

Dead Air Alive is a recording of my sound installation which was featured at The Dalhousie Art Gallery in Halifax NS Canada December 6 to 22, 2002. This is the third piece in a series on sound transmission via radio.

Part one was performed live Tuesday August 27, 2002 from 8 - 9pm Atlantic Standard Time on 88.5FM, a low power station operating for one hour per week by Stephen Kelly and Eleanor King from August through December in the North End (our vibrant arts community) of Halifax. My performance consisted of manipulated radio static and snatches of some of my favorite early jazz recordings on Verve Records. There was no sequencing or preplanning involved in this untitled piece and the live-to-air broadcast was not recorded.

Part two involved extensive planning. The concept was to have the listener hear what sounded like a radio show that had aired on November 3, 1949, or, better yet, to have it sound as if a show was coming through time from the past and airing in the present. Charles Hsuen, a local jazz historian and radio programmer, worked with my idea and came up with a mock program that was authentic in every detail--complete with his voiceovers introducing the songs, sponsorship messages he produced ("The Make Believe Ballroom Hour is brought to you by Chester brand cigarettes; Chester brand--the cigarette for every American" was just one example), and music he compiled from Glen Miller, Danny Kaye, Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, and others that would have been played on such a program airing on November 3, 1949. On November 3, 2002 I performed the piece; the program that was put together was manipulated live on 88.5FM from 8 - 9pm in such a way that it sounded like a show from the past was bleeding through time and bits of it were being heard 53 years later. This piece was entitled Make Believe Ballroom Hour and was installed at The Khyber Centre For The Arts in Halifax.

Part three is Dead Air Alive; it continues the exploration of sound transmission and radio, taking the exploration of the concept to a more microscopic level. Dead Air Alive is an exploration of my personal (as a listener) and professional (as a person whose former dayjob involved radio) feelings toward radio. From when I was young and first began listening to the radio, I have found comfort in the sounds of the space between the stations on the radio--the ebb and flow of frequencies that were not being used by radio stations that express more and more detail the longer you listen. As Program Director at CKDU (April 2000 to November 2003), the campus/community radio station here in Halifax, my job was to ensure there was a trained person on air broadcasting 24 hours a day 7 days a week 365 days a year. A lack of broadcast is called "dead air", a term which I personally consider an oxymoron as the airwaves contain much content even when there is no intended broadcast happening. Commercial radio strives to fill up every second with bombast; there is an unspoken fear of "dead air". (To take away the relation to radio, the same concept can be used for those that fear silence. Microsound is likely loathed by those who need sound to soothe their anxiety; those of us who do not have this fear can revel in the details of silence and minute material). At CKDU, I tried to instill in the programmers the notion that we can have a flow from one song to the next without having to be anxious when the extro from one song doesn't slip neatly into the intro for the next. "Dead air" was not something I wanted them to be stressed about (for example, if the programmer had a song run out and doesn't have the next one ready)—as humans, we shouldn't feel a need to fill the silence 100% of the time. A few seconds of non-broadcast on CKDU, I told them, was not cause for alarm; actually, it is almost natural. Personally, on my weekly radio show, I regularly got calls from people seriously concerned that CKDU was off the air, the transmitter was broken, the record or CD was skipping, or something was wrong with their radio. Despite CKDU being an alternative to commercial and public radio, and even though it features avant garde and experimental material not heard elsewhere, some listeners are still so accustomed to the bombast of constant loud sound that they instantly assume a lack of sound, or sound at a minimal volume, must be a mistake that should not be happening. And despite the fact that my show had been airing since 1987, the calls seemed to be increasing in frequency. Where it would make sense if they were to decrease (due to listeners becoming used to the type of material I played), I assume they were increasing in relation to the fact that society as a whole is becoming louder and more dense with noise pollution.

Dead Air Alive plays with the above concepts by manipulating the Make Believe Ballroom Hour installation and shining a light (er, speaker) on the minute details that are missed by those expecting to have their preconceptions satisfied in terms of sound transmission on radio and, for that matter, sound in general. Though the source is the original 60 minute jazz program Charles Hsuen compiled, the result is that the source becomes invisible and what is left is its essence. To continue the theme of the pieces being first broadcast on the radio, Dead Air Alive was broadcast in full on CKDU 97.5 FM (Halifax) on November 19, 2002.