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Painting in sound

Aural history and audio art

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Placing aural history practice in the context of natural and electro-acoustic sound communication, this paper explores the intersection of audio art and aural history. It includes an analysis of the creative opportunities that electroacoustic and digital media offer aural historians, a brief introduction to pioneering works on the borderland between aural history and audio art, and a short history of the author's own works in this field. The article concludes with an explanation of the benefits of creative work in audio art to oral historians, including a greater sensitivity to the power and wonder of sound communication, expanded audiences, and an enhanced appreciation of the tools of the aural historian's craft.

Keywords: public history, aural history, audio art, digital media

I am in the United States what is known as a “public historian”. I have spent most of my career authoring histories for the listeners and viewers of public radio and television, for museum visitors, heritage tourists, K-12 teachers and students, and the general public. So one of my constant challenges has been to devise ways to bring the riches to be found in history, its lessons and morals, its conundrums and wonders, whatever select pieces of the great blooming mess that I am able to grab hold of – to folks who are free to walk past or turn the channel because something more interesting attracts, or promises to attract their attention.

A few weeks ago I attended the National Folk Festival in Richmond, Virginia, and there heard the Madison Hummingbirds play.¹ To look at them standing around you wouldn't think much: a group of close to twenty young African-American men dressed in khaki slacks and white shirts. But then they

1. The 69th National Folk Festival, held from October 12–14, 2007, included a broad offering of folk music from around the world.

began to play. For the first song, the American gospel classic “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”, they were joined by a large woman who sang slowly and quietly with the trombones. As the tempo and volume slowly built, the singer began to exchange verses with the lead trombonist, who preached through his horn, until everyone was on their feet. Next thing I know, I am smiling and laughing in utter delight. The trombones – whose sound is impossible to capture on CD – filled the tent, drove out all fleeting thoughts and emotions, and transported us into a world of amazing joy.

As the song built in energy and tempo, the singer put on a virtuoso performance. Driven on by the band and audience, she used every ounce of her physical strength, emotion, and breath to carry us along with her. It was an amazing performance: an inspiring and uplifting musical experience.

The Madison Hummingbirds are a trombone shout band from a Sweet Daddy Grace Church in Norfolk, Virginia.² They are Pentacostalists, part of an American evangelical movement famous for its members speaking in tongues, snake handling, and other ecstatic forms of worship. Taking literally the Biblical injunction to “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord” (Psalm 98:4) the Daddy Grace church trombonists play their music to share God’s love with the world.

Now this made me wonder, who are these people? And how do they do this? Where did they learn about these joy vibrations, and how did they figure out how to animate and sustain these transporting sounds? I suspect that none of them are rich, nor do they ask payment for their music, and as African Americans living in Norfolk they have, no doubt, their share of tribulations and sorrows. But they carry in the sound of their horns and their voices this extraordinary history and spirit.

A sound event becomes sound history

Now I did not record that performance, but I did purchase other Madison Hummingbird sound waves on CD. That recorded sound event is now a piece of sound history, a close facsimile of their vibrations captured by electro-acoustic technologies. My memory, narrated through the sound vibrations of my voice, is another piece of history animated through sound. And as an aural historian I can use both

2. Bishop C.M. Grace (1884–1960), known to his followers as Sweet Daddy Grace, was born in Cape Verde Islands, Portugal. He came to America in 1903, settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and in 1919 founded the United House Of Prayer For All People. In 2000, his church, headquartered in Washington D.C., had about 3.5 million members. See Dallam, M. 2007, *Daddy Grace: A Celebrity Preacher and His House of Prayer*, New York: New York University Press.



Image 1. Beulah Collins

to make historical sense of the Madison Hummingbirds. To further document and explore the origins of their vibrations I could record interviews to hear them tell me the history of their church, and how they make their sounds. And to amplify and contextualize the spoken words of their personal histories I also could record their sermons, rehearsals, and performances.

By making music or playing someone else's music we fill space with sound waves, and if successful, we entrain others to those vibrations; we bring to life that joy, or sorrow, or lust, or anger, or hope. The human voice conjures remembered events acoustically in the same way. This is part of the magic of language. Those memories may be sung or spoken; they may be laughed or cried, shouted or whispered. They may invite you in or warn you to stay outside. (Schafer 1977)

In conducting oral history interviews, I have always delighted in people's voices, the sounds of which as much as the content of the words spoken, have engaged and enriched and informed me. Through our unique instrumental bodies, like God's trombones, we add our own voices to the great vibrational symphony of the world.

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One memorable instrument, for me, in that great aural symphony is the voice of Beulah Collins, who was eighty-eight when I first interviewed her in a senior centre in West Philadelphia in 1983. Hers was a humble but valorous story. Understated in appearance, she told me of her move to Philadelphia from the eastern shore of Maryland after the death of her husband during the influenza epidemic of 1918; of placing her young son in another's home while she worked as a live-in maid so that "my boy could get an education"; of her never remarrying for fear that a stepfather "might not be good to my boy"; of his success – learning to read, he became a school principal – and of her intention to be buried "back home" beside her husband in a graveyard in rural Maryland, a place she had not seen in more than sixty years. Beulah died more than twenty years ago; but I still have her voice, laughing and singing, questioning, and telling the story of her life, however partial, disguised, and shaped during her encounters with the nice young white boy from the radio station.

