



Can Music Soothe the Savage Commuter?

When you're a working auto journalist, you get all types of email pitches sent your way. Some want you to test a new car wax. Or perhaps a racing video game. And every now and then, it's about an actual car you cover on your blog. I surprised myself to open one titled, "Music For Commuting Box Set."

I read it and quickly discovered that this "ambient instrumental" music by Ken Elkinson was scored specifically to calm drivers on their horrid commutes to and from work. Why, I have a horrid commute. I often rage, curse fellow motorists and then complain to my co-workers about just how horrid my drive was. Maybe this set was for me.

I, for once, decided to reply positively to one of these random email queries and contacted Mr. Elkinson, a musician based in Southern California. After getting a download link, I had all six volumes on my iPod ready for a commute.

Why a box set? Because there are volumes for every day of the week, of course.

The test: Interstate 90 in Chicago, otherwise known as The Kennedy. Twenty-one miles from home to a downtown parking garage adjacent to Cars.com HQ. Usually the morning commute takes between 60 to 90 minutes.

The Car: 2011 Mercedes-Benz CL550; MSRP \$122,000

Granted, the car itself already makes the commute a bit nicer than usual. My typical audio selection? I start with news radio to get the traffic update, switch to sports talk until it gets to baseball scores, then turn on music — either satellite radio or the iPod. I tend to select up-tempo music like punk and hard rock and, of course, Pearl Jam.

Ken's music is not up-tempo. It's the type of music you'd hear emanating from speakers at a spa. Check out some samples [here](#).

With the CL550's cabin well-isolated from road and wind noise, its massaging seats turned on with ventilation engaged as well, and Ken's music — with titles like "Submerge" and "Soleri" — playing at moderate volume, it did indeed feel like I was at the spa while commuting.

That semi-truck that just decided to change two lanes at once to make an exit he had miles to prepare for, nearly running me off the road? No big deal. Serenity now was working ... 10 minutes into the drive.

The guy who had to dig for change at the tollbooth, causing me to wait a good two to three minutes before rejoining gridlock? I'm good.

The only thing that could have made the commute more soothing would be a valium vapor distributed through the air conditioner.

At about the 30-minute mark, I was stunned stupid that this music wasn't driving me insane. In fact, I found myself thinking about what I had to do that day and other mental tasks with clarity. I was alert on the road as well, despite the relaxing atmosphere.

Another 30 minutes passed, not as joyously as the first 30, as I hit the north side of the city. There, a minivan wouldn't let me merge so I could eventually reach my exit — yes, I was planning miles ahead — and I uttered aloud, "Thanks a lot, you bleeping bleep!"

It didn't seem like one commute with this new music was going to curb my ways after all.

- Dave Thomas | cars.com | 5/26/2011