

MAN *in* A SUITCASE

Music, scent, lighting? **TIM MAGEE**
wonders how good hotels conjure up
the right atmosphere

“Which scent would you like to match your mood?” whispered the smiling Thai lady while washing my feet. My mood now, or after the massage? Actual, or aspirational? I don’t know. Is there a scent for confusion? If it’s to match my mood this second then essential oil of cold coffee and lemon juice should be bang on, thanks. The therapist is sweet and super-professional, following the script, but it’s not relaxing. Nor was the trifecta of quizzes since arrival.

It started with multiple choice. Box-ticking your age. Crisp little black and white reminders of mortality (only one box left now before the wooden box). Then, have you ever had the following conditions? No, but any day now. All of the issues to which I used to just rapid fire a flurry of nos are now actually read carefully until I feel like Captain Corporeal. Until I feel worse than when I came in.

After I don the showercap-ish briefs designed for miniature hermaphrodites, the next quiz starts, questions only a few Grasse noses could answer confidently on matching moods and skin to scents, and which essential oil would I like for the massage. But if the oils are essential don’t I need them all? I say, “Whatever you think yourself,” hoping she can tell what I need by the cut of me. She looks as puzzled as me now, and says that the lavender was gathered on a harvest moon by local eunuchs on free-range unicorns, or something. All I want is to hear her say “Lie that way Bucko, I’m going to make you forget your name for the next hour” and proceed to beat the melt out of me. The only thing I want to choose is fewer questions.

This spa is impressive – they’ve spent a fortune on the building. They might say the interrogation added to my experience. It did. But not in a good way. They might say that they were being thorough, thinking of everything, but they weren’t. Because regardless of the pick’n’mix of oils and incense they had forgotten something. They forgot about the music.

Throughout the interrogation and treatment it was the international spa anthem, those looped medleys of birthing whales remixed with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The musical equivalent of pot pourri. Despite its millions in investment in marble, sandalwood, training and unicorns, another spa had failed.

I should have felt off-grid, disconnected and bobbing around on the ceiling but because of the cheap music on the expensive sound system I actually felt I was trapped in a car with a stoner called Dolphin who had the controls of the radio. The one time I nodded off I dreamt of Moby Dick, and hobbits in my local Chinese.

I spend more time sleeping and eating in hotels than

at my house but I still get a buzz from the bustle of a lush lobby, or stretching toes on silky sheets and the shuffle, jingle and knock of room service. It’s my life and I appreciate how hard it is to do this well. Having masses of strangers eating and sleeping in your house every day isn’t easy. There are a thousand things you need to think of, but the blind spots are strangely the same and they are all sensory. Lighting. Art. Scent. Books. And most of all music.

CHILL-OUT MUSIC can do the opposite to anyone with the will to live.

Lighting is almost always too bright and flat, especially in dining rooms. Most books on shelves look like the dregs of a jumble sale and have little or no relevance either to the place or to you. The art on the walls too often ranges from that poor exhausted Nubian woman still carrying that ewer on the savannah to walls that look like they were decorated with the swag from a trolley dash at Roches Stores in the 1980s. Most hotel lobbies still smell of cleaning products or carelessness and miss the opportunity to welcome their guests’ noses on holidays too.

Most of these things are easily fixed. Dimming everything in public spaces (Jonathan Adler’s advice on lighting is “dimmers, dimmers, dimmers”), light lamps with warm shades for a flattering glow, and turning off any light that’s blue which just makes everyone look green. Having a well-considered and relevant book collection or none at all. Philip Blackwell of Ultimate Library curates a selection of books according to each hotel’s location and clientele, which is a smart way to do things. Light candles or incense – take a leaf from New York’s Gramercy Park Hotel’s bespoke fragrance, a distinctive smoky, leathery, woodsy scent created by Le Labo, based on the hotel’s central fixture of a huge fireplace. It is more talked about than the rooms.

Emphasising the sense of place through great old photography, local maps, contemporary images of what’s outside the window, young artists’ work and vintage travel posters is easy and cheap, and shows a real connection with where you are.

But what is played over the speakers is a different story. What you play, when you play it, how often it changes, and how loud it should be needs time that hoteliers or restaurateurs often don’t have.

Creating the soundtrack for hotels and restaurants is Rob



The Montpellier library
at the Montpellier Chapter
Hotel, Cheltenham.



Music concierge
Rob Wood.

Wood’s job, the founder of Music Concierge. He started making mix tapes for parties at the tender age of nine before going into the music industry and taking his chops on tour as a DJ at a time when both of those things were still fun. Warm, refreshingly lacking in muso-speak, Wood’s shoulders seem chip-free.

Wood and his crew observe the ebb and flow of spaces in hotels, restaurants and bars. When does music need to take a back seat? Like in a full restaurant where the comforting sound of cutlery, china and chat is the soundtrack. Then they put on their anoraks and go treasure hunting for music to fit. Not Muzak. Not Café del Mar, Mickey Bublê, Buddah Bar or Now That’s What I Call Couldn’t Be Arsed 2054. When you are in a hotel you are supposed to be escaping from your normal life, not listening to the soundtrack of your weekly shop. Chill-out music can do the opposite of what it says to anyone with the will to live.

With hundreds of genres, they look for the music that has fallen between the cracks – Wood has a nice term for the mission, bringing people “music they didn’t know they would love”. You don’t have to be an anorak about music because he is.

Also a travel writer, Wood was telling me of a trip to review a Greek hotel that had spent serious money, yet the same Phil Collins album was on a loop everywhere: in the bar, lobby, restaurants, even the spa. Repeating badly chosen music isn’t just a faux pas – it’s torture, for both the poor staff and customers. Really. Playing Van Halen’s “Panama” repeatedly finally resulted in General Noriega surrendering from his sanctuary in the Holy See.

Wood is still making mix tapes for parties from what I see. His omnipresent DJ-ing is something that we need more of. Music matters. Great music makes our wine taste better and our company easier. Time flies, we spend more money. So why do most hotels and restaurants give it so little time? That’s one question worth asking. ■

www.ultimatelibrary.co.uk; www.musicconcierge.co.uk