I interviewed Collins again in 1984 for "Goin' North: Tales of the Great Migration", an oral-history based radio documentary series on the history of African-American migration from the American South to the city of Philadelphia during the early decades of the twentieth century. From her two interviews I also produced an 8-minute autobiographical vignette, "Beulah Collins", which aired on National Public Radio in 1986.³

Now in producing her condensed autobiographical vignette, I edited close to three hours of reminiscence into a compelling narrative from the life story that she provided me, and in doing so I took some artistic license. The sound of crickets that I used as an ambient bed I recorded in Goochland County, Virginia, some eighty miles from the eastern shore of Maryland. But those crickets, that natural soundscape, is also part of the sound history of rural America and of Beulah's life. I used the sound of a vacuum cleaner, a sound marker associated with domestic work, as punctuation to denote a change of scenes. I didn't use much of it. Like a good spice, a little goes a long way and too much, by drawing attention to itself, can spoil the dish. So the audio producer, like a chef, must have good ingredients and use them skillfully. To cook in sound we need the human voice, natural and human soundscapes, sound markers, music, and other sound events.

Oral history interviews, as we all know, are performative, and each person's vocalizations – language, accent, intonation, sonority, cadence, tonality, vocabulary – the whole complex symphony of verbal expression, is living history, a

3. Excerpts of her interviews I also included in *Goin' North: Tales of the Great Migration*, an oral-history based radio documentary series, available on the Talking History website, <<http://www.talkinghistory.org/hardy.html>> 1 March 2008.

historical artifact, a vessel of culture forged over centuries of communal expression that then emerges from the unique form of each of our bodies and lives. Listen to your grandparents, to any nonagenarian, to recordings of Jean Harlow, or Mussolini, or Martin Luther King, or Marilyn Monroe; there is no way for the imagined world of the written word or the best of actors of stage and screen to touch the authentic voices captured by aural historians.

The call to audio art

In the early 1980s I was producing ½-hour oral history-based sound documentaries for public radio in Philadelphia, and feeling increasingly imprisoned by the standard radio documentary formula that alternated continuity (narration) and actuality (recorded events), transitioned by music and sound effects. I also was fascinated by how the interviews that I and others were conducting contained within them deep truths and beauties in the sounds of interviewees' voices as much as in their words; ineluctable qualities that were suppressed and muted in audio and video documentaries. And I was thrilled by how combining a recollection with a related archival recording related to that memory amplified its meaning and brought it to life in what were to me magical ways.

The electromagnetic capture and reproduction of sound is truly one of the wonders of the modern world. Because of its ubiquity, we tend to forget that sound recording and electric-acoustical communication are still, from the perspective of human history, in their infancy; that not until the late 1800s did we have the ability for the first time to capture, store, and call back into existence facsimiles of sonic events that had until then existed only at the moment of their creation. One of the first uses Thomas Edison imagined for his phonograph was capture of the words and voices of the great men and women of his age for the benefit of future generations. (Hardy III & Dean 2006)

Less than a century ago, radio-telephony was "the riddle of the ages", an invisible Aladdin's lamp that swept aside the barriers of time and space, ending the isolation under which humankind had labored since the dawn of time – or so the media utopians wrote. Hindered neither by mountains or oceans, walls or weather, electromagnetic signals sped out in all directions, and could be plucked from the air with little more than some copper wire and a crystal. Imagine the thrill of listening for the first time to the jumble of voices and music; to the words of presidents and kings, to the fiery crash of the Hindenburg, and the imminent consequences of the Martian invasion – a radiophonic narrative some Americans

Long awaited and eagerly anticipated, **Mordecai Mordant's Celebrated Audio Ephemera**, a world renowned revivification of the sounds of the past resurrected through the magic of radio studio production, is now available for broadcast.

Dedicated to the proposition that the long since abandoned and all but forgotten is as good as anything on the contemporary scene, **Celebrated Audio Ephemera** is a series of 5 minute audio curiosity cabinets; past pastiches composed of only the very finest audio detritus selected carefully from the rugged survivors of a turbulent ocean of sounds washed up upon the shores of the arch preservationist, **Mordecai Mordant**.

Listen to rasping recrudescences of sound as hard steel grinds its course through grooves of shellacked bakelite spinning at dizzying speeds of 70, 75, 80 revolutions per minute!

Wonder at the wizened vocalizations of hoary octa- and nonagenarians as they resurrect transient moments from previously unrecorded youths!

Marvel at Professor Mordant's unparalleled skills in the esoteric science of audio-studio production.

Return to the days of wonder, when radio telephony was a dream, horses pulled fire engines, America was America, and nothing was impossible!

Yes, **Mordecai Mordant's Celebrated Audio Ephemera**, programs for the ages, present incontrovertible, living proof of the proposition that the tried and true and forgotten is at least as good as the all new and improved. And they come to you either seamless or fully self-contained.

Make a note of this vital information!
Audio Ephemera is available by satellite over the NPR system on:
Tuesday, November 11th, 1986 13:00-13:59 hrs., Channel 8 and **Tuesday, November 18th, 1986 13:00-13:59 hrs., Channel 8**

Program Titles:
EXERCISE 6: FIRE
NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE
EXERCISE 8: AMERICA IS AMERICA
ETHER ORDER
VIRGINSKA
IT'S JUST LIKE ANYTHING ELSE.
EXERCISE 7: THE PUGILISTS
AND our feature presentation, **THE PRODIGAL SON.**

Lengths: This special introductory edition of **Mordecai Mordant's Celebrated Audio Ephemera** is composed of seven, 5 minute modules, and one, 8 minute feature piece.

Mode: mono (of course)

Use: Unrestricted — upon return of response card.

Who is Mordecai Mordant?
Professor Mordecai Mordant, M.R.P., grand purveyor of the passe and dedicated doyen of dotage, is the noted originator and pastmaster of audio archeo-frottage. This edition of **Celebrated Audio Ephemera** he fashioned with the able assistance of Mr. Charles Hardy of Overbrook Farms at **Toucan Productions** in Philadelphia, a state-of-the-art production facility which enabled expression of the full wizardry of Professor Mordant's skills at audio-legerdemain.

