



Ella Finer & Urok Shirhan: Companion Sounds

[00:00:23] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello and welcome to the Salon! Our guests today are Ella Finer and Urok Shirhan.

Ella Finer's work in sound and performance spans writing, composing and curating. Her practice reflects a particular interest in women's voices, space and the hegemonic order of privilege. Her research continuously queries the ownership of cultural expression through sound, which informs her lectures, performances, and events, including recent works in progress *Burning House/Burning Horse* for Almanac Productions, and *The Silent Whale and The Mute Swan*, with Vibeke Mascini. Ella is the author of the book *Acoustic Commons and the Wild Life of Sound* (Errant Bodies, Berlin), and the recently published essays 'Feminism and Sound' and 'Listening in Uncommon Times'.

Urok Shirhan's work – situated at the intersection of performance, visual arts and critical theory – explores the politics of sound, image and speech in relation to power and affect. Her projects are often entangled with found materials and narratives informed by her biography and family history of political migrations. Urok holds an MA (Hons) in Visual Cultures from Goldsmiths College, University of London, and is currently a Research Fellow at BAK in Utrecht, Netherlands. She has been an artist in residence at the Delfina Foundation in London and has held fellowships at the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) in Amsterdam, Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, and Ashkal Alwan in Beirut, Lebanon.

Urok Shirhan and Ella Finer met in Athens in January 2020 as part of the Theatrum Mundi and Onassis Stegi project The City Talks Back. Given their shared interest in the intersections of voice, culture and agency through radio, performance and music, for this Salon Ella and Urok engage in sounding out the medium of Zoom, and its move from conference software to broadcast platform. Recalling a recording they made in Athens that is left unplayed, they go on air online to consider instead the dramaturgical decisions that pertain to the ethics of usage: what is right and what is necessary to bring back into a live transmission.

This conversation took place on Zoom on 16th June 2020, between London and Utrecht.

[00:03:00] SALON

Urok Shirhan: 'This meeting is being recorded.'

Ella Finer: 'By continuing to be in the meeting, you are consenting to be recorded.' 'Leave meeting' – no, I'm joking.

US: Leave immediately! So we're here. We're live!

EF: We are! So here we are, live in Zoom again.

US: Here we are live on Zoom. This week on: Live on Zoom.

EF: I know. I actually think that you are the person that I have spoken to most on Zoom in this time.

US: Oh really?

EF: In fact, you're my only contact on Zoom.

US: Oh no! [*Laughter*].

EF: I love the fact that you say 'oh no' to that, like that's really sad.

US: No, I don't know. It's like super cute, but also a little bit like – come on, it sounds a little like: 'You're my only friend.'

EF: Yeah. I know. You're my only friend.

US: But also, I mean I have four people on Zoom, and you're the person I also most frequently speak



to – also voluntarily frequently speak to.

EF: Right. Okay.

US: Oh my god!

EF: I know. It feels – but this does – it feels different. So we've gone live, and we decided to really think about what it is to broadcast live in this conversation, even though we've spoken about it so many times before, I think the feeling has shifted in this, because–

US: Definitely!

EF: –speaking out to future you, whoever you are. And also because – I don't know how much you want to speak about the day we've had, getting to this point in relation to a sound cue, but I think it speaks very much to why going live felt like the best thing to do.

US: The most appropriate, yes.

[*Background sounds.*]

EF: The most appropriate.

US: Oh, you know what? I can actually feel the suppressed sound coming through.

EF: Is it my suppressed sound?

US: The formerly known as 'suppressed sound', yes.

EF: So have you got–?

US: I can hear things I couldn't really hear before.

EF: So have I got some background?

US: Yes, there is some background. There is some – there's dimensionality to your sound.

EF: Is it actually perceivable? Can you work out what it is?

US: I could hear backgrounds, like children chatting.

EF: Wow! That's quite amazing! So maybe to give some kind of context to those who are listening, we have had many conversations while on Zoom, about Zoom and about the audio settings of Zoom, and Urok has become something of an expert on Zoom audio. And the kind of strange didactic language that Zoom uses in its settings for audio, such as suppressing sound 'aggressively', and using 'intelligent learning' to work out what to blank out of the excessive sounds.

US: 'Deep learning.'

EF: Deep learning. What did I call it?

