



ASMR and Warm Kitty

The other day I heard Andrea Seigel, in a segment titled *A Tribe Called Rest*, on public radio's *This American Life*. She said that as a girl she had been fascinated by her friend Mindy who would go through Andrea's seashell collection, describing in a "murmur" every shell in detail. This would give Andrea a "starburst effect;" a sort of tingle that radiated down from the top of her skull and throughout her body. At the library she experienced the same effect from listening to people turning pages, and to the librarian reading stories in a low voice. Later she found herself transfixed by the gentle voice and brush stroking of the late Bob Ross, quiet-voiced painting instructor on TV's *The Joy of Painting*. As an adult she would watch the *Home Shopping Network* for hours, as the hosts went over in soothing detail the features of pieces of jewelry. Eventually she turned to YouTube for videos of tutorials by murmuring women about applying makeup. These pursuits took hours out of her day, and soothed and relaxed her like nothing else. She never told anyone, even her husband, about her obsession.

Then one day she happened upon a video by a woman who whispered descriptions of her late grandmother's jewelry, spoke of something called "ASMR" and even referred to Bob Ross.

Andrea was stunned, and Googled ASMR to find she was not alone in her compulsion. ASMR is a pseudo-scientific acronym coined in 2010 by Jennifer Allen of an organization called *ASMR Research & Support*, and stands for "Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response." That's an academic-sounding name for something not yet scientifically explained, but I can personally vouch for its occurrence. I even wrote about it way back in 2001, suggesting they change the name of the Bob Ross show from *The Joy of Painting* to *The Joy of Watching Bob Ross Painting*.

Common trigger-lists of ASMR vary, but

usually contain these points: Slow, soft, whispery speech; lip and mouth sounds; clicking and brushing sounds; the process of painting or drawing; gentle instructional videos; people performing simple tasks (I think of Mr. Rogers tying his shoes); close, personal attention (eye exam, haircut, hair brushing), and almost all lists include Bob Ross.

These triggers pretty much add up to having someone spatially close, speaking in a quiet, comforting, and mildly educational way, while often having a tactile interaction with some simple object. I can't help thinking this sounds like how a good parent comes across to a young child.

I read about a study by biological anthropologist Leslie Seltzer of the University of Wisconsin showing that young girls who were faced with a fearsome exam show increased oxytocin levels when soothed by their mother either live or over the phone, but not by texts sent by the mother. I couldn't help wondering if those ASMR triggers, by viscerally mimicking the parental presence, aren't causing the release of oxytocin in our systems, which may contribute to ASMR.

Oxytocin has been nicknamed the "love hormone," the "hug hormone," and the "cuddle chemical" because it plays such a role in childbirth, maternal bonding, social bonding, romantic attraction, and so forth. By working on the amygdala — the brain's fear center — it also seems to increase trust and reduce fear.

Now since I'm a folk musician, I had to wonder what ASMR might have to do with acoustic music. Researchers claim that the "frisson" caused by a glorious piece of orchestration is NOT the same as ASMR. It's a different kind of willies. (And incidentally, though some refer to an ASMR as a "braingasm," everyone stresses that it is nonsexual.) But after watching YouTube ASMR videos, I do think that some folk singers (though not yours truly) can trigger ASMR in intimate situations. After all, many folkies sing in a quiet voice while having a tactile interaction with their instrument.

The key word is "intimate." The YouTube videos are almost all of people literally whispering, or at least speaking in VERY quiet tones. The miracle of today's sound reproduction can have it seem like Bob Ross (or Garrison Keillor, another popular ASMR trigger) is inches from your ear, and in a concert setting, a good PA can bring the plucks, secondary clicks, and string-slide squeaks of a dulcimer, not to mention the subtle breathy mouth sounds of the singer, right up into your Beltone. And of course the natural acoustics of intimate house concert settings can do the same.

The type of song that most lends itself to ASMR is undoubtedly the lullaby, which is, after all, a song ostensibly sung by a parent in close proximity to a child. "Soft kitty, warm kitty, little ball of fur..." (*Warm Kitty*; Words by Edith Newlin, ©1937, melody traditional) as sung on the show *The Big Bang Theory*, is a great example, having so much tactile reference even in the meaning of those first words. When Penny sings that song softly to Sheldon, I would bet that the oxytocin level of the viewing public shows a measurable bump.

It's complicated. What gives one person an ASMR rush can often give another person the creeps, which, I would say, is a negative version of the same sensation. Often, the manipulation of paper is mentioned as a trigger for example, but David Copperfield says of Uriah Heep, "...his lank forefinger followed up every line as he read, and made clammy tracks along the page (or so I fully believed) like a snail."

Not only that, some people like the creeps; millions pay good money to see creepy movies. And some people can't stand close whispering ever, and call the ASMR triggers too "touchy-feely" for them. I suspect that for most people there's a fine line between ASMR and the creeps. In discussion groups, you even find people who say, "I can't stand Bob Ross; he makes me want to scream, but I can't stop watching him." So there you go. We are tyrannized by our chemistries.

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<http://www.asmr-research.org/>
<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/491/tribes?act=2>
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