Mordecai Mordant's Celebrated Audio Ephemera was made possible through the wisdom and foresight of the **Pennsylvania Council for the Arts** and the **National Endowment of the Arts**, a federal agency.

For further information about this unique offering, please contact **Toucan Productions** in Philadelphia. (215) 732-3784.

Image 2. Brochure, "Mordecai Mordant's Audio Ephemera"

briefly mistook, on the eve of the Second World War, for the unfolding end of extraterrestrial destruction.⁴

When conducting aural history interviews we all hear and experience such memorable moments. Sometimes they stand out because of the history they reveal, sometimes because of how they advance our scholarly agenda; sometimes, too, they stay with us for reasons that are hard to articulate – because they speak to us in more mysterious and personal ways. Now what might happen, should the aural historian take those memorable words spoken about the past and then combine them with other sonic artifacts – like a Madison Hummingbird’s musical sermon – and create a narrative or poem or sculpture or montage not for the purposes of historical scholarship, but instead, to paint with sound; to sculpt through speakers or headphones? What might it sound like if the aural historian became a bricoleur of audio ephemera and treated sound artifacts as ends in themselves; as God’s trombones?

Having grown bored with the standard form of radio documentary, I received grants in 1985 that enabled me to produce a series of six, five-minute oral history-based audio montages and one eight-minute piece, “The Prodigal Son”, that I titled “Mordecai Mordant’s Celebrated Audio Ephemera”. Here my objective was to re-animate the lost worlds revealed in the interviews and old phonograph recordings by weaving together snippets of sonic artifacts into “past pastiches” short enough – I hoped – not to wear out their welcome, and long enough to take listeners into far off places.

I built the montages around life transforming moments, symbolic events, and magical tales. In “It’s Just Like Anything Else” I combined a septagarian’s recollection his own rite of passage when he had crossed the threshold from childhood to maturity by leaving his house – by the back door – for the first time in a pair of long pants with an octogenarian’s still empowering account of having the local barber cut off her long, beautiful her hair in the early 1920s against the wishes of her father, and three octogenarians laughing recollections of their first rule-bending applications of lipstick and rouge. In “Ether Order,” three elderly men return to boyhood as they describe the process of capturing disembodied voices and music from the air with copper wire wrapped around a Quaker Oats box, which I combined with novelty records from the 1920s to reconjure the thrill of radio in its early days. “Exercise 6: Fire,” I built around the tale of a retired fire horse pulling a milk wagon at breakneck speed down a city street without his driver in pursuit of fire bells in

4. Orson Welles’ radio play of H. G. Well’s novel *War of the Worlds* is one of the most famous radio broadcasts in American history. Performed as a Halloween special on October 30, 1938, the broadcast’s first half hour was presented as a series of news bulletins that suggested that an actual Martian invasion was in progress.



Image 3. Virginia Bartow, circa 1934

the distance and an exercise instruction record from the 1920. In “Nothing is Impossible,” a Jewish nonagenarian who had grown up in a rural Russian shtetl shares his delighted rumination on the marvels of electric lights, automobiles, and other modern inventions before concluding that “nothing is impossible”. In “Virginska,” octogenarian New York concert singer Virginia Bartow evokes the Russian romanticism of American high society during the 1920s through her loving reminiscence of how her Russian voice teacher – Andrew Salama, a member of Nikita Balieff’s

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Chauve Souris – introduced her to a fantastical world of timeless love, transcendental beauty, and agonizing yearning that had filled the great emotional void of her own life, and that she gave voice to more than a half century later by singing the Russian folk songs she had mastered before the Second World War ended her hopes of a professional career.⁵ These were some of the disembodied and iconic fragments of sound and recollection that my alter ego Mordecai Mordant layered with fragments of voices and instruments and sounds fossilized on ceramic discs in the early 1900s; acoustical vibrations and electromagnetic signals reanimated and combined through analog open reel electrical-acoustic technologies and the legerdemain of audio collage audio.

In the final feature piece, “The Prodigal Son”, I animated 88-year-old James Plunkett’s account of how he had been led astray by the “bright lights”, when as a young man he had moved from rural Virginia to Philadelphia during the First World War, by interweaving his story with verses from a phonographic recording of James Weldon Johnson’s famous 1928 poem “God’s Trombones”. This combined narrative I then embedded in recordings of African-American sermons, jazz bands, and spoken word routines from the 1920s and early 1930s.⁶

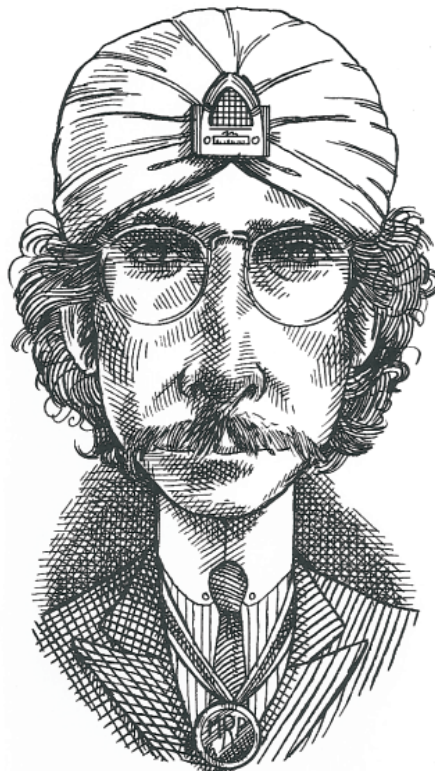
Now these pieces may not be to your liking. Listener response was mixed. Here, however, is where I encourage that you listen to any oral history interview and piece of audio art with an ear towards what you might create as the universe speaks to you in response to your own purposes. And here, I propose, is another value of audio art to the aural historian: it has a good chance of holding its value. I cannot read my own scholarship without hearing disembodied censoring voices; critiques of weak or obtuse writing, of dated interpretations and methodology, and all manner of other faults and shortcomings. Listening to Audio Ephemera, on the other hand, still makes me smile, and carries me back into those worlds of wonder.