US: Oh my god, I instantly forgot.

EF: You're not listening to me!

US: No, but I knew that it wasn't that – I knew that I was–

EF: I'm joking. Yeah.

US: Like – intelligent learning? I don't know.

EF: Intelligent – oh yeah, that's it.

US: We have two moments of sound that we are sharing with each other. We haven't yet decided who's going to go when, and with that, who's going to go first.

EF: Or we go at the same time?

US: We go at the same time? But what if one overpowers the other?

EF: Then maybe that's the risk that we have to take.

US: I didn't know we were going to go at the same time.

EF: Well, I didn't know we were going to go one after the other, but I think this is–

US: Are we doing it? Oh my god! That's the best! This is great!

EF: Yeah, I think this speaks to what we've been asked to converse about, which is what is this task



of thinking of sound dramaturgically, and we're doing it in the live.

US: Okay, I'm finding it's actually quite interesting because this speaks to a couple of things. One of them is again, something related somewhat to Zoom or the experience of Zoom, and observing your experience of Zoom as well, which has to do with this suppressing of the background noises. So I've been in a few conversations where there were several people and you included wherein you would be speaking and at some point, like mid-sentence, you would kind of stop, and be searching, and wonder like, just ask like where the sound is, or like where – like, basically, you would say like: 'I just feel like I'm alone in a room, speaking', because of not having any kind of background noise. And obviously, like – so, even when people are not muted, self-muting their microphones – there is the suppression of the sound, which is what you were experiencing. But I'm also just thinking about now that we're considering this simultaneous live background noise – and I'm hearing some of it [*sounds of children shouting*] – or like sharing some of–

[*Laughter.*]

EF: I told them to be quiet.

US: Well, maybe this is quiet to them. But this kind of sharing sound simultaneously and what does that sound like, and what if one overpowers the other? It suddenly is dawning on me how in a way, we've become also used to this muting, self-muting, so that we only ever experience one sound at a time. Whenever anyone is speaking, there is this automatically suppressed background sound. So it's only this voice. Only when voice is produced, that's what gets re-produced by Zoom – I guess I don't know if I have more to say about that at this point, but this kind of like sounds not being able to cross, and just too much information kind of being literally and figuratively suppressed.

EF: Yeah. Well, I was thinking in relation to that, that it's just not a broadcast medium, Zoom. And actually, it really kind of betrays the fact that it's made for conferencing, and for the one voice to speak, not for collective, you know, babble, conversation or chaos, or crowds, but actually, something that's about the singular voice, making their point. And even these functions, like the hand up, et cetera, it kind of shapes a conversation in a really particular way. So I think part of being asked to do this on Zoom, I think we both felt [*sound of door closing*] – like, for example, did you hear that door?

US: Yeah.

EF: Yeah, so, that wasn't suppressed by the excellent machine learning of Zoom. But you know, there was something about the kind of messiness of Zoom – like, what actually kind of breaks the system – that I found really interesting in thinking about dramaturgies of sound, and in relation to our ongoing conversations about liveness, and actually what that has meant in this time. We've spoken about this a lot, but also this very particular moment, you've identified something in it about a shift in how people are now attending to live sound. For example, live radio, which is what a lot of your work is about and focuses on, and you've identified things are changing – it's not a coincidence that lockdowns are being lifted. What is this condition of listening now, collectively, for us all? And so thinking about Zoom not as a broadcast medium, I think it's actually interesting, because it means people choose who they gather with. And the fact that it's being used for galleries and talks and stuff, and there've been Zoom bombers and everything, the system's obviously had to adapt, hasn't it? It's had to adapt to being a broadcast medium.

US: Yeah, I always forget about these Zoom bombers!

EF: Oh, they were so two months ago.

US: I constantly keep forgetting about this phenomenon. That's a whole other thing, it's hijacking.

EF: Imagine if we got Zoom-bombed now.

US: It would just be crazy!

EF: Well, in some ways, my kids are doing that from the other room.

US: Oh, but bless them! [*Laughter.*]

EF: Bless them. I mean this – shall we talk about how we got to this point of really focusing back on our interest in the live and the medium? And the medium as broadcast, medium as radio, as kind of living through listening in this time, because we got here kind of by accident I guess in a way, by



accident on purpose.

