

Wireless Zombies! A re-creation of Golden Age radio drama for a contemporary audience

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Can you hear the birdsong and the gravel crunch beneath my feet? They can hear too; they can hear the rats and the sounds of terror and the raising pitch of my voice, just like you.

In the so-called “Golden Age” of radio drama from the 1930s to 1950s, all plays were broadcast live: the studio was a hectic environment, with voice actors, sound effects technicians, musicians, producers and directors creating energised performance events. Radio and audio research at the University of South Wales, across a range of disciplines, includes the practical recreation of the performance practices of Golden Age radio as simultaneously theatrical and on-air broadcast productions. Undertaking this kind of studio experimentation for genuine live broadcast has informed and underpinned our understanding of the medium, its history and practicalities. In 2013, USW performed *Lover’s Lane*, an all-new zombie radio play in the 1940s style for both theatre and online audiences.¹ The performance practice was consciously “arcane”, deliberately using the technologies and performance practices of a bygone culture, and yet the live performance was *immediate*, thus creating a variety of challenges.

The experimental audio artist Greg Whitehead has noted that the medium of radio creates an inherently uncanny world of the living dead:

When I turn my radio on, I hear a whole chorus of death rattles: from stone cold, hard fact larynxes frozen in every stage of physical decomposition; from talk show golden throats cut with a scalpel, transected, then taped back together and beamed across the airwaves; from voices that have been severed from the body for so long that none can remember who they belong to, or whether they belong to anybody at all. (Whitehead 1990, 145)

There are many different performances involved in producing work for and in a medium that is simultaneously vivacious and deathly. The vibrancy of the composition and performance of music,

the fleshy technical ingenuity that create the sound effects, and the historical production techniques which stitch all the elements together allow the “severed” voices in the ether to speak to the listener with immediate yet entirely disembodied effect.²

How much time has passed? When are you listening to me? Is that an odd question? I am live and you are not. Not yet. So I must speak and you cannot reply. You have no voice.

Horror had become a staple radio genre by the late 1940s: “US Radio ... fired at least 80 programs of horror and bloodcurdling adventure at its listeners every week” (Grams 2002, 34). This prolific body of work encompassed the broadest range of horror forms and plays about vampires, werewolves (and other lycanthropes), ghosts, witches, mummies, mad scientists, serial killers, aliens, and monstrous creatures were all brought to life in the listener’s mind through narrative, music and sound effects. Also animated in the minds of listeners were the undead, and although the modern zombie in US culture is popularly seen as a phenomenon contemporaneous with, or subsequent to, the Vietnam War, radio offered significant precursors in this exciting period of live radio drama, in a variety of guises (see Hand 2006 and 2011).

The hugely popular radio series, *The Shadow* (1930-54) – about the crime-fighting adventures of a superhero with the ability to become invisible by hypnotizing his enemies – featured “zombies” and the “living dead” on many occasions. These were typically victims of pseudo-scientific mind control or folkloric Haitian voodoo. Similarly, “The Island of Death” (13 March 1945) on the horror series *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* presented the “traditional” voodoo zombie myth, with an American couple on vacation in Haiti and fatally encountering the rituals of a witchdoctor. A few months later, in the *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* episode “The Undead” (18 December 1945), a woman believes she has married an undead man. Despite its Gothic theme – with its echoes of *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle* – the play is set in a contemporary domestic setting and reflects post-war paranoia. It could be seen as being a metaphor for young women who were either

struggling to come to terms with a lost generation of men or struggling to readjust to the return of (frequently traumatised) men from military service.

Two of the finest living dead dramas in American horror radio were both written by Arch Oboler, and were broadcast on the *Lights Out* series just a week apart from each other: “Scoop” (8 December 1942) and “Knock at the Door” (15 December 1942). In “Scoop”, an unscrupulous newspaper editor drives a clerk to suicide. The victim returns from the grave to exact his revenge. We are told that the “worms and maggots (had) worked quickly” on his face: an image unthinkable for the 1942 screen and more reminiscent of the screen zombies of our own time. In “Knock at the Door”, a woman becomes increasingly resentful of her domineering mother-in-law and murders her. After a few days, the mother-in-law returns to the house and her doting son, who notices she is freezing cold but does not see that she is a rotting corpse, forces his wife to get into bed with “momma”, in order to “keep her warm”. The killer eventually commits suicide and the putrefying corpse has succeeded in usurping her daughter-in-law’s place in the household. A remarkable example of sexualized horror, “Knock at the Door” is also a complex metaphor of the dysfunctional American family in a Second World War context. As was often the case in *Lights Out*, the play is sardonically humorous, being perhaps the ultimate “mother-in-law joke”.

