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**The Sound of L.A. Noir – Listening to Marlowe’s Los Angeles in Raymond  
Chandler’s *The Long Goodbye* and Benjamin Black’s  
*The Black-Eyed Blonde***

**Abstract**

Cities have distinct sounds. Some cities might sound alike, some may vary by subtle degrees, and others exhibit significant acoustic landmarks. But how does this play out for cities in literature? In this article Annika Eisenberg explores what Los Angeles sounds like in Raymond Chandler’s novel *The Long Goodbye* (1953), with the occasional glance towards earlier and later novels, and how Chandler’s sonic evocation of L.A. might find its equivalent in the latest Philip Marlowe novel *The Black-Eyed Blonde* (2014) by Benjamin Black (nom de plume of the Irish novelist John Banville), which ties in intertextually with characters and plot structures from *The Long Goodbye*.

**Keywords:** Raymond Chandler, Benjamin Black, noir, sound, city

## 1. Introduction

Cities have distinct sounds. Some cities might sound alike, some may vary by subtle degrees, and others exhibit significant acoustic landmarks such as London's Big Ben. But how does this play out for cities in literature? In this paper I explore what Los Angeles sounds like in Raymond Chandler's novel *The Long Goodbye* (1953), with the occasional glance towards earlier and later novels, and how Chandler's sonic evocation of L.A. might find its equivalent in the latest Philip Marlowe novel *The Black-Eyed Blonde* (2014) by Benjamin Black (nom de plume of the Irish novelist John Banville), which ties in intertextually with characters and plot structures from *The Long Goodbye*. Literature has a long tradition of urban novels that made the respective cities appeal to all of the senses of their protagonists (and their readers), from sight to sound to touch to smell. Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles is such a multidimensional city that can easily join the ranks of well-established literary urban classics of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Alfred Döblin's Berlin, John Dos Passos's New York or James Joyce's Dublin. Even earlier classics might be included in the list, since Frank MacShane claims that Chandler "create[d] the whole of Los Angeles in much the same way that such 19<sup>th</sup>-Century novelists as Dickens and Balzac created London and Paris for future generations" (MacShane 67). To Chandler, who famously noted that "[t]he ideal mystery was one you would read if the end was missing" (*Trouble Is My Business* viii), setting and characters were doubtless more important than the solution of the murder mysteries in his novels. Indeed, when Howard Hawks set out to turn Chandler's novel *The Big Sleep* into a movie starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, he discovered that the novel didn't disclose who murdered the Sternwood family chauffeur, or whether the man committed suicide. As the story goes, Hawks asked Chandler about this, who replied "dammit I didn't know either", as Chandler later recalled in a letter to Jamie Hamilton (Hiney and MacShane 105). In this context, Frank MacShane emphasizes the vital entanglement and immense potential of the city setting in crime fiction with regard to Chandler: "The detective story, so peculiar to the modern city, can involve an extraordinary range of humanity, from the very rich to the very poor, and can encompass a great many different places" (67). Thus, it may seem surprising that to date the majority of research on urban spaces in crime fiction from a sensory perspective adheres almost exclusively to a visual paradigm. It is the flashing neon lights, the inky shadows, and the blinds obscuring windows that come to mind as characteristics of the hard-boiled and noir genres. In my article, I want to shift the focus from visual spaces and places in crime fiction to the auditory qualities of the urban environment. In general, the sound of noir is still an under-represented field, with Robert Miklitsch's 2011 monograph *Siren City – Sound and Source Music in Classic American Noir* representing a notable forerunner in the field of film studies. While Miklitsch analyzes all different kinds of sounds with regard to film noir I focus on a specific subset of sounds: urban sounds, sounds

that are connected to and representative of a cityscape. This leads to a redefinition and precision of Raymond Murray Schafer's original coinage of the term 'soundscape', as in my definition soundscape comprises all of those sounds which the reader of a literary work perceives to be constitutive of a mediated experience of the respective cityscape. [1]

In a first phenomenological approach to a typology of urban sounds I have identified four main groups of sounds that are related to their urban environment in one way or another, moving from the more concrete and obvious urban sounds to the more abstract and unusual. The first group consists of all mechanical and technological sounds that are determined by the architectural and industrial features of the city such as traffic and transportation, sirens and bells (both mobile and stationary), factories and construction sites. The second group is similarly determined by the topography of the city. While most discourse on urban space sees this group as a distinct opposite to the city, the boundaries are surely not as strict: natural and animal sounds – ranging from bird song, squeaking rats and barking dogs to the sounds of the sea, lakes or rivers. The third group comprises the major audience for and at the same time prominent producer of urban sounds: human beings, whether as mumbling crowds, street vendors, or through a distinct way of speaking, such as the Berlin dialect in Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* or the Kansas accent in Chandler's *Playback*. And finally music can also have a great variety of connections to the city it is performed in, originates from, or is associated with in literature. This includes vocal music about the city, with Frank Sinatra's 'New York, New York' being one of the most famous examples, certain musical styles or forms, such as Chicago Jazz, but also buskers, nightclubs and bars, as well as radio or jukebox music played in the respective city. But not all of these sounds will be found in any city and not all of them at the same time and in the same place. So rather than merely identifying which kinds of sounds might be heard in an urban space, the more significant question should actually be: who hears them? This question is an addition to Gérard Genette's distinction between who speaks (narrator) and who sees (focalizer) in a literary text. [2] Who hears?