5. A variety show that had its beginnings in Moscow in the early 1900s, the Chauve Souris in the 1920s attained international success with its mix of dance, theater sketches, folk music, and comedy. After arriving in New York in 1922, the troupe appeared on Broadway throughout the 1920s. For an introduction to its history see Sullivan, L. 1986–1987. Nikita Baliev’s *Le Theatre de la Chauve-Souris: An Avant-Garde Theater*. *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Winter): 17–29.

6. Distributed as an independent series over the National Public Radio satellite, “Mordecai Mordant’s Celebrated Audio Ephemera” was carried by more than 30 stations but has never been released on CD or published on the web. “The Prodigal Son” can be heard on the Talking History website. <<http://www.talkinghistory.org/hardy.html>> 1 March 2008. To learn more about its history see Hardy III, Ch. 2001. Prodigal Sons, Trap Doors, and Painted Women: Reflections on Life Stories, Urban Legends, and Aural History. *Oral History: Journal of the Oral History Society* 29(1): 98–105.

From painting to sculpting in sound

“Mordecai Mordant’s Audio Ephemera” was an experiment, some of the shortcomings of which I became acutely aware of even while producing the pieces. One of the biggest problems, to my ears, was sound quality. Determined to be true to the early days of sound recording, I produced Audio Ephemera in mono.



**MORDECAI
MORDANT'S**
CELEBRATED
**AUDIO
EPHEMERA**

Programs for the Ages

Image 4

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Once in the studio, engineer Len Perskie and I quickly discovered that the limited dynamic range and noise of archival recordings restricted our ability to layer sounds.⁷ The montage of sounds I wanted people to hear became unintelligible when layered monaurally. The solution was obvious: instead of painting with sound on a flat, one-dimensional monaural surface, why not sculpt? This I could do by increasing the number of channels. Stereo was the obvious choice, but what, I wondered, would happen if I had four separate channels of audio to work with instead of two?

So in 1987 I received enough grant money to produce “This Car to the Ballpark”, an 18-minute quadraphonic audio arcade produced from oral histories, archival recordings, contemporary music, and sound manipulations created on a digital sampler. My engineer this time was Jay Allison. After placing a speaker in the each corner of the studio, we laid the tracks and experimented moving sounds around and through the room. The effect, for me, was magical. Four channels opened the space, and the movement of sound – a train moving diagonally through the room from the left rear to right front corner, a voice slowly moving slowly around us as it passed from one speaker to the next, volleys and cascades of instruments and voices bursting around us from four different directions, one voice in the left speakers and the other in the right conversing across the room, and the constant movement of sounds made this “star-lit world”, the Ballpark’s concluding words, come to life.

I built “This Car to the Ballpark” around four voices: 100-year-old William Robinson’s account of how a white landlord’s threatened to put him on a chain gang for stealing three peaches in the 1880s, ninety-five-year-old Louise Smith’s account of resisting peer pressure to become a prostitute and her own desire to kill her philandering husband in the 1920s; seventy-eight-year-old George Baker’s reminiscence of fire engine horses in the 1910s, and eighty-year-old Virginia Bartow’s recollections of the tragic life of her Princeton educated husband (class of 1922), who “never learned to dance”.

The piece begins with a disoriented phone message, left on an answering machine by Virginia Bartow just days before her death in 1983, then sequeways to an excerpt from an oral history interview in which she recalled the thrill of running down a hill as a child to greet a train after she was released from a rope to which her parents had tied her in the early 1900s. It then moves to montages built around interview excerpts with elderly African Americans’ William Robinson and Louise Smith, white-working class Philadelphian George Baker, and then

7. My engineer on “Mordecai Mordant’s Celebrated Audio Ephemera” was Len Perskie of Toucan Productions in Philadelphia. A painter turned audio engineer, Perskie was a perfectionist who brought an artist’s sensibility to radio production.

back to Virginia Bartow, each animated with period phonographic recordings. Transitions from one montage to another I threaded together with excerpts from a 1930s' novelty recording of a conductor calling out stops along a street car ride to "the Ballpark". In effect, the featured pivotal memories of each person's life become stops on an imaginary trolley ride. In the final montage, the voices and sound artifacts of Bartow and Smith – of the world of wealthy Anglo-American and working-class African-American culture – are combined, and the piece ends with Smith reciting the lyrics of a gospel song composed by her minister, Charles Albert Tindley, over Bartow's playing of a Russian folksong, "The Nightingale".

The expense of presenting quadraphonic audio in the 1980s and 1990s – it required four speakers, a four-track open-reel analog tape deck, two amplifiers, and a mix board – the logistical challenges of moving and setting up the hardware, and the acoustical challenges of performance spaces restricted playback of "This Car to the Ballpark" to a handful of venues. These included *Earfest: The Theatre of Sound*, a national juried festival of audio soundworks, and the 1988 Oral History Association annual meeting in Baltimore, during which the audience was invited to move around the room. The denseness and movement of sound thrilled some people and disquieted others. Both "Mordecai Mordant's Audio Ephemera" and "The Car to the Ballpark" made extensive use of low-fidelity 78rpm recordings, which add an additional challenge to novice listeners. Digitally recorded live sounds and digitally remastered archival recordings eliminate the sonic challenges of working with low-fidelity recordings in the production of audio art and aural history documentaries.

