

Transcript

[00:00]

Ethereal Voice: This...is...Phantom Power.

[Banjo Playing]

Male Voice [Singing]: You rulers of the forest. This song to you I'll tell.

Do the impact study. Save us from fracking hell.

[Group Singing]:

Which side are you on, boys? Which side are you on?

Which side are you on, girls? Which side are you on?

Male Voice [Singing]: Come on you good people. Good news to you I'll tell.
If we stick together, we'll save our water bills.

[Group Singing]:

Which side are you on, boys? Oh, which side are you on?

Which side are you on, girls? Which side are you on?

[01:10]

Mack Hagood: Welcome to another episode of Phantom Power. I'm Mack Hagood.

Brian Harnetty is a composer and an interdisciplinary artist, using sound and listening to foster social change. While Brian studied composition at the

Royal Academy of Music, London, one of his teachers, Michael Finnessy suggested he look for musical inspiration in his home state of Ohio.

Brian took that advice and the result has been eight internationally acclaimed albums.

Brian's music combines archival recordings of interviews and singing, often from the Berea College Appalachian sound archives with his own original compositions.

For the past decade, Brian has focused on the myth, history, ecology, and economy of Shawnee, a small Appalachian town in Ohio.

His 2019 album *Shawnee, Ohio*, which we're listening to now, was praised by the BBC, *The Wire* and named 2019's "Underground Album of the Year" by Mojo.

The album engages with the social and environmental impacts felt by the town and nearby Wayne National Forest in their long history with extractive industries, from timber to coal mining to fracking.

But Brian doesn't just document Shawnee's narrative, he intervenes in it.

He's an environmental activist of the gentlest kind. One who gets area residents of different political stripes to walk in the woods together, to listen.

To one another and to the forest, all in service of protecting and healing the land.

Today, I'm thrilled to present an audio documentary that Brian Harnetty has produced for Phantom Power about this quietly radical experiment called *Forest Listening Rooms*.

And afterwards I'll speak to Brian about his project

Now, *Forest Listening Rooms* by Brian Harnetty.

[03:10]

[Somber music]

Brian Harnetty: *Forest Listening Rooms* is often referred to as a socially engaged art project. It's based on this premise: that listening can be a radical act.

A radical act of connection between people and between people and the environment. And that listening, and sound can create social change.

So, this is a listening project where I invite residents from the Wayne National Forest in Appalachian Ohio to gather in outdoor spaces, and it's where we listen critically to the forest and to each other.

The goal here really is to consider the land and how it's used.

To help bridge the divide between rural and urban communities.

And ultimately to end large-scale extraction in the forest public lands.

A brief history. Over the past two centuries, there's been a lot of extraction from this land.

Timber, clay, iron ore, and of course, coal, gas, and oil.

And it feels like a never-ending series of booms and busts, and each time jobs are promised, but that's quickly followed by environmental destruction and economic depression with the latest iteration being hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, today.

I first began visiting the forest and its residents a decade ago in 2010.

Now I grew up and I live in Columbus, an hour north of Appalachian Ohio. And I don't identify as Appalachian, but both of my parents, families are from there.

So, I was somewhere in between an outsider and an insider, and I started meeting residents as part of ethnographic research, focusing on the sounds of the region.

[05:11]

[Guitar plays]

Child's Voice: May 3rd

I'm going to ask my grandma questions of the olden days.

[To Grandma]

In the mines, you know how many people died?

Brian: By 2016, I made a music performance called *Shawnee, Ohio*, which was a series of portraits of local residents telling their own story.

We were fortunate enough to perform this piece for the residents and the discussions after were a revelation. Somehow the music and the community came together, and it felt like I was witnessing something new.

A new connection and sense of pride in the land and some hope for the future.

Child Voice: Uhm, did you ever wash on a washboard?

[Piano Playing]

Child's Voice: You did?

Brian: So, in 2018, I began this project: *Forest Listening Rooms*, and since then I've been listening to local people's stories and to the forest itself.

In each listening session, we walk together through the forest. We listen in silence and to archival recordings, and then we have discussions based on participants experiences in the forest.

And no two sessions are the same.

I've met with big groups and small, and with residents, well drillers, children, hunters, even ATV drivers.

I suppose the hope is to have a project that is built with and focused on local residents, and then to have it radiate out to larger regional audiences.

[Slow Music Playing]

[07:00]

Well, we begin with the sound walk.