## 2. Listen, Marlowe

In Chandler's novels and in Black's pastiche the hard-boiled detective Philip Marlowe is the prominent first-person narrator and focalizer: everything is mediated through him, he is the one who speaks, sees, and feels. When he becomes unconscious, the narrative is interrupted; when he falls asleep, the chapter ends. Marlowe describes himself as a "lone wolf" (*The Long Goodbye* 493), [3] and Chandler wrote in 1959 to Maurice Guinness: "I see [Marlowe] always in a lonely street, in lonely rooms, puzzled but never quite defeated" (Gardner and Walker 249). He is usually short on money but doesn't really care about it; he regularly gets into trouble both with the city's racketeers and the police force; he lives in an impersonal rented house – "this was what I would come back to. A blank

wall in a meaningless room in a meaningless house” (*Playback* 869) – and he keeps an ‘office bottle’ in his desk, which he turns to more often than to his mostly female clients. This narrative perspective implies that all L.A. sounds related in the novels reflect Marlowe’s reaction to and perception of them, rather than an objective, matter-of-fact description of urban sounds, which an omniscient narrator might be able to convey. This becomes apparent, for example, when Marlowe wakes up with a hangover and discloses an acoustic sensation he would normally not perceive consciously:

Birds chirped in the shrubbery outside and the cars went up and down Laurel Canyon Boulevard endlessly. Usually, I wouldn’t even hear them. But I was brooding and irritable and mean and oversensitive. I decided to kill the hangover. (*The Long Goodbye* 600f)

To account for such a specific sensual perspective the descriptive category “Point of Audition” (POA) was developed as an acoustic analogy to the term “Point of View”. The POA became especially prominent in film studies and took on a significant role to describe the subjective reception of sounds. [4] A genuinely literary approach, as already mentioned, modifies Genette’s concept of the focalizer into the auscultator, which Melba Cuddy-Keane proposes as a narratological category. [5] In general, the most obvious indicators for a specific, personal POA or a prominent auscultator in literature are the use of verbs from the semantic field of “listening” such as ‘hear’, ‘listen’, ‘eavesdrop’, ‘overhear’, and so on. Looking for such indications as a starting point for a sonic reading of a first-person narration seems plausible as basically every phenomenon in the world may have an acoustic dimension, which – in theory – could be *heard*, as Toni Bernhart rightly observes (53f). Certainly, densely described sensory impressions of a cityscape are able to evoke certain sounds in the readers’ minds, even though there may be such no explicit indicators for them. But examining such an implicit evocation poses analytical difficulties since any investigation of this kind would have to turn from a text-immanent to a reader-response approach. This is why I refrain from drawing on indirect evocations of sound. This approach is supported by the first-person perspectives in Chandler’s and Black’s novels, where signifiers for Marlowe’s POA are employed throughout.

Identifying the percipient agency can only be a first step, however, since it is equally important to determine how these sounds are evaluated or semantized, which metaphors or similes are chosen to bestow and convey a certain meaning. This can be quite obvious, such as when Black’s Marlowe states: “I like the *glug-glug-glug* that the soda makes as it tumbles over ice; it’s a sound that always cheers me up” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 111, original emphasis). This is reminiscent of a short scene in *Farewell, My Lovely*, when Marlowe finds shelter at Anne Riordan’s place after he has been drugged and held captive: “somewhere ice cubes tinkled and I closed my eyes and listened to the small unimportant sounds” (904). This listening experience is subtler in its connotation than Black’s positive assertion, and although the sounds might be described as unimportant, this short sequence points to an essential distinction between positive and negative

sounds. As a detective Marlowe often has to rely on his listening skills and his good sense of hearing, for example, when he operates at night, while being blindfolded, or while eavesdropping on possible suspects – the latter he does, for instance, most remarkably by using a stethoscope on the bungalow wall to eavesdrop on the conversation between Betty Mayfield and Larry Mitchell from next door in *Playback*. He describes himself as a “trained listener” to Terry Lennox in *The Long Goodbye* (434), which allows the inference of two meanings: of being able to listen patiently to someone’s story, as Marlowe does in this instant, and being a skilled and attentive listener for details. This attentiveness is one of the most crucial qualities in a detective, because he needs to anticipate dangerous situations; he needs constantly to be on his toes, or, as it were, prick up his ears. This quality is found in Black’s Marlowe as well, who is aware of a precarious slip in his attentiveness in *The Black-Eyed Blonde*, when he “half heard, very faintly, a car pulling up in the street out front. I took no notice of it, though I should have.” (112) This inattentiveness has disastrous consequences, as shortly after, two Mexican men enter the apartment, beat Marlowe unconscious, and kidnap Lynn Peterson, who was there with him. Time and again attentive listening is portrayed as an essential quality for survival, as for example in the novel *Playback*, when Marlowe finds out that someone is waiting in his bungalow:

