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For years, US interrogators at Guantanamo used painfully loud music on prisoners at Camp Delta. Rock musicians like Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine and civil rights organization are demanding an investigation into the practice.

In May 2003, a military policeman came to Ruhal Ahmed's cell in Camp Delta at the military prison in Guantanamo and took him to an interrogation room. There, he was forced to squat while the M.P. tied his leg irons to a ring set in the floor. Then his hands were placed behind his back so that his handcuffs could also be attached to the floor ring. In this "stress position," the prisoner is unable to sit, stand or kneel, and can only crouch in an intermediate position that quickly causes cramping. Ahmed was familiar with this treatment, which was part of the "standard operating procedure" used to prepare prisoners for interrogation.

Ahmed had been in Guantanamo for more than a year. For weeks, the interrogators had been asking him the same question, again and again: What were he and two of his friends, who were captured with him, doing in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001? All three men are British Muslims. Ahmed's family originally immigrated to Great Britain from what is now Bangladesh. The men were referred to as the "Tipton Three," a reference to the small city in the British Midlands where they were from. On this particular day, there was also a boom box in the small, eight-square-meter (86-square-foot) interrogation cell. The soldier inserted a CD by rapper Eminem, turned up the volume and left.

"I thought: What's going on now? Did he forget his boom box?" says Ahmed. "When he returned, I asked him: 'What's this about? Why are you playing Eminem?' He looked at me and said nothing."

The next time Ahmed was taken to the interrogation cell, the music was heavy metal instead of Eminem. The volume was earsplitting and the music was played for hours, even entire days. Sometimes they also stuck a stroboscope in front of his face. The cell was dark and he could

see nothing but the flashing lights in his eyes. The interrogators also turned down the temperature on the air-conditioning, forcing Ahmed to endure hours of the music and flashing lights in an ice-cold room. He wasn't permitted to use the bathroom and was left to urinate or defecate in his pants. The shackles caused his legs to swell up while the deafening music continued incessantly.

A Journey that Went Terribly Wrong

Ahmed, now 28, is back at home in Tipton, a small city near Birmingham. He has a short, trimmed beard, wears a tracksuit and speaks with a northern English accent. His wife, who is pregnant, opens the door of their apartment in a working-class neighborhood, where their two-year-old daughter is running around. Two of Ahmed's younger brothers also live in the house.

He was released in March 2004, after spending more than two years in the American military prison. Director Michael Winterbottom's award-winning film "Road to Guantanamo" is based on the experiences of the Tipton Three -- and a journey that went terribly wrong.

The three friends had traveled to Pakistan to attend a wedding in September 2001. Ahmed was 20 at the time. With a thirst for adventure, they naively crossed the border into Afghanistan, even though the "War on Terror" was already in the works. As they tried to return to Pakistan with a group of Taliban, fighters with the Northern Alliance arrested the three men, and they were eventually turned over to the Americans. They arrived in Guantanamo in early 2002.

"When I tell people that music can be torture, they look at me and think I must have a screw loose. How can art, which gives people so much pleasure, be torture? But it's true. You can handle normal torture, but not music torture. I told them everything they wanted to hear: that I had met bin Laden and Mullah Omar, and that I knew what their plans were. But I just said it to make them stop."

In Guantanamo, Afghanistan and in Iraq, and in other American secret prisons, military and intelligence personnel tortured terrorism suspects. Their methods included water-boarding and sleep deprivation, as well as loud music. Prisoners were strung up by their wrists for days while being blasted with music by artists like Dr. Dre. They were bound, with headphones placed on

their heads, and forced to listen to Meat Loaf for hours. They were locked into wooden boxes and forced to endure "Saturday Night Fever" by the Bee Gees for entire nights at a time. Ironically music, the art form that has often been used to change the world and -- at events like Woodstock, Live Aid and Germany's Rock Against the Far Right -- has sometimes succeeded, was turned into a weapon in the war against terrorism.

Artists Fight Back

Some musicians have now sharply criticized the practice, including the British trip-hoppers Massive Attack, American industrial rock musician Trent Reznor and country star Rosanne Cash. They are demanding that pop not be used as a weapon, and they want to know how their music is being used in American prisons.

British and American organizations are supporting the musicians' efforts. The National Security Archive, an American civil rights organization that fights the US government's document classification policies, has filed Freedom of Information Act petitions requesting the declassification of secret government documents on the use of music for interrogation. The petition requests the release of documents from 11 government institutions in which the following terms appear: "AC/DC, Aerosmith, the 'Barney & Friends' song, The Bee Gees, Britney Spears, Bruce Springsteen, Christina Aguilera, David Gray, Deicide, Don McLean, Dope, Dr. Dre, Drowning Pool, Eminem, Hed P. E., James Taylor, Limp Bizkit, Marilyn Manson, Matchbox Twenty, Meat Loaf, the 'Meow Mix' jingle (an ad for cat food), Metallica, Neil Diamond, Nine Inch Nails, Pink, Prince, Queen, Rage Against the Machine, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Redman, Saliva, the 'Sesame Street' music, Stanley Brothers, the Star Spangled Banner, Tupac Shakur."