[Sounds of sloshing through water]

After we've all met in the parking lot or beside a given road in many different places within the Wayne National Forest, we start walking in silence and we focus on listening.

Immediately, I hear the other participants moving, falling into their own walking patterns.

I hear rhythms of feet shuffling, jackets swishing, gravel and coal under foot, and an occasional twig snap.

Slowly, our ears adjust, and the forest introduces itself to us.

A chipmunk, a vole, a squirrel, dry leaves drag across the path.

The walk is usually not too long. It's 15 or 30 minutes. Sometimes it's with many people, sometimes just one.

Once, I went out walking with a hunter and our silence was already built in. We moved further and further into the forest and the pre-dawn chorus of birds was overwhelming.

[Birds Chirping]

Every footstep was careful, purposeful. Every action could be heard and the birds awareness of me being there. I found myself not observing the forest but becoming part of it.

This process of walking into the forest and then walking back out, it feels like a ritual.

It begins to clear my mind. It makes my body and thoughts intentional.

It also begins the process of building trust among participants. And just as importantly, it begins the process of defining our presence in the forest.

[Slow Music Transition]

[08:55]

Next, we arrive at a site, a kind of room. If possible, we sit in a circle, but the rooms are different for each session.

Sometimes we sit on a bench or a fallen trunk, soft with moss, a grassy clearing, or a position near a lake or stream reclaimed from acid mine drainage.

Other times we're close to an oil pump or near an old coal mine entrance or a fracking wastewater site.

These sites are often beautiful, sometimes not, but they all have historical meaning.

[Water Dripping]

Here's an example. One session was held at Robinson's Cave in New Straitsville, and this is the place where miners met secretly in the 1880s to form the United Mine Workers.

The cave was quiet, and the miners could whisper to one another, without fear of being overheard.

It's also the spot where a different set of miners met to conspire to set the mines on fire, fires that are still burning a 140 years later.

So, it's complicated.

We're there to experience the beauty of the place. And yet these places are often marked by the open wounds of past and present large-scale mining and extraction, right alongside the scars of recovery efforts and healed land.

Mostly we're just there to pay attention.

[Crickets chirping]

We sit together quietly for a short while, 20 minutes or so.

As we settle in, the forest slowly gets louder.

The canopy of trees make the wind audible.

An earlier rain shower drips and falls from leaves. Cicadas and crickets offer ever-present drones. A trucks jake brakes rumble in the distance. Birds call antiphonally across a field.

Again, we're making a space in the forest. We're defining our presence. We're noticing what is there, what isn't, and the change between the two over time. Sometimes this absence of sound says a lot.

For example, they often think of the Shawnee tribe and their cruel erasure from this land as a type of silence, or silencing.

Or a different example. One resident told me that it was only after a stream and small lake were restored that he began to hear belted kingfishers in the area, a bird he'd never heard before.

Listening to the forest in silence as a group, it shocked me. It's very different from being alone in the forest. It takes on a communal quality, a felt presence, one shared with the surrounding trees and plants and animals.

In one sense, it reminds me of Quaker religious traditions, where they're definitely comfortable sitting alone together in silence.

I grew up with in contemplative religious practices and this share some qualities with them, but the dogma is stripped away.

I began to think of this process as: contemplative listening, where there's a sense of letting go, of not thinking, there's a simple awareness.

And then an opening up. An opening up to each other and to the world.

[12:23]

Next, we listened to archival recordings of past and present residents. Some are long gone, and often they're speaking of the very places where we're sitting.

They talk of their experiences, their work as minors and shopkeepers. Their pride in the land. And also, of mine fires. Jobs disappearing, towns vanishing

Here, I often think of my own family, working in the mines 140 years ago or walking through these streets of nearby towns.

[12:57]

Old Woman's Voice: Do you know how the mine fire started?

Old Man's Voice: It was Straitsville. There's a tower over there they call Ross Tower, it had a mine down in there and one of the miners and mine owners had disagreements. A bunch of miners loaded up a cart of coal [inaudible].

Old Man's Voice: It's pretty, definitely accepted that the miners poured oil on a loaded car of coal sitting on the tipple when they had that strike and push down the slope and it closed to the way back into mine.

Old Man's Voice: That's what I heard too.

Old Man's Voice: One of the men that helped perform that act after he seen what he'd done, he said he never got it off his mind. It troubled him all his life, to think he was a party to ruination of that.