I went on through the trees until I was below my room. It was dark, soundless. I went up the few steps very slowly and put my ear to the door. For a little while I heard nothing. Then I heard a strangled sob – a man’s sob, not a woman’s. Then a thin, low cackling laugh. Then what seemed to be a hard blow. Then silence. I went back down the steps and through the trees to my car. I unlocked the trunk and got out a tire iron. I went back to my room as carefully as before – even more carefully. I listened again. Silence. Nothing. The quiet of the night. I reached out my pocket flash and flicked it once at the window, then slid away from the door. For several minutes nothing happened. Then the door opened a crack. (848f)

As a result, Marlowe finds most comfort and pleasure in sounds that are outside of his professionally trained listening scope, sounds that do not pose an imminent threat he has to detect. It is the “small unimportant sounds” he prefers to other, potentially threatening, small sounds such as the loading of a gun, cracking twigs in a Canyon, or the almost noiseless opening of a door. Helen Hanson points to another importance of sound – or its absence – in private investigation: “the term ‘gum-shoe’ for a detective, moving silently and unnoticed through the crime world, underlines how audible footsteps can form an index to a character’s location, where darkness frustrates an investigator’s visual map” (289). Interestingly, Black inverts this well-known trope and has his Marlowe struggle with moving silently when he exits his office: “Rufus had gone home, and the floor he had been mopping had long since dried, though the soles of my shoes squeaked on it as if it were still wet.” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 263) This seems more in line with Chandler’s character Bernie Ohls in *The Long Goodbye*, the rare representative of

an honest police officer in the city, whose “heels hammered down the corridor. I could still hear them when the phone on my desk started to sound” (ibid. 652). In Chandler’s works, it is not only the ‘gum-shoes’ who are able to hide their acoustic traces: the suspects and seedy figures are characterized by an equal capacity: “I listened but I didn’t hear their steps going down the hall. They walked as softly as cats” (*The Long Goodbye* 438), Marlowe says of gangster Mendy Menendez and his bodyguard, and the shady ‘dope doctor’ Dr. Lester Vukanich – although not the main suspect – “walked noiselessly on crepe rubber soles” (ibid. 528). But *The Long Goodbye* ends with the most remarkable fading footsteps that are bound to linger in the readers’ minds – and in Marlowe’s, too. *The Long Goodbye* is the first novel that gets Marlowe close to having a real friend in Terry Lennox, and close to a female companion when Linda Loring asks him to marry her, which would put an end to Marlowe’s days as a “lone wolf”. This change becomes apparent to the reader only later, in Marlowe’s unfinished novel *Poodle Springs*; but then again, maybe there is design in Chandler’s leaving the novel a fragment, since “[a] really good detective never gets married. He would lose his detachment, and this detachment is part of his charm” (*Twelve Notes on the Mystery Story* 1008). Inevitably, *The Long Goodbye* ends with Marlowe listening to Terry Lennox’s footsteps fading away: “I listened to his steps going away down the imitation marble corridor. After a while they got faint, then they got silent. I kept on listening anyways.” (734) This sonic figure stands not only for Marlowe’s disappointment that he has lost what might have become his best, his only, friend, but it points to a special kind of vulnerability and frailty of human relationships in the big city.

It seems no surprise, then, that Marlowe does not actively seek human companionship in the novels. Rather, he turns to and identifies with the animals of the city, who – in a similar way as Marlowe – do not belong to its cityscape (as for instance traffic noises do), while nonetheless being a pivotal part of it. Descriptions of singing birds are prevalent in both *The Long Goodbye* and *The Black-Eyed Blonde*. Chandler’s Marlowe projects a lot of his own dissatisfaction with city life onto these animals, when, for example, he claims that he can hear “[a] mourning dove exclaim[] against the miseries of life” (*The Long Goodbye* 533). He takes sympathy in the “little fat bird” (ibid. 508), a baby mockingbird that is trying to balance itself in the tecoma in front of Marlowe’s apartment, and Marlowe constantly uses the personal pronoun “he”, “his” and “himself” to talk about the bird in front of his window (“I spotted him hanging on to one of the top branches”, [ibid.], “a mockingbird [...] admired himself before settling down for the night” [ibid. 475], or “a bird was [...] talking to himself in low chirps” [ibid. 488]). It seems that Marlowe identifies with these animals and finds comfort in another kind of a “small unimportant sound“. The bird’s chirruping becomes human language, when the bird is “talking to himself”; something the silent listener Marlowe may recognize as a familiar habit as well, no less because he is a first-person narrator. Black’s Marlowe does not take such an interest in the birds around him; in *The Black-Eyed Blonde* they are mostly “crying” (“the gulls crying” [47], “the

