

## Tom Middleton Explains the Sonic Landscape at Yotel (/good-night-mr-lewis-1.109/tom-middleton-explains-the-sonic-landscape-at-yotel-1.9)

By [Steve Lewis](#) (/listings/Tag/Steve Lewis)

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Yo! **Yotel** (<http://www.blackbookmag.com/guides/details/yotel>) is the real deal. Known mostly for its robot bellhop, I'm here to tell you that there's a lot more to the place than what seems to be a Disney-like gimmick. The place is stunning, thanks to designer David Rockwell—the Babe Ruth, the Pele, the Michael Jordan of design—putting his best foot forward. Forward is where it goes. At times it resembles an uber modern airport, or that space station in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, but without the kitsch.

The place is beautiful; they put the fun in functional and the attention to detail is mind boggling. I caught up with one of those details in the form of Tom Middleton. He's tasked with the sounds you hear as you travel around the massive property. To say that he's a DJ or music programmer is like calling Bernie Madoff a petty thief. There's a lot more to it.

**Yotel is fun and a bit gimmicky—everyone has heard about the robot that takes your luggage. Where do the gimmicks end and a truly better hospitality situation begin?** I wouldn't consider Yotel to be a gimmick. I think the robot is a useful tool in the context of the hotel experience because it removes the need to employ someone. These things build cars. And storing luggage in a library on the wall is not only visually engaging, it's also an intriguing solution to luggage storage. It's a bit more exciting to come into a hotel lobby and have the check-in kiosks like at an airport. It's definitely the future in a way; what we associate with a normal hotel receptionist/lobby is not what you get at Yotel. It's much more thoughtful and considered. It's function, utility, and design. **You're referred to as a sound architect. What does that mean exactly?** There's a role I've assumed at this point, twenty years deep into the industry, not only as an artist, DJ, and music producer/performer, but now also as a curator. I'm interested in the evolution of sound and music and right now what excites me is applying sound branding and sound architecture to space. I try to figure out how can we augment the consumer experience and influence behavior and emotional connections with the hospitality experience, by using the medium of sound. Sound and smell are both fundamentally more important than visuals.

**The design is extremely "new" and the music is very calming. In contrast with the neon and concrete environment of Times Square, it's interesting to feel this rush of calm. How do the colors and design tie into the effects of the music?** My first role as sound architect is to check the space out. I was here when there was no music or sound, checking out the internal architecture and the structure of the building. I wanted to see the schematics, the layout; it interests me, all this stuff. There is value in immersing myself in the evolution of this hotel, to a point where I can say, alright—I understand the personality of the hotel, the texture, the colors, the tone, the way the light changes through the day. All of these things have an impact on the personality and character of the hotel. So I'm drawing from that and my own experiences of traveling the world, and being privileged to see really amazing hotels. My pitch to Gerard was this:

"If I blindfolded you and dropped you anywhere around the world, you wouldn't be able to distinguish one boutique hotel from another, because they all sound the same." They use this middle of the road lounge, which is a go-to solution for what people think is hotel music. But I believe that's wrong. I believe that right now, sound branding is really important. Distinguish your brand from another by having unusual, unique, memorable music experiences within that space. **What areas within the hotel do you program? Are there sound differences in every area, and does the time of day factor in?** Let's imagine that you roll off the plane at 9am, exit the car and there's music playing on the street. That music will be the soundtrack to the first experience you have after exiting the car. Then there's a second sound experience in the ground control lobby, using things like the sound a yodel makes. So I sampled that, recorded it, and turned it into a soundtrack augmented for driving theater and put it through the sound system. That way you can actually get that sense of wonder and thrill and excitement, but amped to the level of cinemas and theaters. So, that's the first thing you get plus a background \ of

