

A Manifesto, or Sounding Out!'s 51st Podcast!!!

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Abstract

This week, *Sounding Out!* dropped its 51st podcast episode. As the curator and producer, I thought it necessary to commemorate the occasion with some fanfare.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Aesthetics, Archival, Podcasting, Radio, Recording



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This week, *Sounding Out!* dropped its [51st podcast episode](#). As the curator and producer, I thought it necessary to commemorate the occasion with some fanfare. I want to shout from the hilltops about how proud I am that our little podcast has turned 51!

Erm...at least I'm posting about it.

Also, I want to clear the air a little about what it is that we do. I've received feedback here and there over the years about the sound of our podcasts, that we sound "different" and/or "inconsistent," that we need to normalize the sound a bit: hello out there, audiophiles! Today, I want to say, once and for all, that our sound is intentional and that we are proud of it, hiss, distortion, and all! We think what some hear as "imperfections" are all part of what sets us apart from the ever-growing pack of podcasters. *SO!*'s podcast has sounded different since we MacGyvered our first episode from an epic talk, a few great ideas, and a rogue tape recorder at [River Read Books](#) in Binghamton, NY in April, 2011.

The *Sounding Out!* Podcast began as a series of conversations within the editorial team back in 2011. We knew that the blog was "talking the talk" in new, excellent, and often provocative ways, but that something was missing to keep pushing the *form* into the red, not just the content. We knew we needed something more—a little snap, crackle, and pop, if you will—a way to show how *Sounding Out!* was always listening, and a way for thinkers, artists, provocateurs, and more to engage with sound more directly. In 2011, podcasts were accumulating in the shadows waiting to lunge forth to center stage. They seemed really cool, but there were relatively few, and fewer still (if any at all) on the topic of sound studies. Even though we knew that podcasts were going to be a big thing eventually, we had no idea that they would blow up so quickly.

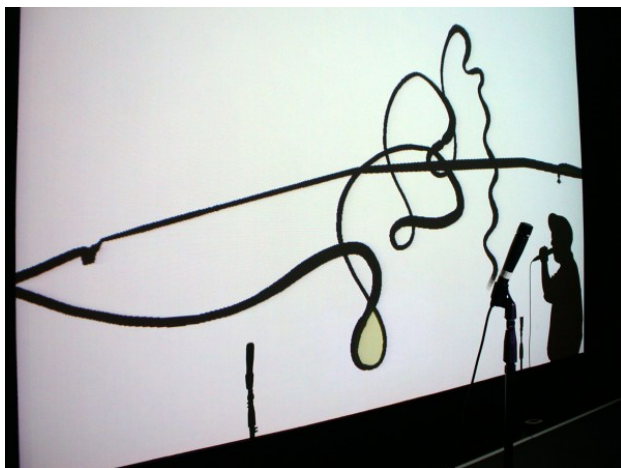


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While we flipped around many ideas, we decided to put our energies behind what was then an occasional series of podcasts that allowed us to capture important yet fleeting moments—too quick and dirty to really transcribe. While our initial vision for the podcast was to capture these rare and powerful moments, over the past 5 years we have kept this mission consistent while evolving to better accommodate artists and theorists alike. During that time we have hosted

mystics and librarians, shared fieldwork from São Paolo, Brazil to Lodi, Ohio, interviewed theremin players and visionaries. See the full list of episodes [here](#). Even though our content has been wide ranging and eclectic, we’ve made it a point to privilege access and immediacy in all of our episodes.

As I listen back to the past five years, I realize that our contribution to the fields of sound studies and podcasting has not just been in terms of who we broadcast and what we amplify, but through the sound of our podcasts themselves. Our podcasts don’t sound perfect. They’re spiritually aligned by the raw production ethic of bands like [The Minutemen](#), who always privileged the emotive qualities of immediacy, access, and intimacy over the brooding qualities of studio production. Particularly because we founded the podcast upon these same principles, I have strived to prioritize radical visions and ideas and to amplify new voices above all else. I want each podcast to arrive in your queue like a wrapped gift—topic, content, production, and sound all equally mysterious. Some of our podcasts were recorded on [cellphones](#) and others were recorded in high-end studios and [recording booths](#). Our 51st anniversary isn’t the perfect occasion, either. But, hey, we’re proud of these audible distortions.