odd seabird sleepily crying” [165], “night birds crying” [ibid.]), and are often used to create a sense of security and comfort in moments of extreme tension, which are shortly after revealed as illusory. When Marlowe hears “a scream, eerily thin and piercing” in the garden (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 50), it is Clare who has to explain to him that this was the cry of a peacock. While Chandler’s Marlowe can easily identify different bird songs (e.g. “Far back in the valley I thought I heard a quail” [*The Long Goodbye* 533]), Black’s Marlowe does not recognize the distinct sound that a peacock makes. In Black, the expectation of its cry becomes a sinister omen that Marlowe is terribly apprehensive about: “Then I caught a flash of blue, a deep, shiny blue, and there was a swishing sound that quickly faded. It must have been the peacock. I hoped it wouldn’t do its scream, my nerves couldn’t have borne it” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 265). While Black’s Marlowe is afraid of the sound the peacock makes, Chandler’s Marlowe is much more fearful of those sounds less associated with animal life and more with big cities.

### 3. The Big Angry City

Marlowe’s troubled relationship with Los Angeles has been an endless source for discussion [6], and quite naturally it finds its equivalence in Marlowe’s audible description of Los Angeles. Any urban sounds that might be positively connoted are entirely absent from Chandler’s L.A. soundscape – and from Black’s, too. In a crucial scene in *The Long Goodbye* Marlowe returns home from the Wades’s house, where he discovered the death of Roger Wade, and he gives a glimpse of his stance on L.A. through an acoustic description of its properties:

When I got home I mixed a stiff one and stood by the open window in the living room and sipped it and listened to the groundswell of the traffic on Laurel Canyon Boulevard and looked at the glare of the big angry city hanging over the shoulder of the hills through which the boulevard had been cut. Far off the banshee wail of police or fire sirens rose and fell, never for very long completely silent. (*The Long Goodbye* 645)

Ceaseless traffic and sirens are the predominant sounds of L.A., indicating the motorization and velocity of modern life as well as the corrupt and criminal environment. This negative connotation becomes apparent through metaphors such as the “banshee wail” (ibid.) or, later, that the “traffic brawled endlessly” (ibid. 530), and of course through the characterization of the city as “angry”. Traffic interferes with Marlowe’s ability to draw deductions from the few facts he has accumulated so far, which is one of the key weapons of a private investigator: “The noise of the traffic outside the building on the boulevard made an unmusical obbligato to my thinking. It was too loud.” (ibid. 616) In Chandler’s other novels traffic is similarly connoted, especially when Marlowe is hung over (see above) or recovers from being drugged: “The noise of traffic from the

boulevard came in waves, like nausea. I felt lousy” (*Farewell, My Lovely* 832). Awakening from a bout of drinking or other intoxication seems to sharpen rather than dull Marlowe’s hearing.

In general, traffic is a very complex acoustic phenomenon that might consist of honking cars, revving motors, squeaking brakes and the odd rumble and rattle of buses, trains or trucks. Subsuming these different sounds into a generic term avoids an aesthetization of L.A.’s traffic noise, which could be easily expressed in literature through devices such as onomatopoeia, paratactic sentence structures, metaphors, and similes. This strengthens the impression that to Marlowe Los Angeles is far from exhibiting what might be called an “urban sublime”, but is rather a “neon-lighted slum” (*The Little Sister* 357) that affords no pleasure or joy for the private detective. But what is more, L.A. can actually turn into a threat, when the “big angry city” is venting its rage. In Marlowe’s case this means repeatedly being beaten up by hoodlums or police officers as the brutal representatives of the relentless city, which often have quite a dramatic impact on Marlowe’s sense of hearing in Chandler: “The blow traveled eight or ten inches, no more. It nearly took my head off. Bile seeped into my mouth. I tasted blood mixed with it. I heard nothing but a roaring in my head” (*The Long Goodbye* 455); and in Black:

It was as hard to get my head up as it had been in Nico Peterson’s kitchen a few hours previously, though the bells that went off inside my skull didn’t make quite as bad a din as before. In fact, I’d mistaken the sound of the doorbell for them when Bernie first pressed it. (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 125)

