

Do people lie about their music tastes on "Desert Island Discs?"

November 21 2016, by Don Knox

If you've ever been asked what your favourite music is, you may have struggled to come up with a satisfying answer. On some level, we all know that the answer says a lot about who you are as a person.

In fact, researchers [have studied](#) the links between music tastes and personality traits for the past 15 years. I have been involved in a new piece of [research](#) to see how well the findings predict reality. Fortunately, there was a huge resource in the public domain to help us: the music choices of the interviewees on the BBC radio programme [Desert Island Discs](#), going all the way back to 1942.

Interviewees on the weekly programme are all in the public eye or prominent in their field, with recent examples including [Jilly Cooper](#), [Michael Bubl ](#) and [Bill Gates](#). They are asked by the host, Kirsty Young, to imagine they have been marooned on a desert island and can take eight pieces of music with them. As they discuss their choices and relate them to their story, it produces an autobiographical account of their life experiences.

Music, profession and personality

We analysed the interviewees' music choices against [research](#) from 2012 that identified five music "dimensions" that relate to the personalities of the people that like them. These dimensions encompass multiple genres and are defined by the qualities that they have in common – known

collectively as the MUSIC model.

	Characteristics	Genres
Mellow	Quiet, slow, relaxing	World, electronica
Unpretentious	Unaggressive, uncomplicated	Pop, country
Sophisticated	Intelligent, complex	Classical, jazz, opera
Intense	Loud, aggressive	Rock, punk
Contemporary	Rhythmic, percussive	Rap, funk, soul

Those who prefer unpretentious and contemporary music, for example, tend to be more conscientious, conservative and perceive themselves as being physically attractive. Those who like sophisticated music see themselves as intelligent, while fans of intense music tend to be more physically active and open to new experiences.

The profession you choose is another expression of your personality, so we also took this into account in our analysis. We used a model that psychologists have referred to since the 1950s – [John Holland's model](#) of vocational personality. This describes how the characteristics of a person and their environment combine to influence their choice of career.

It breaks people into six types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional. For example, artistic types such as dancers, designers and photographers tend to be unconventional, creative, communicative, liberal and open. Enterprising types such as investment bankers, lawyers and salespeople tend to be power-oriented, assertive, dominant and extroverted.

Findings

When we looked at the Desert Island Discs interviewees, we found strong links between these occupation and music models. For example, those in the artistic occupational personality category, such as writers and actors, were more likely to choose sophisticated music like classical, jazz and opera. This explains why in 2007 [Victoria Wood](#) chose Prokofiev, Gerswhin and Fats Waller, for example. These kinds of people tended to choose longer tracks that were sadder, slower and low energy. They were much less likely to choose intense or contemporary music such as rock, alternative or pop.

Realistic types such as foresters, farmers and animal trainers tended to choose intense and unpretentious music like rock, punk, alternative and pop. They liked electric, high-energy, high-tempo music that was upbeat and short; and were much less likely to choose sophisticated music. [Ray Mears](#) would be an example. His tracks in 2014 were by the likes of the Rolling Stones, Blondie, The Jam and KT Tunstall.

Social types like broadcasters and sports people were more likely to choose contemporary and unpretentious music like soul, pop or country. Hence when Olympic gold medallist [Tessa Sanderson](#) appeared on the programme 20 years ago, she selected artists like Whitney Houston, Janet Jackson and Gloria Estefan. As for enterprising types, they chose mostly intense music, and were again far less likely to choose the sophisticated genres.

Digging deeper, we started to speculate on why we see specific relationships like these. Take for example the artistic-sophisticated relationship. [Previous research](#) has separately linked these to openness, the valuing of aesthetics, liberalism and flexibility. Or take the relationship between social types and contemporary/unpretentious music. These have both [been linked](#) with extroversion, agreeableness, sociability

and cheerfulness. Our findings supported the idea that your choice of occupation and music tastes are likely to go hand in hand.

The conclusion? The interviewees on Desert Island Discs generally chose the music you would expect for their occupation type. People do indeed fit the [personality traits](#) that previous research has led us to expect.

This has interesting implications for a common point of discussion when it comes to discussing the programme, certainly among my friends and colleagues: do interviewees tell the truth about their music tastes? In the same way as, say, Gordon Brown's [claim](#) to like The Arctic Monkeys, you wonder how often the [interviewees](#) on the programme choose tracks to make certain statements about themselves.

Perhaps they choose a range of genres to demonstrate diversity in taste; or throw in a classical piece to appear cultured or sophisticated. After all, the programme is a very public forum and the people may be especially aware of how their music choices are viewed. Yet our research suggests this is not what happens on the whole. Interviewees seem to convey the truth – perhaps one more revealing than simply their taste in music.

If personality attributes have a key role in dictating both our occupation and [music](#) taste, no wonder many of us struggle when asked about our favourite tracks. We are being asked to define who we are. To quote Jeffrey Eugenides in his well regarded novel [The Marriage Plot](#), it's "...like a personality test, a sophisticated one you couldn't trick by anticipating the implications of its questions and finally got so lost in that your only recourse was to answer the simple truth."

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