US: Today?

EF: Today, yes.

US: Yeah. Shall we?

EF: Yeah. I think—

US: We can do that. We can do it the other way around – we can start with our sounds.

EF: Yeah. Shall we – do you want to do it at the same time?

US: Yeah, let's do it at the same time.

EF: We can try it.

US: Yeah, let's do that. Okay.

EF: So – okay.

US: So here we go.

[00:12:50 to 00:13:40] Ambient sound from a London flat and Radio Alhara

EF: That's me. Could you hear me?

US: Yeah.

EF: Could you hear my sounds?

US: Yeah. Can you still hear mine?

[00:13:40 to 00:14:14] Radio Alhara

EF: Yeah, but that was – I can still hear yours.

US: Shall we come back?

EF: Shall we come back?

US: Let's do it.

EF: That was really interesting, because it was a bit like the version of you saying about me freaking out in sonically-clean rooms, empty rooms – because I could only hear you. It was like reversal, I could only hear your soundscape, and mine was kind of absented.

US: But that's why I was so surprised, like: 'Oh, we're doing at the same time!' I mean I could kind of imagine, knowing what I was going to do, that mine would overpower something else. Or disrupt, or kind of mask something else.

EF: But we don't know how it sounds.

US: I mean, I could still hear you, but also – yeah, I could still hear like some background noise on this end.

EF: That's interesting, because I couldn't hear anything of mine. Okay, so we also do not know how those two together sound, because we're in Zoom. So we don't know how they sound together. Only those who are listening do. So these are, what? Kind of sonic environments of being strangely at home in this time, this kind of constant sonic worlds. And if it wasn't obvious, Urok, you were playing the radio station that has—

US: –changed my life.

EF: Exactly! And it's been there with you this whole time, you've been in it, you've been in it, listening this whole—

US: Completely in it, yes. I was just thinking that in both our cases, these were live sounds, like little sound bites, that in both cases we wouldn't know precisely what was going to be on. You know, in your case, there was this loud siren, but you know just now it happened to be quiet or a motorcycle passed. And in my case, it was a song that sounded like a gospel song that was just finishing. Then we heard two of the radio jingles, which I thought was a nice little moment of like the radio making itself known to all, to our listeners, basically. So we both actively tuned into – I was thinking that in your case, maybe it's background noise, or I don't know if we can say background noise and



background sound. We can differentiate – I don't know if it's important to do so.

EF: I could have just played just me, sitting here, and you'd have heard people screaming in the background. There's something about a sound that becomes so much a constant of this time, because I've been at home for so long, which is – I don't know if you heard them but skateboarders, because there's a skate park just over there, so the sounds of like clicking, clicking boards and rolling wheels, which you can hear so loud – the sound of the motorbikes, the sound of the siren. And it just being there, constant, like a low constant hum that I tune in and out of a bit. And I guess I'm thinking, because you said about playing the radio, like actually what if you came into my space now as a caller, that's also what you might get: windows open, that sound in the space. And also getting you listening to this very particular radio station, so it's mostly about the constant. It's about the kind of low constant, almost companion sound which we've been listening to.

US: Yeah. I think 'companion sound', that sounds nice.

EF: 'Companion sound'.

US: It kind of covers a large area.

EF: I think this maybe is useful time to relate it to the story of getting here, because this is also a story of liveness in a very particular time, of live sound playing out and through a time which we all know is a time of the pandemic and also now, in recent weeks, a time of mass protests. And when we met for the second time, we were in Greece, and this is when Greece locked down, in the time that we met for the second time.

US: Yes.

EF: And we actually happened to be recording when the alert went out – so audio recording the moment in which the alert went out to say: 'Everyone now stay at home.'

US: Yes, this is the national alert that goes to all phones actually in the country. So it had gone off on my phone even, even though I have a Dutch phone subscription.

EF: I think the reason why also we might – if people can't see us – why we might be also looking at each other almost stunned by the remembrance of this time, because it was stunning. And listening to the recording it feels very affecting, and odd, and also tender, because it's with people who we'd only met – well, that one person, who would we'd only first met that night, and who very generously said: 'Yeah, you can record this whole evening.' Three hours of recording or something, and in the middle, this alarm. And actually this was when we were invited to have this conversation, this immediately was the sonic cue that I think we shared as an audio piece that would both anchor and mark a certain time and date – date a recording but also date us in that space, and also speak to what this time is now, you know, as lockdown lifts. This kind of arc in a sense. And then today we've had this day reworking our way through the use of this recording, through the ethics of using recorded sound out of context and out of time. And also, given our recent conversation about the feeling about the ways that listening is shifting, it felt then really not right to play that recording here.