Brian: Hearing these recordings, the hiss of tape and the warble of age

situated among the natural soundscapes of wind and trees and water and animals. It all has a haunting effect, like hearing ghosts from the past.

Together, they create a sonic map of the forest, ever-changing and becoming which reaches back and forward at the same time.

After this, we then begin to talk and listen to each other. Most often participants talk of the land, of their memories, how it affects them and how they'd like to see it change.

Man's Voice: It's definitely a meditative space for me personally, but it's also this really dense, complex layered historical place that I don't fully grasp or understand.

You know you see the layers of undergrowth and you see the layers of dirt and soil and you see the trash and you see the coal. And I think there's these layers that, you know, listening in a space can bring out.

Woman's Voice: My parents are gone and after my dad died, my mom died first, and after my dad died, I wasn't quite ready for the feeling of being an orphan.

And something about being in an area that is familiar to you that reminds you of your childhood. Reminds you of carefree days.

It's comforting.

I don't know how else to say it. It's just comforting.

It's home.

Man's Voice: 20 years later, I look at that and I feel I have this kind of recurring, it's kind of a recurring daydream, it's not a dream, that the forest

is kind of winning the battle again, it's kind of coming back and taking us over.

I've decided that it's a good thing. The forest is coming back to reclaim this land, but it's a kind of a bittersweet.

Man's Voice: You know when you look at public land, it's no secret, you know, people are pretty divided today. But this is something that both sides of political spectrum agree on.

This is something that everyone can use and it's good for everybody, you know?

And so, I feel like it's such a, I think that it can unite so many different factions that otherwise may not agree on many things right now.

Woman's Voice: The silence for a while, just getting used to the idea that I think the silence says, "There's nobody here but us and a few animals."

What can we hear? What are the birds? You know, you're just listening to that.

But after a while you start feeling like you're just a separate world, a little bit. And so, the other people that are with you are doing the same thing you are.

[16:55]

Brian: Now, this is a space of critical thought. As we move through the very messy and slow process of working towards social change.

It's also a space of deep understanding or as one participant put it, "A space to think and feel."

I should also say that the listening doesn't stop here. When done as openly

and objectively as possible, listening can be a radical act of attention. Of trust. Even of love.

Listening and speaking are two sides of the same coin. They're like breathing.

You must be able to breathe in, to be able to breathe out.

And the tensions between the two are akin to the back and forth movement between contemplation and action.

Here, the forest becomes a mediator. If the project's ultimate goal is to help change and protect the forest, then it's important to remember that the forest is an active participant to, working to change us.

For starters, the forest changes our tone, our inner voice, even the way we talk with one another.

Even if participants are from different places or backgrounds, the sessions have not been argumentative.

Now, I'm convinced that our conversations would be less meaningful if we hadn't just undergone this mutual listening experience together.

And I think it is at this moment that we become aware that we're coming together over this shared interest and love for the land.

We're literally finding common ground.

[18:27]

[Sound of Footsteps in the Forest]

After we walked back together, but this time the walk is more open.

I hear discussions and laughter. The steps are quicker and lighter. The walk feels faster.

Over time, it's this returning again and again, to these places and to the residents, that's the process to work towards social change.

It truly is slow and messy and it often feels lost or misguided, but each time something grows, and some small connection is made.

One of my favorite authors, Wendell Berry, once said:

"An art that heals and protects its subject is a geography of scars."

And this is definitely true here. We witness and reflect on the land and its past, and we work toward helping change the place, to heal it even. And at the same time, it is changing and healing us to.

One last thought.

Before the pandemic, I traveled to Bakersfield, California to work with students at a local community college there.

None of the students had ever been to Appalachian Ohio, and at first glance, the two places couldn't be any more different, and yet they responded deeply to the stories I shared.

They were no strangers to the environmental destruction, economic instability, and labor struggles that accompany large scale extraction, and they began to tell me their own stories.

The message became less about a specific place and more about finding ways to see where you are and where you are from in a new light, all while using both celebratory and critical lens.

And then to make something of it, a field recording, a map, an essay, an image.

This is a step towards understanding.

Toward meaning.

Toward change.

[End of *Forest Listening Rooms*]

Mack: *Forest Listening Rooms*.

Back in a moment with composer, researcher and activist, Brian Harnetty.

[20:54]

Man's Voice: Help us out just a little minute, everybody, please.

If you like the show, go rate us on iTunes, like us on Facebook, hit us up on Twitter.

Helps us all to rise.