Employees at the National Security Archive spent weeks of research to develop the list, and it could take several more weeks before a decision is reached on the petitions. It could take months or even years for the documents to be declassified.

A Shadowy World

Up until now, the secret prisons operated by the CIA and US military have been part of a shadowy world that can only be reconstructed through the painstaking analysis of documents

and statements. The effort is also aimed at tracking chains of command and learning more about the system of secret prisons set up by the administration of former US President George W. Bush. The public is the activists' most important ally in this struggle. And the most effective way to win over the public is with the support of artists.

The use of a music as a weapon isn't anything new. For instance, for the past few years authorities at the main railway station in Hamburg have used piped-in classical music to drive away junkies from the plaza in front of the station.

When the Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, fleeing from US troops in 1989, took refuge in the Vatican Embassy in Panama City, the soldiers bombarded the building for days with hard rock and other music.

And in 1993, when the FBI was preparing to storm a ranch near Waco, Texas, where members of a sect had barricaded themselves in their compound, the agents blared the Nancy Sinatra hit "These Boots Were Made For Walking" from loudspeakers. The purpose was simple: to wear down the besieged sect members.

Flooding the Senses

US interrogation specialists are pursuing the same goals in the war on terrorism. The method dates back to research conducted by American and Canadian government agencies during the Cold War. A 1963 CIA manual, "KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation," describes a method of torture in which prisoners are either inundated with or deprived of sensory input.

It is believed that the US Army stopped using the method after the end of the Vietnam War, but

the knowledge is still applied today. In a program known as SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape), soldiers learn how to resist torture if they are taken prisoner.

No-Touch Torture

In the winter of 2001, the CIA commissioned a psychologist in the SERE program to develop interrogation methods for the "War on Terror." In the summer of 2002, George W. Bush authorized the resulting "special interrogation methods." An important component of these methods is to expose prisoners to loud music for long periods of time, often in combination with other ordeals, including restraining them in uncomfortable positions and exposing them to extreme temperatures and glaring lights. The method, which produces no visible traces, is also known as "no-touch torture."

It is still unclear whether a central authority controls the program. A declassified CIA document contains a few sentences that specify the volume levels to which a prisoner can be exposed, and for how long, but the rest of the document is blacked out.

There are anonymous reports by FBI agents who describe how prisoners were tortured, and Tony Lagouranis, a former interrogation specialist, has even written a book about it. According to Lagouranis, an interrogation room called the "Disco" was to be set up in a prison at the US airbase in Mosul, Iraq, in the spring of 2004. Lagouranis writes that the base commander "pointed to a shipping container right outside the wire of the prison and described what he wanted us to do. He obtained a strobe light from aviation and a boom box from a private. He asked the guards for CDs of the most awful death metal music they had. He gave us these tools and told us to clear the container out and get it ready for use as an interrogation chamber saying, with finality: I want to do this."

'It Takes Over Your Brain'

The specialists used these rooms to conduct their prisoner interrogations. Sometimes, says former British prisoner Ruhal Ahmed, they would come into the room and shout questions into his ear. But often no one came into the room, and the constant music only increased the sensation that the agony would never end.

"It's as if you had very bad migraines, and then someone shows up and yells at you -- and take that times a thousand," says Ahmed. "You can't concentrate on anything. Before that, when I was beaten, I could use my imagination to forget the pain. But the music makes you completely disoriented. It takes over your brain. You lose control and start to hallucinate. You're pushed to a threshold, and you realize that insanity is lurking on the other side. And once you cross that line, there's no going back. I saw that threshold several times."

Suzanne Cusick, a professor at New York University, specializes in European music of the 17th century. For the past few years, however, she has studied the use of music in torture, and she has given many talks on the subject. She says she is constantly surprised by how casually the issue is treated and how the notion that music could be a means of torture is so readily dismissed -- and that there are those who seriously discuss which songs and styles are best suited for torture.

But why music and why not just loud noise? "Sometimes it was noise," says Cusick. "And music is available. Noise often is not. Furthermore, for some sects of Islam, listening to music is sinful, except under specific circumstances. And the circumstances are vocal music. Vocal music that is made to lead the listener to an apprehension of the divine. It's never instrumental music. Forcing them to listen to it is a kind of cultural insult. The music itself tells us a lot about the cultural preferences of American soldiers and contractors."