Oral history and audio art

The rapid development of affordable digital technologies since the 1980s has both simplified and democratized our ability to author in sound, and the Internet, wireless transmission, and portable receivers have shattered radio, phonograph record, audio cassette, and CD into an expanding option of new media for dissemination into the ever-growing global docuverse. The last few decades have also witnessed the emergence of the related fields of sound studies and sound histories. (See Bull and Les Back 2004; Erlmann 2004; Smith 2004; Sterne 2002)

Multi-channel audio art and aural histories are now a viable option for oral historians, museums, and others. In recent years, a number of artists-turned-aural historians and oral historians-turned-artists have begun to turn to audio art. (See Kahn and Whitehead 1994; Kahn 2001; Labelle 2006; Hardy III 2006)

Audio art and oral history have a natural affinity. Storytelling and reminiscence, as we oral historians repeatedly intone, are by their nature aural forms.

Scholars exploring their performative nature continue to change the way that we think about the oral history interview and its uses. That the intersection of theater and oral history has become a vital subfield of oral history practice is demonstrated both in papers presented at this conference and in *Remembering: Oral history and Performance*, a fascinating collection of nine essays on “oral history-based performance”, edited by Della Pollock and published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2005.⁸

Oral historians, however, have devoted far more attention to radio documentary and to theatre than to audio art or other media arts. Sound documentary producers are comparatively numerous, and many of them highly skilled. But most documentarians’ interest in oral history interviews is for the information contained within them; not their physical properties – both psycho-acoustic and electroacoustic – their aesthetic qualities, or the deeper truths about the human condition that can be found within them. A handful of folks, however, have begun to explore in the borderlands between audio art and aural history, and to identify their work as “audio art”.⁹

The new edition of *The Oral History Reader* includes an article on artist Graeme Miller’s “Linked” project in London. This public art installation, which opened in 2003, represents a fascinating hybrid of public history and audio art. (Butler and Miller 2006) Miller and other researchers interviewed local citizens and road protesters who bear “witness to the disastrous impact the M11 link road has had on his local neighbourhood since its construction in the 1990s”. Miller then mounted twenty transmitters high on lampposts along a six-lane motorway in east London that continuously broadcast the audio montages he created from these interviews and other sound elements. Billed as “a landmark in sound, an invisible artwork, a walk”, Linked takes listeners on an audio Easter Egg hunt for recordings that use musicality, including repetition and silences, “to build in space for thought both within the broadcasts and between the receivers”. To bring the past to life, Miller also instructed some of his narrators speak in the present tense, viewing the past in their mind’s eye as if it were happening in front of them.¹⁰

The co-author of the article on the Linked project is Toby Butler, who in 2005 produced “MemoryScape Audio Walks: Voices from the hidden history of the

8. In her introduction, Pollock notes that the telling of oral histories, the making of history in dialogue, is inherently performative. Each interview is a heightened encounter with each other and the past, performance existing in that liminal space between then and now. For Pollock, the oral history interview as “an ignition point” for people who use oral history in theater.

9. I must apologize in advance for only mentioning British and American projects; my knowledge of those working in other countries and languages is sorely lacking.

10. See Miller, G. *Linked*. <http://www.linkedm11.info/>; Lavery, C. 2005. The Pepys of London E11: Graeme Miller and the Politics of Linked. *New Theatre Quarterly* 21: 148–160.

Thames”: two fascinating and pathbreaking riverside audio walking tours that use sounds, oral history interviews, and archival recordings to explore the hidden history of twenty-three stops along the Thames River in London. Butler supplemented his own oral history interviews with others housed at the London Museum, then set these in binaural soundscapes that he recorded with bud mikes.¹¹

Both of these fascinating projects place their oral histories back into the physical worlds they document. And they demonstrate the expanding opportunities that new digital media tools provide us for doing so. Both place their audiences in the actual physical locations of the history, and permit browsers to chart their own way through the programming. Smith equips visitors with wireless receivers that capture the programming from strategically placed transmitters. Butler’s tours can be purchased on CD, with maps, at the London Museum or downloaded to an MP3 player from the MemoryScape website – along with a full printed transcript. Both, too, have created websites that include interactive maps, photographs, and other complementary documents. On his, Graham embeds the location of the transmitters in a satellite map of his tour area.

Conclusion: On the ease and advantages of audio art to the oral historian

These tours are but two examples of the many new forms of aural history/audio art enabled by digital media. They also highlight aspects of the digital revolution’s impact on oral history practice, which include the following.

Audio art improves oral historians’ technical skills. When one authors in sound, a poorly recorded voice and soundscape is like a beautiful portrait, once alive with detail and color, and now obfuscated irreparably beneath layers of dirt and old varnish. Once one thinks of the interview as a sound event, as a precious sonic artifact, as a dramatic performance, the tools that one uses to capture sounds – and moving images – as accurately as possible, become very important. The components of one’s field recording kit – field recorder, microphones, headphones, and so forth – become essential tools of one’s art and craft. This makes perfect sense to a documentary photographer, painter, sculptor, musician, or scientist. Oral historians whose objective in the use of their field recording hardware is limited to the intelligibility of spoken words, lack the artist and musician’s concern for the physical properties of the materials by which they create.