The angry city manifests itself also in several car chases at a breakneck speed through Los Angeles. An especially menacing scene takes place in Chandler’s novel *The Lady in the Lake*, when a police car follows Marlowe, and the description of the car’s sounds already alludes to the intentions of the police officers in it: “The car behind me gained. [...] The car came up level and started to cut in. [...] Behind me sounded the rough clashing of gears, the howl of an infuriated motor, and the red spotlight swept for what seemed miles over the brickyard” (128f). The police officers stop Marlowe, beat him up and fine him for drunk driving. Later on he recounts to Captain Webber: “I didn’t bust Cooney in the nose until after he had forced me to drink whiskey and then hit me in the stomach when I drank it, so that I would spill it down my coat front and smell of it. This can’t be the first time you have heard of that trick, captain” (ibid. 137). Black’s novel is less prone to invoking traffic noises to allude to L.A. as a troubled city, but *The Black-Eyed Blonde* picks up a motif that is also prevalent in Chandler’s soundscape in previous novels: the idea of nature not as an opposite to the criminal urban environment but as being corrupted by it. One example might be Marlowe’s description of the ocean, which is not a source of comfort in either Black’s or Chandler’s novels: “down at the water’s edge [...] pebbles hissed in the wash as if they were on the boil” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 44). Marlowe himself might feel “on the boil” when talking



to his enchanting client Clare Cavendish at this moment, but beyond this externalization of an inner emotional state, “the sound of the waves, the pebbles hissing and the gulls crying” (ibid. 47) construes the ocean as a potentially dangerous place that does not provide shelter from urban criminality. This becomes further apparent for instance in the gambling ships on the ocean that Marlowe describes and visits in *Farewell, My Lovely*: “There was light on the *Montecito* also and music floated across the wet dark sea.” (947)

Gambling ships, casinos, shady nightclubs, and bars – time and again Marlowe has to return to L.A.’s entertainment district, Hollywood, which doesn’t foster a fondness for these environments within him. In all of Chandler’s novels a somewhat natural liaison between popular music and criminal environments is staged, because they are part of the same infrastructures of nightclubs, casinos, bars, hotels, and theaters as their centers and hubs of activities, and all people somehow associated with the music business usually belong to the circle of suspects, such as the night club owner Steelgrave in *The Little Sister* or the singers Velma Valento in *Farewell, My Lovely* and Lisa Conquest in *The High Window*. While it is impossible to give a comprehensive overview of the jazz discourse and its implications in 1940s and 1950s America in this short article, this liaison clearly reflects a certain racial discourse that finds “black” music to be the idiomatic representation of the urban, the secular, and the decadent. [7] Miklitsch summarizes this stereotypical reception of jazz when he states that “many white Americans enthusiastically embraced the music because it displayed elements associated with black popular culture such as ‘spontaneity, transgressiveness, and, most importantly, sexuality’” (12). [8] This might be one reason why Marlowe is rather biased towards the popular jazz music of his time, which is reprised in *Black* from a more nuanced 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, when Marlowe’s radio is “playing an old number by the Paul Whiteman band, hot music made safely cool for the masses. It beats me how a guy with the name Whiteman ever got up the nerve to play jazz” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 264). Jazz music as the prelude to and soundtrack of crime renders Hollywood a shady and phony place. It has little to offer for Marlowe, as the movies are “just noises and big faces” to him (*The Long Goodbye* 488). That his investigations often lead him to Hollywood must seem like the irony of his life. In numerous instances Marlowe voices his contempt for Hollywood and everyone in it:

Real cities have something else, some individual bony structure under the muck. Los Angeles has Hollywood and hates it. It ought to consider itself damn lucky. Without Hollywood it would be a mail-order city. Everything in the catalog you could get better somewhere else.” (*The Little Sister* 358)

*Black* takes up the misanthropic attitude of Chandler’s Marlowe, which is expressed throughout all of Chandler’s novels (most prominently during a long car drive in the novel *The Little Sister*: “You’re not human tonight, Marlowe” [268]), when he has Marlowe waiting at Union Station “amid the noise and smells and the endless rush of hurrying, impatient, ill-tempered people” (*The*

*Black-Eyed Blonde* 251).