Britney as Torture

The list of songs used to torture prisoners in Guantanamo reads like a book about popular culture of the last 30 years.

There are triumphant songs, songs used to celebrate American victory and constantly rub in the notion that the prisoners were the defeated, songs like Queen's "We Are the Champions" or Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA," which is still misunderstood as a salute to American greatness and self-certainty. The song "Babylon," by British soft-rocker David Gray, probably also fits into this category.

There are the torture songs, the Heavy Metal and Industrial music, like Metallica's "Enter Sandman" or "March of the Pigs," by Nine Inch Nails -- music deliberately selected to hurt the prisoners.

And there is the male-oriented, top-of-the-charts music, the country music, the mainstream rock and the hip hop -- music the soldiers listen to while on patrol, partly to drown out their surroundings. And because it's the kind of music they like to listen to, it doesn't bother them as much when they constantly hear it coming from the interrogation cells.

Finally, there is pop music, songs by artists like Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears that were used for the purpose of sexual humiliation -- as a part of wider scenarios in which the prisoners were debased.

"The fact that our music has been co-opted in this barbaric way is really disgusting," Tom Morello, guitarist with the left-leaning band Rage Against the Machine, told the American music magazine *Spin*. "If you're at all familiar with the ideological leanings of the band and its support for human rights, that's really hard to stand."

'Kids in the US Pay Money for That'

Pop has great emancipating power, but there is also a long tradition of rebellious styles of music that are constantly flirting with torture, music made to grate on the nerves of parents.

As it happens, many a rock song is just as likely to end up in Guantanamo as being performed on a stage at a Live Aid concert -- Bono Vox and all Rock against the Radical Right ventures notwithstanding.

"I can't imagine it's that bad," says Stevie Benton, bassist with the nu metal band Drowning Pool. "Listening to loud music for a few yours -- kids in the US pay money for that."

Metallica Singer: 'I Take It as an Honor'

The American band Metallica, founded in Los Angeles in 1981 and still one of the world's best metal bands, doesn't side with the activists, either. In interviews, lead singer James Hetfield has even said that he was pleased to hear that his music was being used to torture prisoners.

"People assume we should be offended that somebody in the military thinks our song is annoying enough that, played over and over, it can psychologically break someone down," he says. "I take it as an honor to think that perhaps our song could be used to quell another 9/11 attack or something like that."

There is probably a dose of patriotism behind his remarks. Hetfield sees himself as someone who is helping American troops defeat the enemy. But they also reflect a peculiar form of pride in his craft. "We've been punishing our parents, our wives, our loved ones with this music forever. Why should the Iraqis be any different?" he said. "Part of me is proud because they chose Metallica!"

In fact, metal, more than other styles of music, is a direct product of a young man's hell, music that tells of the anguish and pain of being a young man. For many fans, going to metal concerts is also a way of proving to themselves that they can stand the music, no matter how jarring. In interrogations, the tables are turned, and prisoners are forcibly taken beyond the limits of the endurable.

There are also technical developments in the pop music of the last 30 years that have made it suitable for use in interrogation cells in the first place. Take, for example, the obsessive efforts of sound engineers to extract every last bit of the frequencies using sophisticated studio techniques.

And in the fringe zones of pop culture, such as industrial music, bands like Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV were already experimenting, back in the 1980s, with the idea that music can also express the dark side of power and violence.

"When you go to a concert or a club, you're looking for loud music and flashing lights. You want to be transported into ecstasy. We experienced exactly the same thing, except that it was turned on its head," says Ahmed. "You could call it black ecstasy."

Life after Guantanamo

In 2004, after more than two years, Ahmed was released from Guantanamo into a world in which music is everywhere, in every commercial, in every shop and in every taxicab. But Ahmed says that it doesn't bother him.

He says that he saw many people who almost went insane, people in the camp who would bang their heads against the wall and try to kill themselves when they were brought back from the interrogations. When Ahmed returned to the United Kingdom, a psychologist told him that he was probably lucky to be so young.

Ahmed now lives the curious life of a former Guantanamo prisoner. He has started a family with his current wife, a former schoolmate whom he married shortly after his return home. He rarely has work in Tipton, where unemployment is high. Life will become more difficult for the couple when Ahmed's wife gives birth in February and will no longer be able to work. She now has a job with the city administration.

An enormous multimedia system stands in the couple's living room, which Ahmed bought with the money he earned working on "Road to Guantanamo." When he goes on the Internet he uses the large flat-screen TV on the wall as his monitor. He uses Facebook to stay in touch with other ex-prisoners. He says that a former Guantanamo guard recently contacted him through Facebook and wrote that he wanted to apologize. The two men went to a restaurant together.

A shelf in Ahmed's apartment contains a Koran and a few old cassettes with recordings of

prayers. He doesn't own a single CD.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan