

## Radio & podcasts

### User friendly

Daisy Dunn

#### Deeply Human

BBC World Service

#### Hidden Brain

Apple Podcasts, Spotify and various platforms

'I like to have a martini./ Two at the very most./ After three I'm under the table./ After four I'm under my host.' I never fully appreciated the brilliance of that spurious quote of Dorothy Parker until I visited Dukes Bar in Mayfair. It used to be the case – it probably still is – that you may order no more than two martinis there owing to their potency. Had she not preferred whisky to gin, Parker might well have banged her fists on that table for a third. After one-and-a-half before dinner, however, this critic would be more inclined to dance on it.

Humans may respond to drink in different ways, but we are, in fact, better at processing it than most other primates. In 'Why do we use intoxicants?', a fun little documentary airing as part of the series *Deeply Human* on the World Service this Sunday, American musician Dessa talks to a researcher about the origins of our obsession. It is thought we first acquired a taste for alcohol when we experienced the 'odour plume' of dropped fruit that had gone bad and created ethanol. A genetic mutation, which occurred perhaps ten million years ago, made us 40 per cent more efficient than other animals at metabolising the alcohol. Not that you'd know it on a Saturday night.

Drink may be ruinous to the body – 'like playing the piano with boxing gloves on', as another of the scientists says – but to the brain it can seem like a necessary ingredient for wit. Dessa quotes not only pseudo-Dorothy Parker, but F. Scott Fitzgerald ('First you take a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes you') and, on another intoxicant, the late Robin Williams ('Cocaine is God's way of saying you're making too much money') to illustrate this point. All of which says a lot about the addictiveness of drugs, but less about why they are so attractive in the first place, which is supposedly the point of the programme.

The most enlightening segment on this question comes from an Iranian-born academic, who describes it as being easier to order 'a little bag of meth' in prohibitionist Tehran than a pizza – 'and pizza's pretty easy to order'. It isn't simply that we crave substances to erode social anxiety, he explains, but that we are emulative creatures. Drinking is 'a mimicking act' beyond one's immediate circle. In Tehran 'a lot of people have the feeling that they are living in isolation from everything... they feel they are losing

out'. They get high knowing that people are getting high in California. Doing the same thing as someone thousands of miles away sparks a connection and diminishes the distance to make the world feel more conquerable. Given the ability of intoxicants to unite people across time, too, it's a wonder that millennials haven't rediscovered snuff.

If you're interested in how the brain works – with or without the aid of stimulants – the podcast *Hidden Brain* is full of fascinating insights. It is presented by Shankar Vedantam, a science journalist who formerly worked for NPR, who's great at breaking down complex ideas.

In one recent episode, he asked whether our focus on what's bad in society hinders us from seeing what's good. In another, 'Putting Our Assumptions to the Test', he discussed an experiment carried out in India to assess whether doubling the number of teachers – from one to two – in schools had an impact on pupils' exam results. Surprisingly, there was little change, leading to the depressing conclusion that the education

*It is easier to order 'a little bag of meth' in prohibitionist Tehran than a pizza*

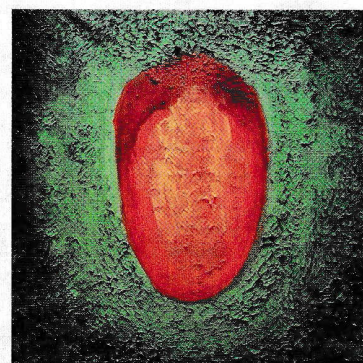
system caters only to those students who can keep up. 'If children fall behind, they fall behind.'

But it was a discussion last month entitled 'Why Conversations Go Wrong' that got me listening. Vedantam's interviewee, Deborah Tannen, a linguistics academic at Georgetown University, had recorded, as part of her research, a Thanksgiving dinner with friends, two of whom came from California, one from the UK, and two, like her, from New York. We were treated to snippets of not-so-interesting conversation about cranberry sauce before Tannen broke in to reveal her findings. During a painstaking transcription of the meal, she realised, to her embarrassment, that the New Yorkers had crowded the Californians out.

'We need a sense of how long a pause is normal between [one person and another],' she explained. 'The New Yorkers' sense of how long a pause is normal is shorter.' The Californians, satisfied with longer natural silences in conversation, missed the chance to break in. Moreover, if they did break in and were interrupted, they gave up. The New Yorkers, on the other hand, were persistent, one of them attempting seven times to make his opinion heard. My favourite moment here was when Tannen attempted to explain away some of the New Yorkers' interruptions: 'Sometimes we talk along as a way of showing enthusiasm,' she said. 'We're so interested we don't wait for you to stop – we talk along.' Now there's a useful notion for members of a *Question Time* panel.

## THE LISTENER

### Oxxxymiron: Beauty & Ugliness



Grade: A+

I was going to review hyperpop chanteuse Charli XCX's album this week, but it was such boring, meretricious, grandstanding 1980s retreat electropop vacuity that I thought, nah, even if it is headed to the top of our ravaged charts. So have this instead. Oxxxymiron is Russia's No. 1 hip-hop artist. Yes, Russian hip hop is indeed an oxxxymiron, much as would be Serbian reggae or Iranian gospel, but never mind. He's a youngish Jewish bloke born in Leningrad, with a degree in Middle English from Oxford University, and is hugely popular in his home country. Is it any good, this album released late last year? It's darker and nastier than US hip hop, full of menace and those icy synths the Russians seem to adore even more than their Iskander missiles. The title track snarls away over a deceptively clever rhythm track about 'first world problems', which endeared it to me. Slavic languages lend themselves to rap rather more easily than RP English, all those angry consonants and every vowel seemingly a 'y'. The tunes, when they come, point to the east. I liked it. What other recommendation do you need?

Maybe this. Oxxxymiron has been blacklisted and cancelled – like several other Russian musicians – for his implacable opposition to the war. He has called off a bunch of lucrative concerts at home in order to play anti-war charity gigs abroad, including in London. Go see him before they call round on him in the middle of the night, which they surely will. Young British musical artists are still in their bedrooms, furious that they've just been misgendered. Here's a quick introduction to the real world, stupid, pampered kids.

— Rod Liddle