

“Last Recording of a Porn Palace”

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Abstract

In the “Sound and Noise” chapter from Aden Evens’s *Sound Ideas*, he asserts that “to hear is to hear difference” (1), and while he is referencing the variation inherent to the sine wave of a frequency, more broadly we can see this statement as also applying to notions of sounds and their associated historical timeframe [...]

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Sound Studies and Aurality (Topic), Experimental and Cognitive Psychology (Subfield), Article, Listening, Memoir, Place And Space, Recording

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In the “Sound and Noise” chapter from Aden Evens’s *Sound Ideas*, he asserts that “to hear is to hear difference” (1), and while he is referencing the variation inherent to the sine wave of a frequency, more broadly we can see this statement as also applying to notions of sounds and their associated historical timeframe in recordings. This is to suggest that the sound quality and fidelity not only speaks to understandings of what makes a recording “good,” but also helps to place it in a historical framework constructed not only of the sound quality, but the means of recording it, delivering and its purpose within the culture, and how this might capture a particular cultural/historical moment or feature. Evens also asserts that “sound is repetition at every turn” (3), and such repetition breeds such an immediate familiarity that sounds can begin to sound dated as they become less common (and thus less familiar) as the push of technology and economics makes them obsolete. Polk

In February 2006, the Polk Theatre in Jackson Heights, Queens closed its doors for good. The theatre presented a daily festival of pornographic films for the waning audience of men who preferred a public showing of lewd offerings to the private show available via VHS and DVD. Despite the relatively recent closure of one New York City’s last porno theatres, the answering machine message giving the show listings and times bespeaks not of the mid-portion of the first decade of the 21st century, but rather harkens back to an older time when such recordings informing patrons of showings were more common. The recording sounds anachronistic and stands out in an anomaly in terms of the typical ways we find information these days. The low-fidelity, background noise, and timbre of the 70-something old man’s voice, not just the content, suggests a particular era of sound communication (and also a stark contrast to the visual mode most used these days to gain information about movies being shown, e.g. the internet).

[Click Here to listen to the “Polk Theater Answering Machine”](#)

The recording also speaks to a localized and low budget operation that is marginalized no longer for its lurid content, but by the failure of this dying porn economic model. “This is a recording,” says Harold Guissin (the proprietor) on the message, feeling it necessary to remind callers that it is not a live person that can be engaged with, that is, no questions can be asked of him. There is a clicking hum of a projector in the background, and his coughs, unedited from the recording, present a lackadaisical and spontaneous approach to the recording of the week’s featured films. Furthermore, the old man’s intonation underscores the absurdity of the titles of pornographic movies, such as “Sexo a la Mexicana,” which he makes sound like “Sexualla Mexicana.”

In comparison to the current mode of using a phone to find out listings for movies, the Polk Theatre answering machine is dated and quaint. Moviefone, by contrast, presents a contrived announcer’s voice, and presents a method with which to interact with the recordings, moving through menus and portions of the announcement as desired. The recording is digitized and free of any context that may alert the caller to where or how it was recorded or the experience to be had at any of the movies listed. Furthermore, Harold Gussin includes his own opinion (ostensibly) on the pictures, something we’d never hear on moviefone, “Brazilian Mulatto, great title, great picture!” Ultimately, however, even Moviefone has started to feel dated and obsolete, or perhaps it is my own decreasing familiarity with it, preferring Netflix to theatres, and a website to the

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telephone on those rare occasions that I do go out to see a movie. The recorded listings reinforce the multifarious ways that time is involved in the how we hear and interpret sound. Sound is noted for its change over time; both in an immediate physiological way in how our eardrums react to changes in air pressure, but also a marker of time in a broader historical way.

