

# Chapter 15: Toward a Feminist Sonic Pedagogy: Research as Listening

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## 5. Episode 5: Archives by Abby, Carly, and Emily

For their archival research method, Carly, Emily, and Abby discover that Grunenwald's story stretches across decades, and they begin to really wonder why the UW campus is so obsessed with the legend.

### Transcript

*[intro music, then fades into background: "Come to Me" by Lily & Madeline]*

**Emily:** Hey, everyone, and welcome back to "Substratum," our week-by-week mystery podcast. This is Emily, and I'm with my colleagues Carly and Abby. We're still unraveling the mystery of Robert Grunenwald, otherwise known as Tunnel Bob.

**Abby:** Last week, we took matters into our own hands by making our own observations at Union South and College library, both of which are known to be places Robert frequents. We were able to get both firsthand observations of how Robert behaves and people watches while also putting ourselves in the shoes of our fellow students who may see him about.

**Carly:** What we concluded is that Robert really doesn't act in any strange or attention-grabbing ways and because of this, it's unlikely that people notice him every time he goes somewhere. This made us wonder, if he minds his own business and blends in so well, why are people so intrigued by him? And why has his legend continued for over 30 years? Is it really just because of the stories about him in the tunnels?

**Emily:** In order to further investigate his story, we went to the UW Archives to better understand how generations before us perceived and talked about Robert. This episode will focus on what we found.

**Abby:** At first, we didn't really think we'd find anything specific to Robert or our podcast. But we were pleasantly surprised. We found articles written about the steam tunnels and their long history at the university. Professor of Steam and Gas Engineering Gustus L. Larson and Chief Operating Engineer of the Heating Plant John J. Novotny laid out the basics of the steam tunnel heating system for the school in May of 1923. At the time, a central heating system located on University Avenue was used to heat the entire school, which consisted of 113 buildings. This system was using a high horsepower boiling system and burning over 20,000 tons of coal per year. Although the engineering and size of the heating system is different today, the same attitude is still seen towards the tunnels. No one really cares. Everyone thinks it's a creepy underground system that we should take no part in. Even in 1923, the authors of this article stated the main purpose was to show students, who either don't know about or don't care about the tunnel systems, the importance of it.

**Carly:** Like that article from 1923, Eileen Gilligan wrote an article about the steam tunnels almost a century later on December 8, 1999. But she describes it a little differently than the engineers did. First of all, she titled her article, "UW Underground: A Subterranean Campus Snakes Beneath Your Feet," implying the sinister nature of the tunnels themselves. She later describes the tunnel system as comparable to hell because of its darkness and incredible heat. Gilligan even mentions the presence of Tunnel Bob,

which is one of the first times he's actually mentioned in an official piece of writing published at the university. She describes him as a "human denizen of the deep passages" and goes on to talk about the dangers of the tunnels and how they could cook a human being. With all of her colorful language, this author implies to her audience that Robert is some sort of superhuman for withstanding this hell, and in some way, she instills fear of both the tunnels and Robert.

**Emily:** However, some less vibrant historical records of "Tunnel Bob" paint a picture that's not quite as different from what we know today. In UW–Madison's 1993 yearbook, Jim Roeber, an administrative assistant of the Department of Planning and Construction, said Robert likes to spend his time down in the tunnels and leave notes for the maintenance workers: "as if he's doing them a favor." However, that's about where the similarity to modern day "Tunnel Bob" ends. In this yearbook article, Robert is described as more of a myth than he is today. A sighting of "Tunnel Bob" was very rare, and students even admitted that they weren't sure what he looked like. It seems Robert didn't spend as much time out in public during this era, or if he did, he was incredibly inconspicuous. Additionally, back in 1993, it was commonly assumed that Robert actually lived in the tunnels, getting "free rent" as it were. Today, we know this is false since the tunnels are actually extremely dangerous and uninhabitable. All in all, as the years have gone on, the student body's impressions of Robert have shifted from seeing him as an eerie mythical being to realizing he's a real person with a unique fascination.

**Carly:** The culture of Madison is highly revered among city-dwellers and students. In 1989, student author Tim Roberts wrote about this in the yearbook. In his article, "Familiar Faces," he talks about the infamous people who hang around State Street, like that guitar player who sounds like James Taylor, Sister Pat, Scanner Dan, other upcoming artists, religious yellers, Hare Krishna, and "Bible-bangers." Although these people aren't famous or actually contribute to student success at all, they contribute to the culture of Madison. These are the faces you'll remember ten years after you graduate.

**Abby:** This article had the biggest impact on me. Although it didn't specifically mention Tunnel Bob, it mentioned others just as notorious as him on campus. This goes back to the question of "why are we so obsessed with him?" Maybe, based on this article, we are because that's the way it's always been. For generations, "Tunnel Bob" has been a name we like to associate with the creepy underground system, and we never stop to think how or why this came about.

**Emily:** Overall, the archives really showed us that over time, Robert Grunenwald has morphed into a semi-fictitious character named Tunnel Bob. Students and community members like to have something to talk about. They didn't know or care much about the steam tunnel system and its importance, but when they learned that a guy likes to spend time down there, it suddenly became so much more interesting.

**Carly:** After all of this investigating, interviewing, and researching, we may have a better idea of what Robert is like and how students, locals, and maintenance workers perceive him. However, we are still unsure about exactly why his legend has remained so prominent throughout the past 30 years on UW–Madison's campus. What is it about him, or us, that keeps students and others so interested in his story? Why do we make things up about him and paint a picture that is far from who he actually seems to be? Are there other individuals on campus that we celebritize due to their eccentricity? We will reflect on these questions and more in next week's episode.

[*outro music*]