

EXTRA> A few words on Don Joyce

Words by Jon Leidecker



[Don Joyce, 1944, 2015]

Don Joyce: unpause, repause

Don Joyce lived in a second story flat off Telegraph Avenue in what is now the increasingly gentrified Temescal district in Oakland, but when I visited the Negativland home studio for the first time in July of 1987, after nightfall you had to watch yourself on the way from your car to the front door. I was there to drop off source materials and discuss the theme for the coming week's episode of *Over The Edge*, which, after two years of avid fandom, I had finally been invited to play. Don still had his programming day job at that point, and I discovered him in his room tinkering with the code for a primitive typing tutor program on his Mac SE with his left hand, while his right hand hovered near a cassette deck set to record a talk radio station. While talking to me and coding with one hand, at seemingly random moments he would unpause or repause the recording with the other. It took a few moments to realize that he was precisely waiting for silences in the conversation, while making sure that the show's host and his callers still alternated in sequence. The resulting tape would still sound as if it were a conversation; it just wouldn't be even remotely close to the one that had actually happened.

This approach to multi-tasking wouldn't have been a surprise to anyone who's heard *Over The Edge*, which I'd channel surfed into at 12:30 in the morning two years before; at first I'd assumed I'd hit one of those magic nodes on the analog dial where two stations were coming in clearly at the same time, and paused to enjoy the accident. The slow rush of recognition came on over the next twenty seconds as I realized it was actually five to ten things at once: talk radio recordings and TV advertisements cut in with each other and twisted into dialogues, while loosely played, audibly live guitars and keyboards mingled with fragments of canned pop and soundtrack albums. Only when the sound of a disconnecting line terminated the guitar riff did I make that final connection: a number of the lower fidelity instruments and tapes were being contributed by live phone callers. I stayed up until the show ended at three, that night and many nights to come.

My nascent record collection had already skewed electronic by that point in my teenaged life – the most interesting music, by definition, seemed to be something that could only be composed within the confines of a studio. Concert sound seemed like a pale shadow, or a pantomime where all the interesting sounds only existed on canned backing tracks – what was live music even supposed to sound like at this point in history? The answer was suddenly obvious – you make music, live, out of pre-recordings, treating no one source as final, hearing any single moment of recorded sound not as a fixed object but rather always as potential for a new moment of live music. Music is not an object, it always happens live on playback, and the show made this obvious by showing just how deeply one could get involved. This show was the moment when I stopped relating to music as the sum total of my record collection and I began relating to it as something that could be made in real time by people: Don, every week, sometimes joined by Negativland, Fake Stone Age, King's House, Ronald Redball, Babs Bendix, The Professor, People Like Us, and an endless cast of receptacle callers: Sasquatch, Mr. Oogie, Rocky, Phineas Narco, Metallurgy, Suicide Man, and countless others.

I never got around to formally studying music; there was only playing on the show. All the instruction I needed was right there in the studio headphones. The radio audience remains hypothetical, but I knew by definition the right people were listening; anyone else had the option of tuning out. Going back to the tapes, I know how exactly annoying I was at that age, but Don never assumed the role of a mentor, he just chimed in with what he knew. There'd usually be a smoke break around 1:45am with the occasional golden aside: 'The trick is to keep coming up with new ways to make mistakes! It gets harder and harder to keep yourself confused enough to make anything worth listening to the next day.' Or: 'Never confuse satisfaction with success! That first hour was way too much fun to be listenable.' Sure enough; the final hour was often the best.

His life was pretty much his work. By the early nineties, the day job had been jettisoned, and the show became a full time effort that nothing else could compete with. There was the occasional relationship with an amazing woman, but



[Negativland]

that was not going to be the path. Even food; I think he timed his grocery shopping to happen on the drive back from KPFA to minimize the number of hours away from his equipment. I'd play the show a certain number of times a year, and shared some wonderful concerts with him over the years; always surreal to spend time with the guy in a public setting. But most of my most personal memories of him are also strangely public; I've got them on cassette – they were broadcast. And this is not the time to sum them up. The size of the archive is overwhelming, but listening to all of it is never the point – any given five minutes shows you the lifetime's practice, hands out an inspiration to anyone who needs one. It's harder to describe the show now in the age of the internet; as much as having twelve browsers open at a time feels like a similar kind of multitasking, we seldom use these tools to practice our lives as a work of art in the way that he proved any one of us can.

I drove him to the emergency room when his breathing became a problem and we spent about three hours talking about future concerts and radio shows while they found him a room. So much left to do! He didn't feel up to traveling with Negativland for tours, but he definitely wanted to play local shows, and he had ideas. And when I reminded him that he had collapsed, backstage, moments after we'd finished a concert we'd played together in 2012, overwhelmed... He admitted that if he was about to go, it'd been an amazing life that had gone much further than he'd ever imagined. He started out a painter, and then out of nowhere, this whole music thing – it'd really turned out! He also wanted me to know: he wouldn't take back a single cigarette. Every one delicious. So much pleasure.

In other words, no regrets. Such a relief for anyone who sometimes feels exhausted about the energy demanded by this level of focus, or who at moments begins to long for the familiar signposts of a traditional life. Take it to any degree you feel comfortable with, as you visit to the archives, or make your own weird new combines, or encounter any of the other odd people who might have been listening in isolation, but whom this show eventually brought together in real life. The recordings are one thing, and it's good that they're there, but what are you going to do with them on any given week? Might as well be something; it'll be the right move.

The work you started is not ending anytime soon, Mr. Edge, though it will not be the same without you. Thank you for the inspiration.

Jon Leidecker, August 2015

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