

Foreword (and Backward)

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I've always been captivated by sound. I have actual sonic proof of this. After my grandma died in 2017, my dad found a beat-up shoebox of cassette tapes in her attic. Since I'm the only family member that still owns a boombox, he gave the tapes to me.¹

[rattling sound of cassette tape being put into boombox, the click of the play button, and the warm static-like buzz of the beginning of the tape]

Strangely, all of the cassettes were blank except for one; it was labeled First Tape December 1984. This was the year my Grandpa Ron bought a portable recorder with a microphone. His first and only audio composition was a variety show of sorts. The tape is a mix of Christmas carols recorded from the radio, *[music: Grandpa Ron's 1984 recording of "The Little Drummer Boy" from an unknown Pittsburgh radio station; the rhythmic plucking of a stringed instrument followed by angelic female voices singing "Come they told me pa rum pum pum pum"]* narrative that sounds a bit like my grandpa impersonating a game show host, *[Grandpa Ron: "OK now Stephanie you listen here" in the style of Bob Barker]* and multiple attempts to "interview" the grandchildren.

Grandpa Ron: Come on let's play, they're waiting for you. Ok, sing from over there.

Toddler Steph: NO!

Grandpa Ron: We can hear it. Sing from over there.

Toddler Steph: NO!

Most of these interview attempts feature the breathy noises of little kids sugared up on holiday treats *[sound of kids' fast, heavy breaths followed by hyper scream-laughing]*, but one particular moment of lucidity made my ears perk up.

Grandpa Ron: Say it, go ahead. Well do you have something to say, Stephanie?

Toddler Steph: Nah, I wanna just listen.

Grandpa Ron: You wanna just listen?

1. The audio version of Steph Ceraso's foreword can be found on the book's companion website.

Toddler Steph: Yeah to the music.

Grandpa Ron: Ohhh. To the music.

As a longtime music nerd and someone who has made a career of thinking about sound, “I wanna just listen” could be the thesis statement of my life.

[an exaggerated, cartoonish fast forward sound]

Fast forward ahead, through awkward grade school trumpet lessons, *[two badly played trumpet notes]* angsty teenage years, *[MTV News anchor Kurt Loder: “Kurt Cobain, the leader of one of rock’s most gifted and promising bands, Nirvana, is dead and this is the story as we know it so far . . .”]* and that intense Britpop phase in college *[music: “Crazy Beat” by Blur; Damon Albarn sings “They think you’re clever/Cos you’ve blown up your lungs/But I love to hear that crazy beat (yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah)”;* accompanied by powerful drums, distorted guitars, and electrifying synth sounds], to 2008—the year I started graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh. This is when I discovered that multimodal composition was a thing, but also that rhetoric and composition scholars were starting to pay more attention to sound in general.

So when I got to teach my first class at Pitt the next year, I immediately wanted to try out an assignment that required audio editing—a very simple “musical literacy narrative.” After taking students through the basics of how to use a digital audio editor, I was walking around the classroom to see if they were getting the hang of it. I went over to a student with his hand raised and asked how it was going. In the most sincere voice, he said: “This feels radical.” It really did. It was 2009. While others in the field were incorporating sound into their pedagogies by that point in time, it felt radical for me and for that student to be composing with sound in a writing course—even though neither one of us really knew what we were doing.

[Music: “Happy Soul” by Daniel Johnston; Johnston sings, “I got a mind blowing philosophy/I don’t know exactly what it is” to a simple, raw rock rhythm on the electric guitar; music then fades into an exaggerated, cartoonish fast forward sound.]

Here we are, more than a decade later, and teaching with sound no longer feels radical. In fact, it’s now commonplace—a standard feature of multimodal composition courses. And that’s a good thing. The eclectic range of topics taken up in this collection—soundscapes, voice, hip-hop pedagogy, remix, audio tours, oral histories, archives, listening, access, and more—is a testament to the health and continual growth of sonic work in writing and rhetoric, and in related fields. *Soundwriting*, a concept popularized by the editors of this collection, has become not only accepted, but embraced. We now have the freedom to experiment—to keep pushing the limits of what we can teach and do with sound in the classroom.

[Music: “Brown” by John Oswald; a high energy remix featuring James Brown songs and a range of hip-hop and soul samples.]

Amplifying Soundwriting asks us to turn up the volume and listen to authors who are invested in spreading their bold and dynamic approaches to sonic pedagogy. Relying on both theory and praxis, the authors in this collection offer innovative ways to challenge teachers and students to engage and compose with sound. They invite us to interact with the sonic world in more attuned, expansive, and full-bodied ways.

This collection reverberates with pedagogical potential. The question is, are you ready to listen?

[Toddler Steph: “Nah, I wanna just listen.” “Nah, I wanna just listen.”
“Nah, I wanna just listen.”.]

Note

All sound and music clips not included in the references list are from the Ceraso family cassette tape, First Tape December 1984.

References

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