US: Out of its initial sort of properties, its time, like the context and the other conversation partners. I'm not sure if it's about 'right', like, they 'didn't feel necessarily right'. Maybe we were also already feeling like maybe it's not necessary? I mean, obviously the sound itself is profound. The fact that we even have a recording of it is bizarre. It is so bizarre that we have this moment. We have the before – we have this moment, this marker, the sonic marker – and then we have the after, in which sounds and 'life', between quotes, goes on, except it is now – I mean, we know it is forever changed. And we have that moment in which sonically we can hear when that moment happened in time. We knew in that moment that this was – I mean, it was also frightening and it was disturbing as a sound, like as something that was coming out. And as we were like having this completely other mode and listening to all kinds of like music, and having conversations, and then this outside – this message from the state ringing the alarm, the state alarm, the alert to all, everybody's phones, and also knowing that this is the sound that everyone in the country is hearing or overhearing from someone nearby with the alert saying: 'Emergency: this has now happened.' In other words, life as you know it is suspended for the time being. So it's bizarre that we even have a record of that, but to convey that or to share that with people who were not present, maybe hearing it might not necessarily be – at least, not the only way.



EF: Well, that brings up such interesting things about how also we might want people to hear a certain – or expect, or assume people might hear a certain sound, and actually it just not falling, not registering it, it being in a different frequency for some people. And I think actually just to go back to the point you make at the beginning of considering why we're not using this file, the kind of missing sound in all this and saying it wasn't perhaps necessary and me saying 'it didn't feel right', and thinking about these as almost dramaturgical decisions for a sonic environment that we're making now. So it doesn't feel necessary now, because we're thinking about who's listening and the places, perhaps, that they are now. And also they're not listening now, they're listening – 'Hello, in two months or three months', you know? 'Hello in September 2020, what are you?' And so, it's really thinking forward about what also might land differently then. And then to bring it back to rights, because it's something we've talked about – about copyright, and about, you know, for whom these decisions are made – I've just been told my internet connection is unstable.

US: Oh, by Zoom? Zoom, leave us alone, god!

EF: By Zoom. I know, it's the ghost in the machine. It's the voice, the dramaturgical voice, coming out of Zoom. So to think about for whom are we making such decisions of speaking on behalf of this recording. And the fact we had two other people in the room as well, as you mentioned. I think these two questions are really – I think they point to so much else–

[Silence.]

US: Oh, you're frozen. You are frozen. No?

EF: Okay. I mean, there you go!

US: Okay, you were saying – wait, you were saying?

EF: I was saying about accountability, and then Zoom decided to vomit me out.

US: Are you are you happy, Zoom? Did you just hear that? Yeah. Yes, we're talking about you, entity.

EF: Because this is something we have been talking about in the live, isn't it? And the kind of the, you know, how actually in your listening to the radio station, for example, because it's all happening in domestic space, kind of DIY space, you hear a lot of what happens behind the scenes.

US: Yes, yes, precisely, these precious – I've been calling these moments very precious – yeah, I guess, certain activities or things that one normally doesn't hear. Not on the radio, not in events – maybe in just like some cases, like things that would be considered mistakes or... And again this – it's actually, what we're talking about – about the background sound. Like, it's usually suppressed or we've learned to like clean it up, clean up the recording, use the little pop screen, let's not have this kind of additional stuff. And I mean there are good reasons for that often, but a lot has been lost so that we haven't been able to hear these unpolished sounds or situations. And I guess Radio Alhara – this is like my main companion, my sonic companion and I guess otherwise companion in general throughout this lockdown – came to life on 20th March, I checked this recently, 20th March, and along with several other online kind of ad hoc radio stations. I do believe it's one of the few that have actually survived up until today or that are still running, that let's say are also still powering through with lots of energy, and still like some really amazing programming, and a vibrant kind of community that they've been able to power through the easing up of the lockdowns. So from what I gather, a bunch of other radio stations that also came to life in the Middle East in this same time, a lot of them actually stopped broadcasting in the past week, or maybe two or three weeks ago, let's say, end of May, when the very strict lockdowns that had been imposed throughout the Middle East were lifted. So you have this quite, as I was saying to you the other day, a more strict experience than like you in London and me in the Netherlands have experienced in terms of measures being taken. And I have something else I wanted to say about the lockdown – but yeah, so that's Radio Alhara, and it has somehow captivated so many, so many different people. I think also through very much this live and aliveness, and this is also why it's been this true companion, and very, very quickly became also a source of wonder and of activation of so many different questions, and – yeah different questions and understandings of listening, of sound, of listening together, of tuning in, of what constitutes live, what makes live feel live versus – sometimes things are live but they don't have that quality. Oh my god, have you frozen?