serene, calming music as you said. The last thing you want is amped up excitement when you've had a really tiring journey—you want to be relaxed, but also left with a sense of intrigue and excitement that's new. So for me that provided a very interesting, but brief lift experience for about seven seconds. **Brief lift as in the elevator?** The first elevator ride from ground control, after you've checked into the kiosk is about seven seconds long. So I just spent some time hanging out in the lift, understanding how long people spend in there. It's about 7 to 10 seconds, so we had to figure out what to do with that? I really like those Rain and Scott musical sound experiments from the sixties using synthetic sounds. I use the music for my kids, to chill them out and calm them down. So when it's implemented it will have descending and ascending arpeggios that are quite ethereal sounding. It's retro in that kind of moog, lounge-core vibe, it's embracing a bit of that sixties ethic, but at the same time it's got a nod to the synthetic and modern tunes. It gives you that anticipation of ascending somewhere, or descending a bit. Next—you get out of the lift in Zone 4. **So where are we sitting right now?** We're in a cabin on level 4 and it's part of this multipurpose flexible lifestyle space that incorporates both a club and lounge area (that can provide music and dancing at night) and business meetings during the day. It expands out to a terrace and around the corner where there is a Green Lounge, and then extends into the Dohyo restaurant space. Assuming you've already checked in, everything has a very specific purpose, including the toilets. Traditionally, with hotel lounges, there's always a meet and greet and you may be having a business conversation or it's a social space. More often than not, it's not really working in the way that I think it should be. For me to focus, I either want no sound or the equivalent of white noise. So I've made recordings of outdoor ambiances in particular locations. In the morning I give you the English countryside, with the cuckoos, charming bells, cows, and sheep.

**So you were that guy with a tape recorder in the middle of the meadow?** It's fun creating this unusual, unique soundtrack for the morning in Yotel that people don't really notice until they hear a cow and think, "I'm in Manhattan and I'm hearing cows?" There's a bit of comedy and humor in it, but I think it's important to keep the experience light, while reinforcing brand identity. In the afternoon, you've got Serengeti and wildlife, and *Tarzan* samples. It's a bit of fun. **Which Tarzan, the original?** Yes, with Johnny Weissmuller, the legend. And as an experiment, every twenty minutes I put in the sound of a can or bottle being opened. It's a very specific sound, of a cold drink being poured over ice and fizzing and sparkling. **Is that to encourage people to drink?** Exactly. **Is that legal in America?** Who knows! But I'm messing around here, having some fun, and at some point down the line we'll do some analysis and see if it makes people buy more drinks.

**So a lot of what you're doing is subliminal? You're creating an environment where the guests—mostly out-of-towners—are feeling comfortable about being here?** Always be inclusive, always be fun, always be memorable. But also exist on a level where it's an appropriate volume of music and sound design or sound effects. There's nothing worse than being in a restaurant and it's just too loud. It actually impacts the speed at which you're eating, it could give you indigestion. **What happens here at night?** There's a really interesting crescendo of energy in the evening. Obviously post-work people come for drinks, and do that on the terrace in the summertime, which is a lovely evening experience. For the Dohyo, it's all about the Latin and Asian fusion cuisine, so I've created a specific soundtrack that draws on Latin American music, Asian music and fuses it together. If you like the flavor of food, it's enhanced by the music that's appropriate to that food. **Did you design this sound scape before or after construction?** I was brought in probably in the last three months. The hotel was more or less ready to go and I was given the various designs to consider, and figure out what to do with them. Even with the toilets. **Rooms are becoming less and less important in hotels these days. True?** You're right and actually I think it's all about making sure that the room is important. It does what it needs to do. It's functional. **My experiences at some of these places—even at the finest joints—is that the rooms are small and uninteresting. But music has always been important** That's interesting because Gerard Greene, the CEO of Yotels didn't want music in the rooms. He wanted you to arrive in your room in peace and quiet. It gives you the ability to define the space yourself. It's got an iPod plug-in port. In my perspective, I think it's another opportunity to have fun at some point in the future, but right now, in terms of the experiment of how the consumer and the guest feels—give them peace and quiet. Research showed that people were using their personal devices for that kind of thing, so if there was music and movies in the room, it's not used very often, since the customer will likely use their smart phone or laptop. That was part of the Yotel model for the room. **Who is DJing here at night and what kind of image are you trying to present with those DJs?** Rather than going down the route that most hotels do of pumping current, banging, club songs—aggressive, electronic music—it's a lot warmer, and soulful, and spiritual. So suffice to say that Thursday is very much a soul-based soundtrack. (\*Steve Lewis Note: I was given a rundown

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the DJs and was quite impressed but most deals are pending at this time and can't be talked about)

**What about the weekend?** Saturday's were disco nights for me growing up. That's when I didn't even know what disco meant, I just thought it was a place where you did discotheque. So my idea for Saturday night is education—the roots and history of disco, plus how it's evolved into house music, and where it's heading.

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