

The Grain of the Voice or the Contour of the Ear?

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Abstract

One of the most exciting possibilities emerging within sound studies is the emphasis on the listener and his/her role in shaping a sound's meaning and content. Sounds disconnected from their contexts of reception rarely answer our questions about the past, but merely make for new listening experiences in the present.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Sound Studies and Aurality (Topic), Experimental and Cognitive Psychology (Subfield), Archival, Article, Listening, Memoir, Nostalgia

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One of the most exciting possibilities emerging within sound studies is the emphasis on the listener and his/her role in shaping a sound's meaning and content. Sounds disconnected from their contexts of reception rarely answer our questions about the past, but merely make for new listening experiences in the present. Thinking with our ears is profound, but thinking through our ears can be life-changing—moving us closer to an understanding of sound's power and its intensive connection to memory and the emotive forces of both life and death.

Until very recently, I had not heard the sound of my Grandmother's voice in over eight years. I had actually never expected to hear it again, as she died in 2001. It is a clichéd understatement that I loved my grandmother very much; when she died, I was barely a “real” adult and I felt like we had just gotten acquainted. However, I thought I had already made peace with the passing of her beloved throaty crackle into the world of furtive dreams and spotty memory, until one night in 2004, when this loss was suddenly found.

Somewhere around two a.m. on a weekday, the phone rang. Once you are past a certain age, the shrill peal of a telephone after midnight can be downright terrifying. Someone has died. Someone is calling from jail. Someone's life is in shreds. Nothing good. My hand hovered over the receiver for a second, as I rubbed my tired eyes and steeled myself for whatever might be at the other line.

“Hello,” I mumbled, hesitatingly.

Silence, for a second. And, then, the keen of my sister's voice, choked through tears, “I found it.”

Inexplicably, my groggy listening ears automatically knew precisely what “it” was : an oral history of my grandmother I recorded in 1998, on teeny-tiny tapes in an itsy-bitsy recorder my sister used to record her professor's lectures. I borrowed it, and like a good sister, I returned it. Tapes included. At the time, I thought there would be plenty more opportunities to have deep convos with Grandma. I had always assumed my sister recycled it, replacing my grandmother's words with her bio prof's. With three little gasped words, I realized she hadn't.

You'd think my first reaction would be excitement—and I was thrilled, but in the nineteenth-century sense. My heart was pierced by even the thought of hearing my Grandmother's voice again; the imagined sound tremored through me and, in a moment of pure protective reflex, I immediately cast the receiver away. In a sense, I had heard my grandmother's ghost. The sounds magnetized on that tape seemed to resurrect her and mock the promise of that hour of conversation, when we had no idea what lay ahead.



Even though I made the conscious decision not to listen to the tape, I let the thought of her audio presence haunt me for five years. I could not escape the thought of her voice both in my memory and in this new audio embodiment. Oddly enough, I surrounded myself with pictures of my Grandmother as remembrances—cheeky 1940s shots from her youth as well as seasoned photos of us together—but those images brought me cool comfort. Their framed borders demarcated a long-gone past. When my chest got too tight, I could look away. Not so with the vibrations of her voice, which sounded out the contours of her absent body. Her voice threatened too much wonder, and with it, an attendant dose of insatiable longing. Unlike the frozen photographic slices of life, the sound had an animated heft to it. It breathed.

Ultimately, I was unable to listen to the tape through my own ears. It wasn't until the birth of my son that I even considered playing it. Suddenly, my grandmother wasn't mine alone, but also the great-grandmother my son would never really know. The new relation between the two of them allowed me to fashion another set of ears; I became a new listener, connected to the voice by life rather than death, by shared possibility rather than the solipsism of grief. So on a snowy night last January, I finally pressed play. With my infant son in my arms, I listened, at long last, to that beautiful crackling voice spinning stories of her childhood in Iowa and adult life in California. Ironically, I almost immediately realized there were actually two dead voices on that tape. I had long since shed the happy-but-halting girlish voice of my youth like an ill-fitting skin, but hadn't quite realized it until I heard my old nervous laughter fill the speakers. I realized that, someday, I'll have to introduce my son to that young woman too.

JSA

My Grandma and I talk about WWII and the sinking of the Ruben James:

[Grandma Maryanne's Interview Segment 1](#)

My Favorite part of the interview:

[Grandma Maryanne's Interview Segment 2](#)