You are dead, and someone must speak for you, but you are not helpless. You can choose not to listen. You can rewind, can pause, can devour my story in pieces, the living cannot. You are dead. At least you are to me.

Our new zombie radio play, *Lover’s Lane*, is set in an immediately post-World War II context – an era of new hope yet recent scars – and features two characters, Fred and Daphne, who are on a country walk and, after flirting and titillating each other, stumble across a derelict mansion. These textual decisions were designed to evoke a sense of homely nostalgia while simultaneously offering a platform to subvert that domestic reassurance with their implicit textures. The play is a deliberate homage to “Golden Age” radio in plot and characterisation: the themes of pseudo-scientific conspiracy and paranoia with gruesome unhappy endings all wrapped up in extremely sardonic humour were typical of this epoch of radio.

The post-war setting allows us licence to utilise plot devices which are familiar to a modern audience but remain unhindered by modern conveniences of communication or etiquette: there are no mobile phones, GPS or computers, and the promise of sex is only implied. Fred and Daphne can therefore be allowed to pursue innocuous romantic seclusion; we realise before they do that that means terrifying isolation. The character names reinforce the cynical humour of the form, as they are a conscious nod to *Scooby Doo* (1970 onwards), the playful Gothic of which Golden Age radio drama is arguably the progenitor. Their names signal the tone of the piece and the inquisitiveness of the characters. Just as their namesakes would often explore haunted houses to solve the mystery, Fred and Daphne in *Lovers Lane* explore the mansion.

Unlike their namesakes, however, this Fred and Daphne are not going to unmask a human disguised as a supernatural creature but instead awaken a grisly human-made terror: the mansion was the laboratory where the “V-3” biological bomb was being developed, not by the Germans but by the British. Unfortunately for Fred and Daphne, the undead human specimens of the abandoned experiment are still in residence and extremely hungry. While the plot and delivery begin in a deliberately camp and cartoony way, they are subverted by the uncanny twists the radio allows. This is not the homely and familiar tale of young romance and hi-jinx that is at first evoked but an altogether darker story.

I am a voice in a black room. There are others around me in the blackness. My concern is with the living here with us and elsewhere far away, listening. We wait for the sign: the gesture that begins our tale.

The production techniques which informed *Lover's Lane* were developed during the 1940s in the US when a commercially funded broadcasting model had emerged. This created high demand for cheap, entertainment oriented programming and scripts were frequently developed through to broadcast in a matter of four or five hours. Recording technology at this time was not well advanced, so creating spot sound effects was quicker and much cheaper. Sound effects and music were not intended to be technically naturalistic but were recognisable indexically in the given

context. Textbooks from the era (e.g. Abbott 1941), document in fascinating detail how to make sound effects from everyday objects which become stimuli for the listener to create an environment, event or mood using the power of the imagination.

We applied this principle in the beginning of *Lover's Lane*; a short burst of birdsong and evocative music is sufficient to indicate the mood, the era and location and we leave it to the listener's imagination to perpetuate this idyll throughout the scene. Microphones were relatively advanced at this time and were sensitive enough to enable performers to create a sense of movement and perspective (Kingson 1950). We also re-created the role of the director, who in the golden age was essentially an orchestral conductor, cueing performers and sound effects, steering the pace, the crescendos and diminuendos with an elaborate series of hand signals, documented in John Carlile's *Production and Direction of Radio Programmes* (1942). This array of historic production techniques do not merely reproduce antique radio but re-animate the vibrancy of the form. As the audience listens, the direction and rhythms of the story are emphasised by the music, synchronised with the living voices and crystallized by the range of sound effects.

Those far away (I like to think they are sitting in a comfortable chair with everything that tells them that everything is perfectly well placed in a neat domestic pattern all around), they can hear my voice because I speak quietly into a microphone, a single severed ear that connects those far away, to us here in the black. They can hear everything. They can hear the music I supposedly cannot; they can feel the tension I am to be oblivious to. You can hear it too, can't you?

While the musical score primarily creates ambience and supports the linearity of the unfolding narrative, it is also used to smooth over unforeseen events: a cue is missed, an entrance delayed or the performance time is behind or ahead of itself. Adjusting the overall performance time by shortening or lengthening musical passages "on-the-fly" is designed into the score. For the music to *Lover's Lane*, each section was composed with one or more repeatable segments embedded within it; one of the roles of the director is to signal where and when to cut or cycle.

