“Electric Boogaloo”

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My employer is clear: There is no expectation that my labor in the academy engage with research or writing or publishing—ever. I am a senior lecturer, a fancy teacher, with all the glamour those words and that rank entails. Lest I come across as an ingrate, I should acknowledge here that my department nonetheless had provided enough travel money this year to make my trip to Denver to present at SCMS merely onerous. I should also include that as someone who has been around the block and has a fiscal safety net/tenured partner, I am less trepidatious about asking for funding than my fellow adjuncts. I don’t give a fuck, I’m kind of stuck and I can be charming. That said, my quixotic, persistent engagement with my field in no way counts positively in terms of the metrics of overwork and bait and switch, along with sexism, that measure contingent class labor.

So, thank you, SCMS, for this call to “give space and voice to those who do not have the time or attention to write full-length articles.” I do hope that, maybe, like municipalities’ sudden ability to house people experiencing homelessness during COVID, on the far side of our current moment the fortunate in the academy can continue to recognize people producing scholarship in formats/conditions the academy usually deems less than. Sounds cool to me.

I could tell you here about how lecturing via Instagram stories this spring was straight fire, well received by the film studies survey students from whom I’d solicited assent back when we still met in person. Or I could talk about how I continued to use Canvas post pivot but safeguarded my intellectual property by removing much of our work from proprietary university systems.

We checked in a lot as a community, including about some of the conditions mentioned in the CFP: Are you ill? Are you taking care of someone else? Can you pay bills? Are you food insecure? Are you emotionally and physically safe? (I have graphs and charts that capture spring semester data in real time.) In that context, I want to pause a moment on the "parents and caregivers" CFP framing, which valorizes the difficulties of performing certain visible kinds of natalistic labor. Please, don't. Not unless other unpartnered/wide-ranging precarity and mental illness are acknowledged as equally relevant impediments.

Cut that four-paragraph tl;dr preamble if you like. Today, I want to talk about radio. And I want to do so not clad in the language of academia, which is the equivalent of wearing a nice shirt for a Zoom meeting—seemingly presentable but dishonest. Ready?

Since, I wanna say, the third week of March-ish, Monday through Friday at 10 a.m., I have tuned into a "homebound freeform radio" station emanating from the Watertown, Mass., basement of one T.J. Connelly, who in the before times was DJ for the Red Sox, Patriots, Bruins and, this year, was to DJ the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Which is to say he's epically unemployed.

Here are some things to know about Uncertain Times a.k.a. uncertain.fm/live: It is not a pirate radio station. (It may, however, be a privateer radio station.) There is a Patreon intended to pay off the ASCAPs and BMIs, etc., of our broken copyright system so artists get paid/the IP kapos don't one day kick down TJ's door. And subsidizing some 1369 iced coffee might be nice, too.

The shows usually run between two and three hours in length and are rebroadcast at 2 p.m. eastern for the west coast crowd or those otherwise entangled in zoom calls. Cuss words are eschewed for the most part—whatever might spare a spread-thin parent from a conversation they hadn't banked on. There is a resolute commitment to not getting bogged

down in the latest atrocity in that particular day's news cycle, which isn't to say there aren't some pointed song choices. The pandemic is represented by its absence on air. Similarly, deaths of musicians—COVID related or otherwise—are noted obliquely by playing their work in lieu of performative kvelling.

Otherwise, figure on a Gen X start point musically and know that T.J. fields a lot of young professional athletes' musical tastes. Some days, there are themes: walkup Wednesdays, songs on Bandcamp you could buy Juneteenth to benefit BLM. There have been a few Saturday night shows and Facebook Live forays. Fridays have naturally d/evolved into Big Stupid Dance Parties. There may even be chair dancing! Or more Oingo Boingo than you'd realized was out there. Ultimately, NOBODY KNOWS WHAT THEY'RE DOING, AND THAT'S OK.

It's always good. Here's why: Tucked away behind the music and the Patreon and the intrepid DJ's twitter (@senatorjohn) chatter is a Slack channel. The interface is beyond bare bones. Yet each weekday, people across time zones start clocking in around 10 eastern to engage in glancing or wide-ranging conversations, about a song or coding deep dives or Shania Twain, peppered with GeoCities-level GIFs or custom emojis that group members have created. Our intrepid privateer, TJ, whose partner is a nurse practitioner serving people experiencing homelessness in the midst of the pandemic, starts a little late on Wednesdays because he has therapy right before. Friends and strangers check on one another. It's the damnedest thing: a time travel portal to the internet circa 2003—a realm of in-jokes and commiseration and compassion long since erased by trolls and septic comments sections.

Thank you for the CFP, as a reminder of the ephemeral nature of media in these Uncertain Times and our responsibility to remark upon and preserve it for future scholars. Tune in. Be well.