11. See Memoryscape Audio Walks, <http://www.memoryscale.org.uk/Press.htm/> and the February 12, 2007 interview with Butler published online at ReadySteadyBook, <http://www.ready-steadybook.com/Article.aspx?page=tobybutler>. 1 March 2008.

The move into aural history and audio art broadens oral historians' responsibilities. It requires, for example, that oral historians record the historically specific and historically endangered soundscapes, sound objects, and sound artifacts of a narrator's life and community, all of which are important historical documents, and all of are needed by authors in multimedia.

The tools for audio art production are affordable and comparatively easy to learn and use. The basic requirements are a good field recorder and microphone, laptop computer, and digital audio workstation shareware.

Digital scholarship and audio art are collaborative endeavors. The digital revolution presents wonderful opportunities for aural historians to team and work with people who have the technical skills and training in the arts, especially digital media arts, that most oral historians' lack.

Audio art can enhance oral historians' abilities to hear and to listen.

Audio art, by the nature of its focus, can enhance, open, and deepen oral history scholarship.

Audio art can broaden aural historians' audiences. Sound and thought both emerge out of silence; they are energy events. We as a species take in and experience the world as much through our ears as though our eyes. Moving from the written word to sound enables aural historians to reach those who spend little time reading and a great deal of time listening.

Audio art is a realm of open exploration in which one can use memories and sound artifacts to compose, sculpt, fabricate, reveal—insert the verb or verbs of your choice – to make sense of the human condition through recorded sounds.

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Appendix

“This Car to the Ballpark”

A 14 minute, 49 second, stereo memento mori.

Producer: Charles Hardy III

Engineer: Jay Allison, Woods Hole, MA.

“This Car to the Ballpark” was first created as a quadraphonic audio montage produced from oral histories, archival recordings, contemporary music, and sound manipulations created on a digital sampler. This annotated transcript is for the shortened stereo remix of the original 18-minute composition.

Introduction: “The phone call”

MUSICAL OPENING (Untitled composition, Charles Hardy, 1987, performed on Oberheim Matrix 6 synthesizer)

ANSWERING MACHINE MESSAGE, VIRGINIA BARTOW (Virginia Bartow to Charles Hardy, March 1987): Charlie this is Virginia. I seem to be ill and I want you to come and get me Deary, I – you’ve got to come and get me. They’re keeping me here. They’re supposed to be on a picnic, but I’m not myself and I want you to come and get me. I must see you. Charlie. I must see you. I’ve got to, I’ve got to see you Deary, I’ve got to see you, I’m alright, but I was sick last night. See you dear –

RECORDED OPERATOR (Recording a telephone operator, 1987): If you’d like to make a call, please hang up and try again. If you need help, hang up and then dial the operator –

BARTOW: That’s it dear, he’s out. Operator did you get that, and I must get him in. But I’ve got to speak to Charlie, there’s something the matter with me. Please the number is 879 –

RECORDED OPERATOR: If you’d like to make a call please hang up and try again. If you need help, hang up and then dial the operator.

SOUND OF DIAL TONE

SOUND BRIDGE: DINNERTABLE CONVERSATION: (Hardy Family Reunion, private recording, 8 October 1983.)

BARTOW (Interview with Virginia Hardy Bartow, 26 August 1985.) And father was very serious about me being a musician. He wanted all his children to be something.

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MUSICAL BRIDGE: “The Nightingale”, private recording OF Russian folk song transcribed by Andrew Salama and sung by Virginia Bartow, circa 1962.

I was put out in a field in a place where there were trees and I was tied to a little doll carriage. And any time my doll freed itself I rushed after it and picked it up, and tied myself back up to the tree again. Wasn't that a funny reaction. And the family used to laugh at me. But then one day they let go of the ropes and I went flying down millions of stairs to the railroad tracks. I loved the railroads so.

SFX: TRAIN and WHISTLE (Recording of B&O locomotive)

BARTOW: We were another world; a starlit world.

Scene 2: “Three peaches”

STREET CAR CONDUCTOR, from novelty recording, “Ballpark” produced by Helen Meyers, Blue Bird, B-644-B: Ding ding. Ballpark this car goes to the ballpark. Fares please. Ten cents lady. Transfer sir? Where to? No lady, this car goes to the ballpark, ballpark car here, fares please.

SOUND BRIDGE: “Rosie”, Negro Prison Songs, Tradition, 1958. Soundscape recording of crickets, Goochland County, Virginia

WILLIAM ROBINSON (Interview with William Robinson, 25 July 1983): I was born December the 11th, 18 and 80. And therefore the Lord has brought me safe this far and no marks against me. Nothing like that. Everything I did, I tried to do it and if I saw it, you done something and if I knowed it was wrong, I'd run and get away from you cause them white folks was strict.

SHORT MUSICAL BRIDGE: “Rosie”

ROBINSON: I had done something one time and that was this. I didn't go into the orchard, but I received three peaches. Well, the man said “The receiver is just as bad as the rogue”. See, that's why – I didn't go into the orchard and I listened right in the man's face when he said if I was just a little older – I wasn't but 8 years old – that resented it just a little bigger, “I'd put him on the chain gang”. I listened right at him. And I was scared because I heard them working on it. I was never on it. But I heard them working, heard singing on that and working on the roads.

MUSICAL BRIDGE: (chain gang singing) “Hot Summer Days”, Negro Prison Songs, Tradition, 1958.

THUNDERSTORM SFX (Recorded in Goochland County, Virginia, summer 1983)

ROBINSON: My father had to pay \$21 for three peaches. He had to pay it because I received the peaches there. And the white man was the one that looking right at him just like I'm looking at you and I heard him say if he was just a little bit bigger I'd put him on the chain gang, and I was scared to death. But them three peaches learnt me a lesson. It learnt me a lesson that don't take what isn't yours.