<https://youtu.be/ExS8sOWtYxQ>

“The Minutemen: #1 Hit Song”

So what do I mean that our podcast *sounds different*? Well, I mean two things: First, we sound different than what episodic radio sounds like. Our DIY—or, more accurately, we will *help* you “Do It Yourself”—ethics deliberately dial back radio’s genre conventions: smooth identifiable hosts, heavy compression, sound-proof rooms with the latest in equipment. We encourage and construct our podcast with a deliberate sonic diversity, providing little sonic consistency from episode to episode in order to challenge regimes of production that threaten to make all recordings sound the same. We have many many different announcers and hosts; for this podcast to be the space of radical discourse that we intend, it’s important to cast our net wide. This isn’t to say that we don’t care about “quality,” but rather that we define quality differently. Rather than an audiophilic emphasis on the sorts of tone found most frequently in microphone technique,

sound booths, and—when all else fails—postproduction, we believe that a “quality” podcast—particularly one about sound—should explore sounds that we rarely hear and allow its artists freedom over how they present their work.

I curate our podcast as a sonic refuge from the invisible regime of auditory production that has slowly constricted and strangled radio this past century. And I’m proud to share podcasts that have been recorded on in impromptu circumstances, [Episode XXXIX: Soundwalking Davis, CA and New Brunswick, NJ](#), for example. We want artists to show more than they tell; [Episode XII: Animal Transcriptions, Listening to the Lab of Ornathology](#) is a perfect example of this. Here Jonathan Skinner’s brilliant exploration of animal sounds perfectly balances sound and interview and invites listeners to compare sounds to speech, and vice versa. Another example of this ethic is film professor Monteith Mccollum’s [remix of the original War of the Worlds broadcast](#). Although Mccollum offers some commentary at the start of the recording, what follows is a unique and dazzling sonic experience. Giving radical ideas both the space and platform to be heard is this podcast’s mission. So far, so good!

The second way our podcast *sounds different* has to do with our deliberate curatorial resistance to consistency between our episodes. When programs bend to the whims of genre conventions, creativity is all but snuffed out. For our podcast to excel as a form for sharing visions, ideas, and experiments, we must allow our composers, authors, and auditors the freedom to explore sonic space. We celebrate *Sounding Out!*'s anniversary annually with a series of mixes hand-picked by our stable of authors (Listen to years [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), and [6](#) here!), we’ve entertained [interviews](#), [panels](#), and [sound art](#) alike. You may have missed it, but [we even have an episode diving into the work of ambient sound in a Dungeons and Dragons game](#).



Behind the scenes, we look NOTHING like this.
Image borrowed from fr4dd @Flickr CC BY.

While I do think about the sound of our podcast aesthetically—I used to run a music production studio out from the trunk of my car—we do not cultivate a DIY anything-goes ethic strictly for a “cool factor” or just for its own sake. Rather, we have calibrated our different sonic approach in deliberate defiance of styles of production which are all too frequently celebrated within the cultures of straight white men. (Check out *SO!* Editor-in-Chief Jennifer Lynn Stoevers’ epic three-part treatise on the tape recorder in popular film to glean some sense of the tape-recorder’s role as an instrument of masculine control. [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#)). The standards of taste which have

long governed the domain of radio production (and audio production, as a whole) are historically connected to the communities of practice which have occupied invisible yet powerful roles as audio producers, engineers, critics, and marketers.

As Jonathan Sterne explains in [MP3](#), the science of audio fidelity has historical roots within a corporate logic that privileges sounds that are easily shared through telephone cables. “AT&T encountered hearing as an economic problem once its options for extracting additional profit through price were limited,” Sterne says, “Among other strategies, it sought to learn which frequencies could be excluded from the market for telephone signals” (14). In other words, the entire craft of audio engineering has historical roots in privileging sounds that make money above all else. Not only this, but the standards of fidelity cultivated by engineers allow them to gatekeep and demand money at the outset, blocking access to the means of production. These standards are more often than not embedded within the cultures of listening and sales fostered by the radio industry. Fortunately, podcasts have been able to challenge many of these genre tropes. We’re proud to contribute to this momentum and to propel it forward as we continue our series. And we’re not stopping! Up on deck in 2016 we have some amazing compositional sound art, more from Marcella Ernest’s trek to uncover lost sounds, and some notes on a forthcoming project in archiving one city’s local music scene.