Being able to respond in this way becomes less practical as the size of the ensemble increases, so there are advantages to be found by limiting the number of musicians involved in the

performance. However, having fewer instruments available can also reduce the options for tonal and dynamic contrast. With these compromises in mind, only two instruments were scored for *Lover's Lane* (organ and bass clarinet) but they were chosen to offer as much sonic variety as possible within the horror genre. The bass clarinet offers a spectacular range of tones and effects, ranging from dark breathy lows to shrieking high-pitched overblows; it also offers effective mimicry of other familiar instruments (saxophone, cello, clarinet, didgeridoo). Alongside this, the organ offers a similar range of tonal variety reaching from low mysterious drones through to its piercing higher registers, this whilst also offering the polyphony that brings depth to the underlying harmonies and great dissonance to areas that are suspenseful or sinister.

The two musicians on this project were used to working together, which meant that they were able to improvise in and around the musical territory once it had been identified. Improvised sections included the bass clarinet solo under the actress' speech from 5:30 to 5:58 on the iTunesU recording and the short atmospheric interlude that runs from 8:05 to 8:18, a duet for organ and bass clarinet are both atonal in character to establish sense of unease which suited the play's setting. Similarly the very subtle organ underscoring that runs from 9.57 to 11.13 was improvised in the moment of broadcast, responding to the pacing of the actors and the sound effects.

According to the horror film sound designer Graham Reznick:

Sound design has the great ability to *unwrite* and *rewrite* reality at any time. Combine these techniques with the framework of horror, and you can bring viewers to a very vulnerable place. (qtd in Hand 2014, 11)

The sound design of *Lover's Lane* intended to bring the audience to a vulnerable place of the uncanny by drawing them into a recognisable sonic landscape before turning that landscape and the audience's expectations of its reality against them. The liveness and immediacy of the broadcast format can be exhilarating for participants and audiences as three layers interact: the performance and pacing of the actors; the composed and improvised music; and performed sound effects.

The others, the live ones here in the room, see the disconnected me that's live. They can only dimly see me holding a script and moving but not walking, kissing without contact and speaking into a severed ear, a microphone, to people far away. They can see many other shapes, moving in the darkness, making the gravel

crunch with surrogate feet and making birds sing and rats squeal. They dimly see a physical symphony crash mechanically around my jerking, dancing body with its stock-still head whispering into a metal ear. I speak softly to them and hope they will believe my tale, as they sit far away listening, listening. Can you hear our breathing?

Designing and performing a score of live Foley effects for radio drama requires a range of different approaches to meet the demands of a script. *Lover's Lane* begins with a bicycle ride but, without any visual or verbal reference, the sound of wheels and pedals turning is non-specific and would not necessarily be instantly recognized as a bicycle by the listener. The ride also comes to an end in the middle of a forest, the brakes have to be applied and the cycles parked. This requires the inclusion of additional sounds as well as working out the physical logistics of how to move, balance, and manipulate the bicycle to produce the necessary effects, in view of a live studio audience.

To produce the final effect, the back wheel of the bike was held up by the saddle with one hand while the pedal was cranked with the other. In order to signal that the sound belonged to a bicycle, a bell was introduced a few seconds into the play. When the characters arrived at their destination the Foley artist gently squeezed the brake while simultaneously lowering the back wheel into a shallow trench filled with dried leaves and twigs. After a quick press of the saddle to imitate the rider dismounting, a section of the bike was laid in the trench. However, with Foley a contradictory situation sometimes occurs when the real thing does not seem to sound realistic enough. In *Lover's Lane* this was the case when creating the sound effect to accompany the characters' walking up a driveway. Although gravel and stones of varying sizes should be used to emulate the driveway, the sound they produced did not match our expectations. Other materials were tried leading to the discovery that cat litter produced precisely the effect being sought. What the cat litter provided was a crisp dry crunch without the other sonic frequencies that gravel produces.

There is also a process of creating sounds that cannot be generated through literal means. This may be because the sounds do not exist in reality (this often the case when creating effects for genre radio, including horror radio) or because it would not be feasible or ethical. In the case of

horror, it is usually the latter and therefore the sound effects created to accompany scenes featuring torture or execution generally involve the mutilation of fruit, vegetables rather than actual flesh.