FOUR-CHANNEL AUDIO MONTAGE, includes:

“Why I'm a Klansman”, The 100% Americans, KKK Label, Indianapolis, Indiana, circa 1924.

“Special Demonstration Double Disc” Columbia, 1912.

William S. Hart, Promotion for the 1925 motion picture, “Tumbleweeds”.

“Explanation of the Objective of the U. N. I. A.”, Marcus Garvey, See Bee G453.

Promotion for the 1929 Motion picture “Innocents of Paris.” Reminiscence with Irving Kauffman, The Recording Pioneers Phonograph Record Enterprise, LP101, 1974.

Scene 3: “I kicked over the table”

BARTOW: They were lost and the girls too were lost, the debutantes. And I remember thinking I was glad I was studying while I was a debutante. I was a very poor debutante. I wasn't like the girls and they didn't care for me.

MUSICAL BRIDGE: “Sitting on Top of the World”, circa 1930.

BARTOW: But the girls who made the hits those days would dance with the man, then move away and dance with another man and just raise hell. They thought they were terrific, those Cabots and Lodges that only speak to God, you know. That was a terrible era in New York and Boston.

STREET CAR CONDUCTOR (“Ballpark”): Blabber Street, watch your step. Watch your step there, watch your step. All right, step up. Fares please, fares. This car goes to the ballpark, ballpark car here. Fares please.

MUSICAL BRIDGE: “The Charleston is the Best Dance of All” Charlie Johnson's Paradise Ten, Victor 21491, 1928.

SFX: (Sound of people at a party, recorded 1984)

“The Prodigal Son”, James Weldon Johnson, Musicraft 1084, circa 1937.

LOUISE SMITH (Interview with Louise Smith, 24 September 1984.): They used to go in these places where the girls used to dance and they throw out money on the floor at them on the stand at them. And they would be dancing and wiggling and carrying on. Well things like that, my mother never raised us that way. So therefore I didn't go in for that. And my mother taught us when we was at home to keep out of bad company and then you would keep out of trouble. And so, that's the one thing, I never – a person that I know would go to this place or that place – I may have gone with them once, but after I found out what they were doing, I quit. I didn't go no more.

SHORT MUSICAL BRIDGE: “The Charleston is the Best Dance of All” Charlie Johnson's Paradise Ten, Victor 21491, 1928.

SFX: (Woman moaning, recorded 1987)

SMITH: In Atlantic City there was a bunch from Virginia that I knew, and they said we are going out tonight and having a big time. And I didn't know what they meant. And they went to a beer garden and they were drinking beer and they were singing. They tried to make me drink beer. That's the night that I kicked over the table. One girl had a hold of my hand and the other was trying to pour the stuff in me. And I yanked that and [SFX: TABLE CRASHING, GLASSES

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BREAKING] kicked the table and kicked the whole thing over. And then I broke away from them and never went with them no more.

Scene 4: “And he showed how the devil pranced”

STREET CAR CONDUCTOR: Kindly move back in the car please, there's plenty of seats in the rear. Move back. Next stop Clancy Street, Clancy Street. Transfer for Hoodoo Heights. Transfer for Hoodoo Heights here....

SFX: Railroad Train interior rumble slowed down on a Roland Sampler.

BARTOW: And Ned was always very polite, but you know when it came to things like making the family punch, he would fuss and fuss and fuss. They were fussers the Bartows. And he'd never do it and get med and finally I'd do it and he just never could be graceful. And he wouldn't learn to dance. See how he suffered. Wasn't that awful. A boy who wanted to dance and be a jolly boy. He had no chance. He went to the wrong boarding school and went to Princeton, a terrible place in those days. So he never found himself.

SFX (Cows mooing manipulated on a Roland Sampler to sound like long, low moaning).

SMITH: One night I attempted to kill my husband. I went to the store on South Street and bought the gun and had taken the money out to pay the man to kill him and as true as I would have bought that gun he would have been dead and I'd be pulling time. But something spoke to me just as plain and said “Vengeance is mine. And I will repay sayeth the Lord”. [SOUND BED OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN PREACHER BUILDING IN BACKGROUND: “The Downfall of Nebuchadnezzar”, Reverend J. C. Burnett, Columbia 14166-D, 1926.] Instead of buying the gun I came on to church on a Tuesday night's prayer meeting. Dr. Tindley got up that night and he told how the Devil gets you in trouble but he never knowed nobody who the devil got out. And after the Devil gets you, he showed how he pranced. And when he got through I went to him like a child and cried on his shoulder and told him he was talking to me, cause I had just attempted to get a gun.

BRIDGE: Reverend J. C. Burnett, “The Downfall of Nebuchadnezzar”.

SMITH: I went home that night right around at 1522 Catharine Street, I got down on my knees and I prayed to the Lord. I cried. I prayed. I cried. Every time I went to get up it was like somebody pushed me right back. I stayed down there until the burden was lifted and when the burden was lifted I felt like I had wings, I could fly.

MUSICAL BRIDGE: “Certainly Lord”, Deacon A. Wilson & Choir, (Webster Hotel in Chicago), Victor 20423, 1926.

Scene 5: “An American Tragedy”

STREET CAR CONDUCTOR: Clancy Street. Watch your step now getting off. Let the passengers off please. This car goes all the way to the ballpark. Fares. Ten cents lady. Fares, put them in. Plenty of seats in the rear of the car. Move back please, lots of seats.

MUSICAL BRIDGE: “Slumming on Park Avenue”, Ray Noble & his Orchestra, Victor 25507-A, 1937.