But it is not only crowded Hollywood, the movies, and jazz music that Marlowe does not find any pleasure in; he is also indifferent to the “Waltz King of Radio”, Marek Weber, whose music he has “in his ears” (*The Long Goodbye* 531) while waiting to be seated at a burger restaurant, and he isn’t too fond of classical music either. This doesn’t imply that Marlowe is ignorant of the musical arts. On the contrary, Marlowe is well-versed in (classical) music and its terminology, which becomes obvious in his repeated musical comparisons, for instance, when he relates the suspenseful silence after Eileen Wade enters a bar as “like just after the conductor taps on his music stand and raises his arms and holds them poised” (ibid. 490). Black’s Marlowe is not portrayed as the understated connoisseur of fine arts, who is educated and well-read. Rather Black’s Marlowe even outs himself as ignorant of classical music: “I heard the sound of a piano and stopped to listen. Chopin, I guessed, but I was probably wrong – to me everything on the piano sounds like Chopin” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 265). In contrast, Chandler’s Marlowe describes the “noise of the traffic outside the building on the boulevard” as an “unmusical *obbligato*” (*The Long Goodbye* 616. added emphasis), and this paradoxical comparison points to his ambivalent relationship to urban sounds and to music in the most subtle yet precise way. One might argue that Marlowe construes music as an opposite to the urban sounds around him by calling the traffic “unmusical” and “too loud” (ibid.); but at the same time the traffic sounds are an “obbligato”, an obligatory and indispensable musical line in a performance, which might be seen to elevate these urban sounds to the sphere of music. As a result, the difference between the incidental chords of urban noise and the careful composition of classical music is, to a certain extent, revoked. Chandler’s Marlowe frequently draws on music metaphors as a means of connecting the cacophonous cityscape with the aesthetics of music, the latter of which might generally be perceived as more pleasing – all while degrading music as just another source of noise. This is further emphasized by Marlowe’s description of a violin concerto by Aram Khachaturyan, which he listens to when he is unable to sleep: “I was walking the floor and listening to Khachaturyan working in a tractor factory. He called it a violin concerto. I called it a loose fen belt and the hell with it” (ibid. 488). Consequently, music does not provide comfort or relief for Marlowe in the way it does, for instance, for Jessie Florian in *Farewell, My Lovely*, when she describes her radio as “[a]ll the comp’ny I got.” (785) In *The Black-Eyed Blonde*, on the other hand, Marlowe could not be less interested in his car radio: “I flicked on the radio. It was a thing I rarely did, and in fact I forgot for long periods that it was there” (264). So if neither typical city sounds, such as traffic noise, nor musical harmonies are pleasing to Marlowe’s ear, does silence do the trick for either Chandler’s or Black’s Marlowe?

#### 4. Silence

The most readily associated opposite to urban noise might be silence – although this can never mean complete silence as there is always something the human ear picks up, even if it is just the beating of one’s own heart. When Marlowe is at Puma Lake outside of Los Angeles he remarks: “The air was peaceful and calm and sunny and held a quiet you don’t get in cities“ (*The Lady in the Lake* 37). Such a relative silence is reserved for L.A.’s upper classes, who can afford a place just outside of the densely populated downtown areas; closer to the canyons, mountains and the Pacific Ocean that provide natural barriers to the sprawl of Los Angeles. Although Marlowe often has clients from these parts of town – General Sternwood in *The Big Sleep*, Elizabeth Murdock in *The High Window*, Lindsay Marriott and Mrs Lewin Lockridge Grayle in *Farewell, My Lovely*, Terry Lennox and the Wades in *The Long Goodbye*, Clare Cavendish in *The Black-Eyed Blonde* – Marlowe doesn’t like to associate with these circles, because they all exemplify the corrupt and phony society that Marlowe would find in Hollywood and every shady nightclub as well:

It was the same old cocktail party, everybody talking too loud, nobody listening, everybody hanging on for dear life to a mug of the juice, eyes very bright, cheeks flushed or pale and sweaty according to the amount of alcohol consumed and the capacity of the individual to handle it. (*The Long Goodbye* 560)

In contrast to the city’s racketeers these “well-heeled people” make “quiet money”, as Marlowe calls it in *The Long Goodbye*. This attribution strengthens the connection between (relative) silence and wealth:

I knew a good deal about Idle Valley, and I knew it had changed a great deal from the days when they had the gatehouse at the entrance and the private police force, and the gambling casino on the lake, and the fifty-dollar joy girls. Quiet money had taken over the tract after the casino was closed out. Quiet money had made it a subdivider’s dream. (*The Long Goodbye* 498f)

In *Farewell, My Lovely* Marlowe describes such “great silent estates” as coming with “a special brand of sunshine, very quiet, put up in noise-proof containers just for the upper classes” (854). In an area that has plenty of sunshine but also long periods of droughts, real wealth and luxury is shown through a seemingly endless supply of water. Thus, the water sprinklers become the defining sounds of the wealthier parts of town as both Chandler and Black carve out: “High sprinklers revolved over the big smooth lawns and the water made a swishing sound as it licked at the grass“ (*The Long Goodbye* 664) and “among the shrubbery there was a soft hushed hiss of