In *Lover's Lane*, the script called for an effect to represent the sound of rats being stamped on and squashed, which was created with a pair of rubber gloves (the type used for washing up). One of the gloves was cut off just above the fingertips, filled with jelly and then placed in a Tupperware box containing the remains of the jelly. Moments before the sound effect was needed the Foley artist put on the second glove and picked up the one filled with jelly. They then squeezed the opening closed so the jelly was compressed into the fingers and with their spare hand picked up a shoe with which to create the stamping sound. When the director gave the cue the Foley artist slapped the shoe onto a small section of wooden floorboards set away from the microphone and then a split second later gave a hard squeeze on the jelly filled glove while simultaneously pushing it into a Tupperware bowl set directly under the microphone. This created the sound that was indexically recognizable as the squashing of rodents – that is, a stamp, pop, bubble, and squelch to accompany the action performed by the character.

The gap between the indexical evocation of recognizable but unusual sounds and the naturalistic, or at the very least realistic, world of the sonic picture, was bridged in *Lover's Lane* at the climax of the drama in the instance of creating the sound effect of the slowly advancing zombies. Here there were no squelchy props needed, but rather the ensemble – sound effect operators, musicians and director – all providing the rising crescendo of rising desperately hungry groans of an undead hoard to accompany the panicked final screams of Fred and Daphne.

Lean closer. Listen. If I raise my eyes above my script, a flick and focus above the paper's edge, I can see dozens of shapes silently watching in the dark auditorium, craning, straining to hear what I am saying to them. Beyond my script with my notes and marking (when do I walk? when do I kiss? when is my scream cut short?), I see an audience I must ignore. I want to let them know. I want to strut and preen and grimace, but I must not. I would lose my place, trip upon the others, forget my way, stray from the microphone, my voice would drift wildly about the audio picture they have painted. I have one member of audience, though many might be listening, I speak as if I were talking only to one. It may be broadcast to many. Many might listen, but I'm only talking to one living soul.

Lover's Lane may have been as playfully pseudo-Gothic as an episode of *Scooby Doo*, but its immersive formal strategies were intended to exploit the creative imagination of the listeners, helping them to “see” two lovers kiss, a dilapidated mansion and a horde of zombies. The latter may look like their “favourite” or most dreaded incarnation of the living dead: we cannot always control what audio stimuli construct, and what is not seen can only be as horrific as one imagines. The modern audio zombie draws upon generic material, such as music and indexical sound, and intertextual tropes borrowed from the wider cultural history of horror. These textures feed into the creation of a perceived uncanny horror uniquely tailored to the individual's imagination. The rising popularity of the horror podcasts such as *We're Alive* (2009-2014), as well as the *Zombies Run!* app are testament to the efficacy of the imagined zombie. For an experiment into historical radio techniques and their implications, the exploitation of zombie culture was especially apt: the audience witnessed the reanimation of a “dead” practice wherein a playful contemporary tale (created in a deliberately archaic style) about zombies was not so much live as “undead” on the air.

You, of course, are dead and are by now wondering why the Narrator sounds so much like Fred (you've started the track again to make sure), maybe you are looking for the edits (there are none) or the slip ups (there are many). I like to hope that you have listened to the recording at least once, right the way through as if it were live, as if you were here safe with us right now, but I'm dead now too. We're all dead and have been for some time. But rewind and imagine. Shut your eyes, begin again and make believe that you are here with us in the dark waiting for the signal to begin our tale. Who's to say we're not live and there with you right now?

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1 Notes

Lover's Lane was written and directed by Richard Hand; performed by Geraint D'Arcy and Robyn Kennedy; and produced by Mary Traynor. Music was composed and performed by Ben Challis and Rob Smith. The Sound Effects Director was Robert Dean, assisted Kayleigh Edwards and Christy Evans. The floor manager was Corinna Hedderick and Assistant Producer was David Rose. *Lover's Lane* was performed at the Roland Levinsky Theatre, Plymouth, presented by Peninsula Arts, on 13 April 2013. Open access software was used to stream the production "live" via the internet, web-linking to several community radio stations, as well as the University of South Wales' student radio station. The play remains available as a free audio download on iTunesU: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/itunes-u/murder-mystery-and-mayhem!/id633557923>.

2 All unattributed quotations in this article represent the internal monologue of the voice actor, Geraint D'Arcy, who played Fred and the Narrator in the broadcast under discussion.