BARTOW: He had an Uncle who was a partner of J. P. Morgan, but Nevett was never popular. He was awkward. He was terribly awkward. His father did nothing about it. He used to look at him. “What is this boy saying?” And I think Ned’s life was an American tragedy.

SMITH: Cause that’s where all crimes begin at, home. If you don’t train a child – because my mother taught us that book, “Train a child in the way he should go and when he grows old he won’t depart from it”. And I’m a witness. I’ve lived past ninety years and I know what it is. And I tried to follow her teaching and my father’s teaching.

FOUR CHANNEL AUDIO MONTAGE, including:

“The Warbler’s Serenade”, Arthur Pryor’s Band, Victor, 17380-B.

“The Steamer Trunk”, Party Records, circa 1934.

“Sounds of the Forest”, Charles Kellogg “The Nature Singer”, Victor 55092-A.

Conclusion: “A Star-lit World”

STREET CAR CONDUCTOR: Raidy’s Ballpark. Last stop. Raidy’s ballpark, all out. Ballpark, last stop here

SFX: Crowd noises

MUSICAL BRIDGE “The Nightingale”, private recording, Virginia Bartow, circa 1962.

SMITH: A Better day is coming. No more shall Lords and Rulers their Heavy victim pressed, Shall bar the door against the poor and leave them in distress. But God the King of Glory who hears the Raven cry, will give command that every man have plenty by and by. A better day is coming.

BARTOW: We were another world, a starlit world.

“The Car to the Ballpark” featured performers

Virginia Hardy Bartow, (1902–1987) began her life as the daughter of a wealthy New Englander. When she proved uncomfortable in “society”, her parents in 1919 sent her to Paris to study music. She became a concert singer, gave well-received performances in Carnegie Hall, Bermuda, and abroad, and then starred with the Blue Hill Troupe in New York City. In 1928 she married Nevett Steele Bartow Jr., a young stock broker from South Orange, New Jersey. The Bartows moved into an apartment on the upper East Side in Manhattan. Nevett worked for a Wall Street brokerage until the onset of the Great Depression ruined his career and his self-confidence. In 1938 Mrs. Bartow became a student of Andrew Salama, a classically trained musician and performer in Balieff’s Chauve Soiree, who had fled Russia during the Revolution. She became Salama’s benefactress and entered into the life of a community of Russian émigré artists whose romantic sensibilities and “oriental melancholy” appealed deeply to her artistic temperament. After a divorce from her husband in 1945, Mrs. Bartow cut her remaining ties to society, and

“went Russian”. To help finance her son’s musical education she turned her Manhattan, West Village apartment into a student pensione and led the life of a gilt-edged Bohemian. A strong willed, loquacious, and attractive woman with a flair for the dramatic, Mrs. Bartow drew generations of musicians and artists to her residence “Salamovka”, a former hunting lodge on a wooded mountainside above the Delaware Water Gap in New Jersey until her death in 1987.

William Robinson: (deceased) Born on December 11, 1880 in rural Georgia, Robinson left school at the age of fourteen to work full time on the family farm. At the age of forty-eight he “just got a notion” and, upon the advice of friends, came to Philadelphia. Robinson worked briefly as a longshoreman, became a barber, and eventually owned a barbershop on Poplar Street in North Philadelphia. Throughout his life he remained a devout churchgoer and holder of many church offices. When I interviewed Mr. Robinson in July 1983, he was 103 years old and in frail health. He appeared not to hear or understand many of my questions and to be unclear about who I was or why I was questioning him. But amidst his generally disjointed and incomplete recollections, he returned repeatedly to one recollection: an incident that had taken place ninety-five years before, when at the age of seven he had been unjustly accused of stealing three peaches by a neighboring farmer, who threatened him with imprisonment and forced labor on a chain gang. The twenty-one dollars the supposedly aggrieved farmer forced Robinson’s father to pay for the theft of the three peaches was well over a year’s wages and bound the family even deeper into peonage to the plantation owner whose land Robinson’s family sharecropped. As the interview proceeded, I began to wonder if the tale of the three peaches was not just a story about the Jim Crow South, but Robinson’s way of protecting himself against me, a young white man disturbing his peace for unclear reasons. Soon, Robinson stopped answering questions altogether and fell into a Bible verse-laced monologue on the importance of honesty and minding one’s own business.

Louise Smith (deceased) was born in 1893 on a tenant farm outside Granville, North Carolina, up near the Virginia border, where her mother raised the white landowner’s children. A precocious student, she left school after her father broke three ribs lifting railroad ties, then came to Philadelphia in 1910 to help support her family. There, she worked as a live-in domestic, a job that she engaged in off and on for the next seventy years. Although never attracted to the “Bright Lights”, trouble seemed to keep finding its way to her door. In 1914 Louise was almost forced into prostitution in Atlantic City by an older friend of her sisters under whose protection she had been placed. That winter a young man who wanted to marry her followed her back home. Against her better judgment, Louise allowed her mother, who always thought that a boy who was good to his parents makes a good husband, to persuade her to accept his proposal. Her husband turned out to be a philanderer with a fondness for dice, a penchant for travel, and a predilection to violence. During the course of a stormy ten-year marriage he threatened and harassed her, at one time attacking her with a razor “to mar [her] good looks”. Mrs. Smith joined the Calvary Methodist Church soon after her arrival in Philadelphia. Calvary’s pastor was the renowned Charles Albert Tindley, one of the city’s most influential ministers and also one of great black gospel songwriters of the early twentieth century. When Louise’s mother died the same day as his wife, Tindley took her under his wing and became her protector and confidante. When interviewed in September 1984, she still lived in the apartment that he had obtained for her more than sixty years before.

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