[Silence.]

US: Oh no! You weren't – oh no, you weren't listening, were you? Oh dear!

EF: Hello, old friend.

US: Hello!

EF: So I was just saying, blackout is happening, is upon me, because I keep – my internet connection is unstable, so–

US: I mean, usually, it happens to me, actually. I'm the one getting the notification. I had to instruct – I opened the door of the closet where the modem is, I had to ask for people to just like – well, people being my parents – like: 'Please don't you – don't like play lots of videos maybe, just for like an hour!' Like, just so that we don't over – kind of, yeah.

EF: Your parents, my children: 'Get off the internet!' But this is why I was saying–

US: Oh my god, that is so funny!

EF: –everyone's on the internet. Everything online! As I just said in the break, this is not a broadcast medium. So it's going to happen, and all this 'Can you hear me?', that you said at the beginning. Like now, people, are: 'You okay? Can you? Yeah? You can hear me. Can you see me?'

US: 'Am I frozen?'

EF: It's just a whole new world. So when I left you, you were talking about–

US: I was – oh, right, I was saying how like all these questions around sound, around tuning in, around liveness, and around what makes 'live', anything – live event, live gathering, live broadcast feel live or alive. Right? So there are factors. So as my interest, and also enjoyment, and kind of wonder around so many aspects of Radio Alhara, sometimes particular programming, sometimes it's the host, or how the host embraced their role as a host, like, as a radio host. These are five friends, like none of them have made radio before. As far as I know, they don't, you know, they don't work on sound-anything specifically. A couple of them are DJs or do work with music, some more than others, but they, like, I think most of – I mean, four of them for sure have different day jobs, let's say, from design to architecture to arts. But none of them have actually done this before. They've organised events, they have a lot of experience in producing events, producing and organising things like running an art space, producing a lecture, things like that, but not radio. And certainly not being hosts in that way, not having that role. So like someone kind of growing into their like role and familiarising themselves with the role of – I mean, hosting, basically like you know, speaking in between some of the programmes, and saying something about what the listeners have just heard, and what might be coming up, and sort of freestyling. And the listeners familiarising themselves with this voice or different voices that may or may not be particularly – how do you call it? – they're not really the usual kinds of voices that you would hear on a radio. I don't know how else to say it. Like, there have been the qualities of certain voices, which – that's a whole other thing – that normally, you don't hear them, like an announcer, you know? Like to some people you say: 'Oh, you have such a great radio voice!' or 'You have like such a great–' And to other people you don't say that. You know what I mean? And like some of the things are wild!

EF: I like that it's something you say.

US: Like, this thing where I even was like: 'Oh, what is this voice? Like, it sounds different, strange. I'm not used to like hearing this!' And also, just like uh-ing a lot, like: 'Uuh', 'So that was a uuuh', 'We just heard uuuh', and at first I was like: 'What? What is going on here? What is this?' And then somehow but very quickly this became such an important part of everything else. Like, yeah, it's live, and it's alive, and there is this kind of labour of love and dedication. And there is curating, there is a lot of care and dedication, and very high quality in terms of the programming or the people that comes through somehow, which has to do with the kinds of people and programming that they attract, and also, select, right? And kind of encourage. So very, very high quality of content. And at the same time this very – I don't know, lo-fi, low-key like streaming from houses, fixing – this was a conversation that we had before, where I sent you a message at some point saying: 'Please, please, please tune in. Can you tune in to the radio right now? It is so precious, they're trying to fix the audio connection live, on air.' It was one of the main guys, Yousef Anastas, who also happens to be one of



