

THE SOUNDTRACK TO SHOPPING

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I have a habit of making hyper-specific playlists. If you open my Spotify account, you'll see over 100 playlists that run the gamut—from “Cozy & Cooking Dinner” to “Women in Indie Music Pre 2010s” to “Slow Beyonce Tracks.”

While I can often be found listening to one of these playlists as I run errands, one place where I tend to *not* listen to my own music is at the Coop. When I'm shopping there, I prefer to listen to whatever music is on the speakers. There's something about the music at the Coop that's always fascinated me—the way I almost never hear a song twice, the way that all of the songs feel familiar yet foreign, and the way that the songs seem to always suit the Coop, no matter the genre.

This prompted me to do an experiment of my own, and one day, while waiting in the

express checkout line, I created another hyper-specific playlist: Shopping at the Park Slope Food Coop.

Since then, I've cataloged two to four songs that are played during my shopping trips each week, adding them to the playlist as I shop. It's a surprisingly cohesive playlist—and one of my favorites—on which Van Morrison, Carole King and Bob Marley all make appearances. Which prompted me to ask: How does the Coop decide what music to play? And how does it impact our shopping?

TOP TEN COOP PLAYLISTS

- 1) Lettuce Turn Up the Volume: Pop and dance tunes for stocking the Vegetable Aisle
- 2) Ice Cream Case Cool Jams: Lo-fi beats to keep things chill
- 3) Vegan Vibes: Cruelty-free tracks for your plant-powered life
- 4) Grass-fed Funk: Groovy jams from the heart
- 5) Free-Range Jazz: Experimental improvisations
- 6) Gluten-free Grooves: Jam-band favorites
- 7) Check Out Country: Top-shelf Americana
- 8) Bulk Aisle Blues: Boogie-woogie classics
- 9) Back to School Special: Backpack rap from back in the day
- 10) Line waiters Shuffle: Slow jams for swaying in place

DONOHUE

When I posed this question to Membership Coordinator Karen Mancuso, she explained that there aren't formalized processes or parameters for music that's played on the shopping floor.

"Whichever Membership Coordinator is doing 'floor time,'" picks the music, Mancuso said. "We don't really have parameters other than playing 'clean' versions" of songs.

Mancuso said personal preference guides her choices when it comes time to take over the aux cord: "I love late '80s alternative so I'll often play PJ Harvey Radio...I also love '90s hip-hop so A Tribe Called Quest Radio is also one of my favorites."

Originally, Shopping Squad Leaders controlled the music played on the floor. Ann Herpel, General Coordinator, recounts that "at times problems developed because of the type of music being played or its volume. Staff could not communicate with each other, hear members making pages for items, page members who were working, or respond to pages. The pages had to compete with the music and often the music won out."

As a result, it was decided that staff would control music choices and volume to enable smooth work shifts and communication between staff and members.

There were also legal considerations with the switch to staff-led music.

"Music played in a public setting, like ours, is considered a 'public performance' and needs to comply with the law, which requires a license," Herpel said. "Playing music from personal collections or personal streaming service accounts, like Spotify, is not a licensed use and, therefore, violates copyright law. Our Spotify accounts are business accounts that comply with the license requirement for public performance use."

The staff's personal music selection does not go unnoticed by members.

"Other supermarkets I go to are always playing Billboard hits," said Coop member Ab-

An illustration of a brown-gloved hand holding a purple-framed smartphone against a light blue background. The phone screen shows a music application interface. At the top left, it displays '6:45' and signal/battery icons at the top right. Below the status bar is the title 'Your Library' followed by a magnifying glass icon and a plus sign. Underneath are two tabs: 'Playlists' (with a small 'x' icon) and 'PSFC'. A numbered list follows: '1- Knead Some Organic Dough, Knead Some Tunes (Indie folk + Acoustic Classics)', '2- 6 AM Receiving (Jazz and Funk Fusion Edition)', '3- Turn Up the I PM Beets (EMD + House Bangers)', '4- Let's Unpack Whole-Grain Bread (Classical + Baroque)', '5- Simmer Down Shopping Squad (Ambient + Chillwave)', and '6- Food Processing Posse (Rap, Drill + Trap Anthems)'. At the bottom of the screen are three navigation icons: a house labeled 'Home', a magnifying glass labeled 'Search', and a bookshelf labeled 'Your Library'. The signature 'DONOHUE' is written in the bottom right corner of the illustration area. On the far right edge of the entire page, the text 'ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE' is printed vertically.

Mancuso considers the energy of the Coop—how crowded it is that day, for exam-

ple—when making music choices.

“Sometimes when the store gets really crowded and chaotic, it’s not a good idea to have the music match the store’s energy—it can become too frenetic. That’s when I tend to break out an Ethiopian Jazz playlist.”

When I asked Membership Coordinator Alexandra MacDonnell about her music choices at the Coop, she noted, similarly, that it depends on the vibe that day, and the shift: “I open the store on Saturday mornings, so you will always hear some jazz or Getz, and then around 8:30 a.m., Breakfast with the Beatles to spice it up and wake everyone up.”

BACKED UP BY SCIENCE

MacDonnell and Mancuso’s instincts to tailor the music they choose to the ambiance of the Coop are scientifically backed.

In a 2023 study, researchers found that the tempo of music can impact customers’ perceptions of wait time, and variance-seeking behaviors (i.e., willingness to try new items, or consider alternatives to the products they may usually buy).

The study found: “Participants exposed to fast-tempo background music showed a higher tendency for variety-seeking compared to those exposed to slow-tempo background music.”

Similarly, in a 2013 study, it was found that slower music can be used in waiting rooms “to reduce the subjective duration of time spent waiting or in supermarkets to encourage people to stay for longer and buy more.”

In another study, from 2016, researchers found that music can impact moods—and therefore purchasing behaviors, subconsciously.

In the study, customers in the drinks aisle of a supermarket were exposed to either French or German music. “The results showed that French wine outsold German wine when French music was played, whereas German wine outsold French wine when German music was played. The type of wine they had bought had been influenced by the music that was playing.”

Obviously, at the Coop, music choices aren’t an attempt to influence what members buy.

MacDonnell described how the choices at the Coop reflect her personal history.

“I used to work for an Independent record label, Putamayo World Music, before I had kids,” said MacDonnell. “I love world music, and Putamayo’s compilation CDs are great for this—a real go-to for me.”

Unsurprisingly, some of the music selections aren’t as intentional but rather a reflection of what that Membership Coordinator is humming to themselves that day. “Sometimes, if I have a song [stuck] in my head and I want to hear it, it’ll go right on as soon as I take over the front end.”

When there’s a holiday, MacDonnell doesn’t hesitate to reflect that in her music choices: “I love to play thematic music, too—so on St. Patrick’s Day, for example, I’ll choose Irish music such as Pogues, Waterboys, Sinead O’Connor.” But the themes don’t stop there: “When it is raining out, I’ll sometimes play music with ‘Rain’ in the title.”

Membership Coordinators are also considering underrepresented genres.

“Recently, I realized there are some genres we rarely play, like country,” said Mancuso. “So, I’ve started playing Gillian Welch Radio once in a while.”

Ultimately, while the tunes may be set by the Membership Coordinators on the floor,

Coop members can put their two cents in, too. “I always listen to the members,” explained Mancuso. “If someone comes up to me and tells me that the music is giving them a headache—which has happened!—I have no problem changing it, or lowering the volume.”