water sprinklers at work“ (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 67). It seems especially noteworthy that Black’s sprinklers are “at work” for the rich because this way another “small sound” becomes the agent of a larger, capitalist endeavor. These kinds of single sounds that can only be heard outside of the buzzing downtown areas, their faint acoustic signals only perceptible in an empty space, also allude to another kind of loneliness that is often confused with or attended by exclusivity: “[Idle Valley] was exclusive in the only remaining sense of the word that doesn’t mean merely expensive“ (*The Long Goodbye* 499). These small single sounds assume an explicit potential to highlight isolation or loneliness because they stand out as single sounds in moments of relative quiet. As Marlowe’s dismissive description of the Wade’s cocktail party already indicates, real friendship and companionship is a rare commodity in communities where money talks. In addition, the power to silence others with money is another privilege of the rich Angelinos that distinguishes them from the equally rich mobsters around town. For instance, in order to increase their bad reputation and silence an enemy, gangster Mendy Menendez and his boys beat up police officer “[b]ig tough Willie Magoon“ as an “advertisement“ in *The Long Goodbye* (656): “He gets well eventually and goes back to work. But from that time on something is missing – the last inch of steel that makes all the difference. He’s a walking lesson that it is a mistake to push the racket boys too hard” (ibid.). Quite contrary to the literal and figural *racket* boys, newspaper mogul Harlan Potter, for example, is able to silence the news coverage of his daughter’s murder with his “quiet money” to avoid a scandal that would damage his reputation and expose his daughter as the rotten apple of the family. But this kind of “wealthy silence” is not only imposed to distinguish the upper from the lower classes, it emphasizes their power and privilege to cancel out or just as well produce noise, too. This is why prestigious status symbols are made to stand out even more through their noise: when Marlowe sits outside on the patio in front of the Wades’s house, he hears a speedboat on the adjacent lake: “It was almost four o’clock when I heard its distant roar swell into an ear-splitting howl of noise. There ought to be a law.” (ibid. 627) Later on, this speedboat roar takes on a pivotal role because Roger Wades’s murderer “had to pull the trigger when that speedboat was making enough noise to drown the shot” (ibid. 638). This exemplifies how even the rich parts of L.A. are rife with crime – but they make a greater effort to conceal those bad deeds and try to keep up appearances, or more precisely, keep up the quiet.

But although Marlowe finds these phony surroundings repulsive, he finds no comfort in the buzzing urban center of Los Angeles either, as already discussed above. The only place for him to occupy, then, is a position of exclusion and being in between, where he is not part of the accelerated urban life but equally not of the wealthy seclusion. This becomes obvious, on the one hand, through a depiction of Marlowe’s frustrated waiting, a forced stillness, and, on the other hand, through acoustic demarcations that indicate Marlowe’s moral and emotional distance to the city he lives and works in. Marlowe often finds himself in a state of waiting, either when his

investigations have come to a dead end: “I waited, thinking about nothing. A speedboat came racketing down the lake” (*The Long Goodbye* 626); or in moments of extreme tension when an outburst of action is anticipated any moment: “I waited and listened, crouched against the bush, and there was nothing to listen to and nothing to wait for. Just a dark car motionless at the foot of my redwood steps, with the windows closed” (ibid. 626). Black takes up this coupling of waiting and an increased sensitivity to the sounds around him when he has Marlowe sitting in his car “with the window open, hearing the distant sound of the ocean, and the odd seabird sleepily crying” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 165) or “listening to the engine ticking” (ibid. 264). In Black, waiting is turned into a distinct characterization of Marlowe, when he observes: “I settled down to wait. It’s part of the story of my life, sitting in cars late at night with stale cigarette smoke in my nostrils and the night birds crying” (ibid. 165). In addition, most of the city sounds he hears are located outside: “Outside in a bush a mockingbird ran through a few trills” (*The Long Goodbye* 475); “Outside on the boulevard the traffic brawled endlessly” (ibid. 530); “Outside on the road I could hear the dull thump of a folded newspaper hit the driveway” (ibid. 671). At the same time, Black adopts a language of uncertainty that leaves Marlowe equally removed from the cityscape and its inhabitants: “A mockingbird somewhere was going through its repertoire” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 67); “From somewhere nearby I could hear the slither and crunch of a gardener’s spade delving into what sounded like dryish clay” (ibid. 70); “Away in the distance, a police siren set up its wailing” (ibid. 132). Marlowe’s inability to locate a specific sound’s origin emphasizes the city’s opacity and his alienation from the urban environment, and the distinct demarcation of inside and outside points to Marlowe’s solitary and isolated position. Thus, neither the hustle and bustle, the movement and motion of the big city, nor the remote and aloof waiting as an outsider are pleasant instances for Marlowe to occupy – and his profession, ethics, and bank account balance keep him from joining the rich environment as a third option.

## 5. Conclusion: “The Traffic Brawled Endlessly”

At the end of *Playback*, Marlowe returns to his rented house on Yucca Avenue in Los Angeles that is as “stuffy and dull and impersonal as it always was” (869). It is only after Linda Loring has called from Paris to renew her marriage proposal to Marlowe that his perception of the living room changes: “Almost immediately the telephone started to ring again. I hardly heard it. The air was full of music” (871). This almost cinematic (and melodramatic) ending is a wonderful example of Marlowe as the prominent auscultator, his subjective listening perspective that the reader retraces. He is not only the one, who sees and speaks, but also the one who hears. As I have tried briefly to outline in this paper, it can be argued that Los Angeles is made to sound as an expression of Marlowe’s feelings about this city and its inhabitants. His intermediate position