the main radio voices, like hosts, who is based in Bethlehem, who was communicating with someone, who goes by the DJ handle Qais London – I think his real name is Matt something – who was in Amman, and they were conversing on air like about: ‘Where is the–? Wait, it’s not– So wait, which one? No. Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now? Hold on, no, no, no. No, the sound is still coming from your speaker. Wait. So which one is it? I can’t see it. It’s input/output.’ These kinds of things. And then, you know, that happens maybe for 30 seconds, and then the music is back on, and it’s, let’s say smooth or whatever, it’s mixed properly and da-da-da and – I’ve rambled for quite a bit.

EF: Yeah. No that’s not rambling. It’s such an amazing moment that I was so glad that you pointed it out to me to listen to, because it made me think about so much radio we do listen to that’s mastered, and that’s cleaned, and who does master our sounds and controls the way that we get selected audio material or edited material, which is something else we’ve been thinking about. And actually, also, there’s something about the kind of attitude or the ethos, that kind of sensibility I guess of this radio station, which is: ‘We’re broadcasting in the continuous. It’s live. If it stops and we’re fixing something, that’s part of the continuum of this time.’ And something that really struck me when you were talking about those who started the station not necessarily coming from sound, I think it’s really – ‘coming from sound’, what on Earth does that mean? But it means – no, no, I know, exactly. I just thought it sounded so ridiculous: ‘I come from sound.’

US: ‘I come from sound. Do you come from sound? Where do you come from?’

EF: Yeah: ‘Pictures.’ So I think it’s really clear, because it’s like they were making a space, in which to meet, and to meet friends, and to meet allies, and to be together, to collect together, and gather together, assemble in a time, when bodies can’t do that in physical proximity. I think we’ve spoken about this before – there is a feeling of being close in the live, and we’re talking about this at a time of course when theatres, where we usually go – well, I mean, you know, where we go, but also, other kinds of performance spaces, galleries, where there’s performance, dance spaces, stand-up comedy, where we go to be in physical relationships – gigs, concerts, music venues, clubs – in physical proximity with each other, gather together with some kind of focus – and it’s happening with us, and we are in it while it is happening. And when we are in the conditions that we are now, where that’s not possible at all, and theatres are dark and have been for so long – these other spaces become even more important, and even more amplify these connections. Of course, Radio Alhara is doing other things as well, and the radio is distinct from theatre. But I think to talk about the live, and what we need from that, or where we feel like we belong in this time in a way, with others, is really interesting, because you’ve talked about the chatroom as another place of belonging, I guess, and being in relation with others. And I also witnessed you doing something extraordinary in another chatroom, on the Sound Camp chatroom, where you also kind of knew the rules of the game of the chatroom.

US: Of the chatroom? Yeah, I have a chatroom history.

EF: Yeah, you knew how to direct it, and I mean then that is really interesting, thinking about the context, in which we’re speaking today, which is oral and aural dramaturgies – you’ve built up this kind of knowledge of actually how you direct traffic in response to communal listening. It’s absolutely fascinating!

US: I’m thinking, I’m processing a lot of what you’re saying and I’m kind of connecting a couple of things, I think. I think I’m doing that in my head. So I’m thinking about this, thinking about theatres, right, or the theatre, or the whatever, the conference, the auditorium, the cinema – I don’t know – like the place that you go with, like, the purpose of not being alone. You can go alone but you won’t be by yourself. You will witness something or hear something or experience something, somehow. You will like attend to something. You attend an event. And it’s only partially about the thing itself, it’s only partially about the film or the concert, the music, how great it is, or that lecture. I mean, some of the lectures are also fine to just listen to later on or, yeah, to listen back to somehow. But you go for something else, you decide to go to the thing for different reasons. Let’s say if it’s a lecture or, I don’t know, a documentary film, for me it’s like I know I need to go in and watch something with other people, or watch it live, and in a way be seen or be visible because I otherwise can’t concentrate. So I need like a kind of – you know what I mean?

EF: Right: you need to be accountable for your listening. Right.



