improve employees’ productivity and moods in the workplace.

Considering those studies above, it’s very probable that ambient music has the potential to help improve your mood and productivity. However, for music to really improve your productivity at work, you’ll likely need to alternate between periods of no music and periods of different kinds of music.

We can recall that, when learning new information, music without lyrics is preferable to lyrical music. However, if we complete this task at work and need to switch to a more repetitive, well-known task, we may benefit emotionally and productively from listening to music with lyrics. And, depending on the complexity of the task, we’ll likely encounter instances throughout the day when we need to ditch our headphones altogether and simply focus on what’s in front of us.

That said, finding the right kind of music can be challenging at times. This is part of the learning curve mentioned in the *Psychology of Music* research above. Clicking around to find the right artist can certainly detract from workplace productivity but, once you know what works for you, music can become a tool for near-instant concentration.

Need some solid music recommendations to get started? I've got you covered...

11 Artists To Listen To While You Work

Here are a few artists that focus on lyrics and others that are more ambient. Some are uptempo and others are mellow.

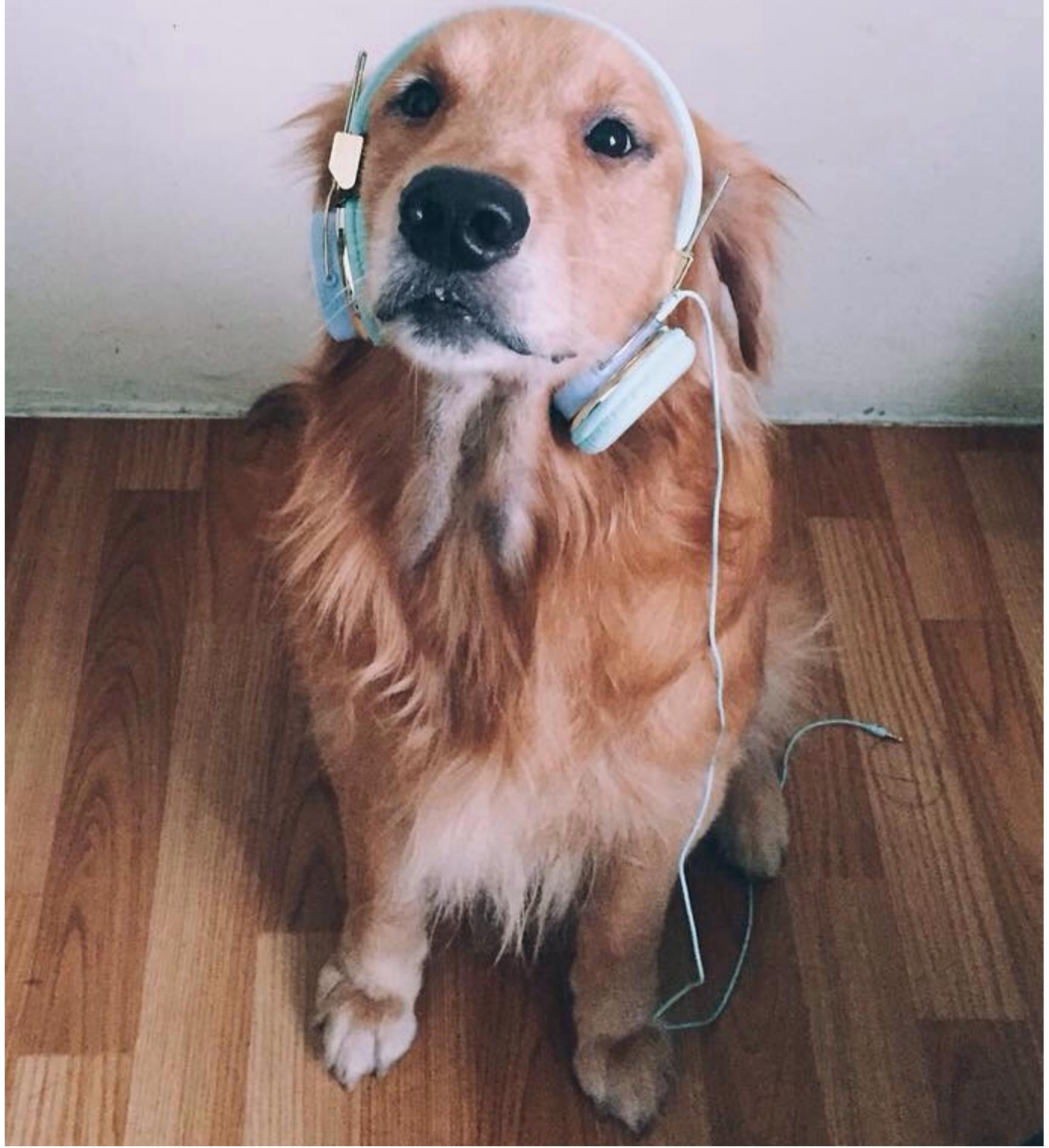


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All are available for free on YouTube, Spotify or SoundCloud.

1. Akiko Kiyama

Lyrics: Rare

Genres: Electronic, Industrial

Links: [Spotify](#), [SoundCloud](#), [YouTube](#) | [Website](#)

2. Pixl

Lyrics: Sometimes

Genres: Electronic, Dubstep

Links: [Spotify](#), [SoundCloud](#), [YouTube](#) | [Website](#)

3. Bassnectar

Lyrics: Often

Genres: Dubstep, Electronic

Links: [Spotify](#), [SoundCloud](#), [YouTube](#) | [Website](#)

4. Balmorhea

Lyrics: Sometimes

Genres: Classical, Post-rock, Pop

Links: [Spotify](#), [SoundCloud](#), [YouTube](#) | [Website](#)

5. The Echelon Effect

Lyrics: Rare

Genres: Ambient, Soundscape, Post-rock

Links: [Spotify](#), [SoundCloud](#), [YouTube](#) | [Website](#)

6. Wynton Marsalis

Lyrics: Rare

Genres: Jazz, Classical, Orchestral

Links: [Spotify](#), [SoundCloud](#), [YouTube](#) | [Website](#)

7. Wess Meets West

Lyrics: Rare

Genres: Soundscape, Post-rock, Electronic

Links: [Spotify](#), [SoundCloud](#), [YouTube](#) | [Website](#)

8. DeVotchKa

Lyrics: Often

Genres: Indie folk, Indie rock

Links: [Spotify](#), [SoundCloud](#), [YouTube](#) / [Website](#)

9. Color Theory

Lyrics: Often

Genres: Synthpop, Electronic

Links: [Spotify](#), [SoundCloud](#), [YouTube](#) / [Website](#)

10. Crystal Castles

Lyrics: Sometimes

Genres: Electronic, Experimental, Noise

Links: [Spotify](#), [SoundCloud](#), [YouTube](#) / [Website](#)

11. Andhim

Lyrics: Sometimes

Genres: House, Electronic

Links: [Spotify](#), [SoundCloud](#), [YouTube](#) / [Website](#)

There you are again: to-do list in front of you, the office beginning to bustle with life. And you already have your headphones on, knocking out your to-do's.

Chad Grills is the founder of [The Mission](#), your #1 source for accelerated learning.

If you enjoyed this article, please click the green heart below to help others find it.

Do you already have some go-to artists or playlists for productivity? Click respond and share them below for the people reading this post!

One clap, two clap, three clap, forty?

By clapping more or less, you can signal to us which stories really stand out.