BOOM!!!!!! Image by Jamie McCaffrey CC @Flickr BY-NC.

So, in the spirit of *Sounding Out!*'s annual blog-o-versary we're popping the cork for our podcast's 50th episode with a few of the milestones we hit this past five years.

We found a theme song. This was a small but important step in our development. What would a podcast about sound be without some kind of awesome anthem representing it? (Nothing, that's what!) We need to officially thank the members of Hunchback (Miranda, Mike, Jay, and Craig) for

donating their song “Feeling Blind” to our podcast. Hunchback was a legendary horror-surf band from the NJ basement scene who endeavored to produce highly visceral sonic experiences of the highest caliber in their songwriting. [You can still find a ton of their recordings on the internet.](#) Thanks, crew!



We got listed on iTunes and Stitcher. It bears mentioning that quite a bit of technical muscle is involved in establishing a podcast. We would have gotten nowhere without Andreas Duus Pape’s help and guidance during our earliest moments. Andreas was instrumental in opening up the hood of the podcast and making it purr. Not only did he donate his time to plug us into iTunes’ network of podcasts, but he also shared some excellent philosophical thoughts on the topic. You can listen [here](#) and read them [here](#).

We went monthly. Originally we had conceived the podcast as more a haphazard, occasional treat for our readers. Slowly but surely as demand and interest grew, we began to carve out a more regular calendar space for our podcast. First we switched to a bi-monthly format, and then we started with monthly broadcasts. Can’t slow this beat down.

We are the sonic archive of a sound art conference. That’s right, we featured sonic mixdowns of the entire Tuned City of Brussels sound art festival. Over the course of the festivals three days, we featured daily mixdowns of the prior day’s key sounds and moments. Each mixdown is brilliant and a testament to the raw passion of our podcast contributors. They worked round the clock to produce such an amazing series. Check out the [night before](#), and days [1](#), [2](#), and [3](#).



We produced a LOT of soundwalks. If you’re a listener you know that we love our soundwalks. We’re proud to be host to play host to a variety of soundwalks from cities around the world. Last month’s [Yoshiwara soundwalk](#) by Gretchen Ju challenged listeners to critically engage with the city’s fraught history of sex work. Other contributors in our soundwalk series like [James Hodges have considered how the ambient music of big box stores and shopping malls are part of the architecture of commerce.](#) Finally others like Frank Bridges have taken us to the edge of history and [soundwalked the grounds of Thomas Edison’s workshop](#) in Edison, NJ. No matter what the locale, our soundwalks are part of our podcast’s signature.

We found a regular contributor. Regular contributors are the heart and soul of *Sounding Out!* They lead the conversation on sound and work to bring you the best, most interesting content. For these reasons we’re proud to announce that Marcella Ernest will be joining our podcast as a

regular contributor with her series “Searching for Lost Sounds.” Marcella will be interviewing a variety of sonic practitioners in an effort to give voice to the voiceless. Her most recent entry in the series was posted last Thursday. [You can listen here.](#)

We’re going to keep it coming. That’s our promise to you! We’ll be producing great content as long as you’re listening. Take a moment to subscribe to our [iTunes](#) or [Stitcher](#) accounts and also explore our [Episode Guide](#) to see if you missed anything this past 5 years. It’s been a rewarding adventure so far and we guarantee that we’ve already got some great content lined up in the coming months.

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[Sounding Out! Podcast #1: Peter DiCola at River Read Books](#) – Peter DiCola

[It's Our Blog-O-Versary](#) — Jennifer Lynn Stoevers

[Sounding Out! Podcast #51: Creating New Words from Old Sounds](#) – Marcella Ernest