US: Maybe it's a little bit weird, but like I need to like have a little bit of monitoring, like a weird – or like something that coerces, that makes me like: 'Okay, I know I need to like make it through. Like, let's do this! Let me pay attention.' Or, you know, I mean if it doesn't interest me, I can still zone out but the point is the intention.

EF: Yeah.

US: The intention is 'I want to really tune into this', and to be in a space where everyone, or most people, are tuning in. And if maybe I didn't understand or whatever, you can also see each other tuning in or tuning out as well. It's not just about how good it is. Like, it might be amazing but I need to know that I'm listening or attending with others and that they can see me somehow, that I'm also there. It's not just this – it's not this participation thing, you know, it's not all always about that stuff, like: 'Oh, I just want – I want to be able to participate.' No! I mean, I'm not always – I'm not going to be the person always asking a question when there's question time, even if I have the questions. But I just need to feel presence and that I am – I don't know.

EF: No, I completely understand. I mean, you're talking also about really particular kind of being present, say a lecture or something, a talk. But also what started off this conversation is us thinking: 'Oh, whoah! We're now going live, it's formal. There's something formalising this discussion, which isn't just us having a chat on a Zoom call one night. Actually there's a framework to it. And also there are others listening somewhere.' And yeah, and it changes the shape of how we speak and respond to each other, attend. You used that word 'attend'. I think this is so interesting as well, considering that a lot of the time, a lot of the kind of speak around gathering together to participate – to 'participate' – to be a part of a live event or even to just be witness to a live event, is also about being anonymous or the ability to go and be anonymous in a crowd.

US: Right, but still be present, to not be invisible. Anonymous is not about invisible.

EF: Right. But to also kind of be able to have this very complex, this complex matrix in a way of appearing, being visible but not being known, but being, but passing through, but attending to something then leaving. I mean that body in that time is really very particular. And I think then, when we talk about the radio and your relationship with Radio Alhara, I mean, it's not about: 'Oh, I've been with this radio station for so many weeks and I'm–' I mean, you have actually participated in it, you've done a radio programme on it. I mean, do you forget it's in the background? Do you feel there's any kind of shape of experience that relates to that one, say, when you're there, in body with the thing performing, the person performing? I mean, what are the – I'm interested in how now you listen to it, that you've been listening to it for so many weeks. Can you kind of tune in and out of it?

US: To the station?

EF: Yeah.

US: So okay – the thing is that, you know, it has been developing live, right, and things were also taking on speed and magnitude, even to them like as it went on, because of so many people attending to it. And so, it had been changing and shifting a lot. What's been also nice and interesting to follow, is that – I mean, it is bizarre, I mean, I'm a total fan girl now. Like, I know I sound like, I almost sound creepy when I talk about Radio Alhara but there's so many fascinating aspects also about the experience of time. So there have been at some point like daily programmes, you know, and some of them weren't even like 'my favourite', let's say, like: 'This is my most favourite type of music', but I see and I hear and I recognise like: 'Oh, this is a daily show', like a daily morning show or daily night show where this one person would, da-da-da, play certain types of selections. So a daily thing at a certain hour. Imagine, you know, when you have no routine, nothing, but then suddenly there's this daily thing. Then there were quite early on, let's say, weekly shows. So suddenly there is an identity, days have a kind of flavour rather than it just being like one big sort of blob of like: 'Is it Tuesday? I don't know.' And again, funnily enough, it's not just about like: 'Oh, but it's my favourite show, and that's why I know what day it is.' It's just, you know, it starts to kind of enter my awareness, or like my–

EF: –your rhythm. It's in your rhythm within.

US: Yeah. So even if I'm not always like 100% like in it but, you know, sometimes I'm just listening, like it's radio. I turned it on and I'm doing other stuff. And then something will happen, I'm like: 'Oh,



this show is on, it must be Tuesday.' You know. Or: 'Oh the Monday night thing. Oh okay.' Or: 'This name', like there's this like familiarity and then, intersperse – there's lots of kind of like weekly shows, certain things that only happen on Saturdays, on Fridays, etc. And yet, still a lot of just new stuff, you know? So then, suddenly, you think like: 'Oh, is this going to be a rut, or like you know all the weekly stuff, same people da-da-da', and then boom, new idea, new concept, new show. One of my latest absolute favourite shows is the music request show – which actually is going to be on in half an hour – where people can submit live requests for songs. Or like, no they're not requests they're dedications. So through the chat or through Zoom you can actually call them now, and be like 'hey!' so you hear other listeners.