in the city – a man going down “these mean streets [...] who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid” (*The Simple Art of Murder* 991f) – is reflected in his highly ambivalent, wary and cynical attitude towards L.A., which is mirrored in the use and effects of sonic devices. Traffic noise is not an aesthetic feature of an uplifting urban experience, but a disruptive and potentially life threatening force that is omnipresent in Chandler’s cityscape: Marlowe spends a considerable amount of time in his car surrounded by noise, his office on the busy Hollywood Boulevard is not exactly a quiet oasis in the city either, and his house on Yucca Avenue looks down onto the equally busy Laurel Canyon Boulevard. Ubiquitous police sirens characterize the city as corrupted and far from being salvageable, as Marlowe’s repeated brutal encounters with several police officers throughout all novels indicate. Others might find distraction and amusement in the Hollywood district with its jazz clubs and bars, but Marlowe is repulsed by the phony and tainted film industry and the unsound characters it attracts. Not even classical music is able to comfort him – it is frequently just another source of noise to Marlowe. While Downtown L.A. and Hollywood are marked by traffic noises and sirens, the wealthier and more secluded parts of Chandler’s and Black’s Los Angeles are defined by silent and more soothing technological and mechanical sounds that are closer to illustrating a domestic idyll: water sprinklers, gardener’s spades, and the odd piano lesson in between. And not only the noisy speedboat on the lake, which drowns the fatal gunshot that kills the writer Roger Wade, uncovers that these parts of town are no less criminal than the most shady downtown street or nightclub, but that they simply do a better part of covering their traces. An examination of Marlowe’s evaluation and semantization of silence has revealed that what might usually be considered the opposite of city noise is often just another disguise for bad deeds that are prevalent in Los Angeles.

Black falls slightly short behind Chandler’s numerous and elaborate descriptions of sound (as the imbalanced example quantity in this paper might have indicated), and occasionally Marlowe’s incredible listening skills and his extensive knowledge are reduced especially regarding his sensory experiences, so that Black’s Marlowe tends less towards the perceptive character from a Raymond Chandler novel than to one of the bumbling uncertain dupes from a novel by John Banville. This is especially surprising considering the lifesaving quality both attentive listening to and knowledgeable interpretation of ambient noises and specific sounds take on with regard to Marlowe’s profession as a ‘gum-shoe’. The example of the unrecognized peacock cry in *The Black-Eyed Blonde* hints at a fundamentally different depiction of Marlowe’s attitude towards animals in the respective novels. While the peacock and its cry are a sinister omen in Black’s installment, Marlowe is sympathetic and identifies with the various birds around Los Angeles in Chandler’s novel. Black’s characterization ties in with a general sense of nature being corrupted by the city space, which becomes most apparent with regard to the Pacific Ocean; and Chandler’s Marlowe is equally suspicious of this large body of water. But Chandler’s bird-friendly Marlowe exposes his loneliness and sense of dislocation when he

hears the birds express their seemingly own discomfort with the urban environment. Here, Marlowe can feel comfort in their “small unimportant sounds“, which provide the only real contrast to all the other negatively connoted urban sounds, and since his friendship to Terry Lennox isn’t meant to last, he might find kindred spirits in birds, almost as if they were friends, speaking not only to themselves but also to him. Marlowe’s ‘friendship’ with the birds emphasizes his alienation from fellow human beings and, again, his existence as a loner. All that remains from his friendship with Lennox are his fading footsteps, which signify the ephemeral nature of humanity and community in the big city, and provide an equally cinematic ending to *The Long Goodbye* as the reader encounters in *Playback*, mentioned above. Overall, both Chandler’s and Black’s soundscape of Los Angeles reflect the gloomy and shady impression of this city as presented in noir fiction. While Black’s recreation might not be a faithful reproduction, its use of urban sounds as an expression of Marlowe’s inner landscape ties in with its original soundtrack nonetheless. And, like Terry Lennox’s footsteps dying away slowly and prompting Marlowe to “[keep] on listening anyways” (*The Long Goodbye* 734), so Black’s recreation of Chandler’s sounds in an alternate way, may prompt the reader to return to Chandler’s works and trace the origins of seemingly “small unimportant sounds” (*Farewell, My Lovely* 904).

## Endnotes

[1] See Schafer's original definition of soundscape: "The sonic environment. Technically, any portion of the sonic environment regarded as a field for study. The term may refer to actual environments, or to abstract constructions such as musical compositions and tape montages, particularly when considered as an environment" (274-275).

[2] See Genette's discussion of his concept of focalization on pages 189-194.

[3] All subsequently quoted works by Chandler are taken from the Library of America edition (see Works Cited), but I will use the respective titles of Chandler's novels and essays for the in-text citations to allow for an easier and more obvious attribution of the quotes to the respective works.

[4] See Sonnenschein 163 and Hanson 291.

[5] See Cuddy-Keane, 71.

[6] See, for example, Babener: "Such a vision – of an empire built on a spurious foundation, decked in tinsel, and beguiled by its own illusory promises – is central to the Los Angeles novels of Raymond Chandler" (110).

[7] For a more detailed discussion see, for example, Kalinak 167f.

[8] Miklitsch quotes Krin Gannard.



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