EF: Oh my god! We could have called in as we were speaking now.

US: It's not – wait, it's not on yet, I think it's – no, it's not on. It's going to be in half an hour. I mean, we can still do that but it wouldn't necessarily be part of this.

EF: Oh right.

US: I did it, like I called in last week, I think. I was very nervous, like really nervous, for someone who, you know – I do things with performance, I do things with public speaking – but this, I was like: 'Oh my god, I'm calling in! I'm calling into the show! Oh my god!' Because, you know, it's also like I'm calling as me. I'm not doing a talk. I'm just like calling my favourite show, saying: 'Hi! Hello, I'm listening. Thank you! You guys are great! Can I hear this song and dedicate it to this person? Bye!' So yeah, these things have shifted. I was propelled to say as the world turns, but I mean maybe that's not wrong, like as the world turns every week and as you also, rightfully – it's important to also date this conversation in the middle of worldwide protests. And like renewed rightful demands for like final change, I would say, and the breaking down of racist and white supremacist signs and structural exclusions, and oppressions, et cetera. Sorry, I hate to say 'et cetera' with something like that, but I did. Ever since this turn took place, we have been hearing on the radio broadcasted lectures by James Baldwin, different discussions, different lectures from, and interviews with Angela Davis, and – I mean, just incredible.

EF: It's been responsive.

US: Yes, and it's not been like: 'Oh, it's just the one-day thing, and then, now, we're back to our, you know, fun daily programming.' It's just become a kind of integral, daily thing, like really responsive, and kind of–

EF: It provides commentary. Yeah.

US: Yeah, it's active. It's like it's–

EF: Contingent, intuitive, active.

US: Yes, it is so – it is really also like the sound of the time, it's not – I don't know how to sort of say this properly. I feel like also, we're–

EF: It's good. It's good, I can tell – I think this is a really important point to kind of get to, to close it, about the kind of vibrancy of live contingency, and actually how this station is almost – it's mobile enough, it's agile enough. It's also set itself up as responsive, like for example you mentioned way back –

US: Yeah, responding to the time–

EF: Yeah – to the time, and so – but you know, way back you said about the backstage, kind of 'where's the output' part of the conversation, you know, it's not set itself up formally, like I mean, you know, British Broadcasting Corporation Radio 4 every night, we have the broadcast of the update. Obviously it's not that. It's also not, say, the kind of art stations that are more scheduled. It's got this kind of scheduling that does surprise, as you've been talking about, and this scheduling where it builds identity in time and through time, and can switch it. I mean, it's a kind of extraordinary tribute in a way to the best that this time can do in responsive media. I'm really grateful. I'm really thankful to you for introducing me to it, and for you also describing your experiences with it, because those as well have been really – you used the term 'precious'. Like: 'You have to listen to this, it's precious!'

US: Yeah.



EF: But it is. It's also really generous, the way you talk about your own kind of intuitive responses to theirs. And I'm sure that comes through in listening you talk about it for others and not just me. And I really hope it's still on when people can hear this. I hope it's still going.

US: I know! Oh my god, I am just – this is the one thing that, wherein I'm not necessarily – like it's really interesting this live thing, right? It's live, it's right now, it's happening now, now, now, now, now, and I'm nervous thinking about a faraway future because I'm like: 'No, I don't – I'm just – I just want.' I mean, I know it can't, maybe it can't last forever, and obviously you know what I mean like there – it is transient and it responds to time and it responds to like real life, and it is part of real life, obviously. It's just not IRL in the strict sense but it is real life. And so I'm just a little bit nervous thinking about anticipating an afterlife or the time when it's not here anymore. But I think that's, yeah, that's one of the strengths and the beauties of it: not knowing.

EF: Yeah, exactly.

US: Not being able to take it for granted.

Transcription by Kalina Petrova

Clips Summary

[00:12:50 to 00:13:40] Ambient sound from a London flat and Radio Alhara

[00:13:40 to 00:14:14] Radio Alhara

Audio available at www.auralia.space/salon1-ellafiner-and-urokshirhan/.

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