[21:11]

Mack: So now I'd like to welcome the person who created the piece you just listened to, Brian Harnetty.

Hi, Brian.

Brian: Hi. How are you?

Mack: Good. Good. Thanks so much for doing this work and thank you for creating this piece for us so that we could learn about it.

And one of the things that just occurred to me when I was listening is that it's an interesting experience to just be taking a bunch of strangers into the woods. I mean, it almost sounds like the start of a bad movie.

[Both Laughing]

How did it feel that first time that you took people on one of these sound walks to listen to the forest?

Brian: Uh, well, hardly anyone showed up.

I mean, I realized pretty quickly that, you know, putting a sign out or making an announcement that we were going to have a forest listening room session wouldn't really attract many people at all.

In fact, that became like a major hurdle at the beginning and the people that did come were people that either I knew, or that were connected, as artists, but they weren't necessarily local people.

That's something I didn't really plan for or know how to address right away.

So, I kind of slowed down.

I had also become an AmeriCorps volunteer that year, so it actually allowed me to be present in the town of Shawnee and to get to know community members a little better, that became part of the solution.

And then another part of the solution was, perhaps instead of inviting people to come to me, maybe I could go to them and they could show me things that they liked.

So, some people showed me their homes, you know, their backyards.

Others, like a local hunter took me hunting with him.

And I even went out and met a group of ATV drivers who were, you know, advocating for a state forest to not be coal mined because they like to use the state forest for their recreation.

And so that way I was able to meet people where they were instead of trying to entice them to come out into the woods.

And then as the project unfolded and I developed better relationships with some local folks then I felt more comfortable asking them to come to a listening session and the listening session might be followed by lunch, for example.

So, there was like another way to help develop the sense of community but also have this experience.

Mack: Ah, that's really interesting.

I mean, I think one of the things that shines through there is that you took the time to get to know them and their mores and kind of understand where they were coming from before you tried to squeeze them into your project.

Brian: It's that process of moving from the proposal, the grant proposal and getting some funding to do a project and then making it concrete and making it, you know, fit actual reality.

And the other piece of that has to do with language and the language that I used in speaking to, you know, arts organizations about a socially engaged art project is very different than the language that I would use in speaking to local residents.

And it's not about trying to mimic a vernacular or speaking down to someone or anything like that, but it's kind of perhaps stripping away some of the more, you know, charged words.

Words that might deal directly around fracking and sort of environmental issues and allowing those things to still be structurally there. To be part of how I'm thinking about the project and how the project unfolds, but also basically starting off with a more neutral ground, so that you can put in some roots of trust to begin with.

Mack: Yeah because you're navigating something that is very charged here, right?

You know, one irony that I think about fairly often is that we have this politically divided nation and we have rural people who have a more intimate connection with the land who are voting for a party that tends to open up the land to more damage and exploitation.

And then we have urban people who have a, I don't know, a more like abstract and superficial connection to the natural world who are nevertheless, like tending to vote for a party that at least takes some steps to protect the environment.

And I'm just wondering if your *Forest Listening Rooms* project sort of shed any light on that dynamic.

Or if you even agree with that framing that I just proposed.

Brian: Well, I mean, there's a couple of things.

I mean, there's these divisions between, you know, political sides.

There's divisions between urban and rural.

And there's also divisions between sort of townies and outsiders.

All those things are at play and there is a shared interest in the land and a

sort of pride in that land, which is a great place to start.

It's not to gloss over things. I mean, yes, there is poverty and in the region. Yes, it's mostly conservative, but there are also, I guess, people that I would say were unusual allies that, for example, those ATV drivers.

Often, I would not hang out with at all, and yet, you know, they were donating their labor and their time to raise money to hire lawyers, environmental lawyers, to help fight off these new coal mining permits in a state forest.

And to me, I just thought that was really interesting that they were sort of sitting side by side by this sort of more, you know, lefties from town for a common goal.

Mack: That is interesting.

And there is an interesting irony too, with the ATV folks, sort of, pitching in on the conservation front considering you're a sound guy.

[Both Laugh]

Brian: Yeah. I mean, like they were showing off their motorcycles and ATV vehicles and they wanted me to ride with them, but I couldn't do it.

It was just too much.

Mack: Too much noise?

Brian: Too much noise and also just too much. Yeah.

Mack: Can you talk about like the role of listening in your project and its connection to politics?

Brian: Yeah. I mean, the structure of each process, which is laid out in what we just heard, involves sort of walking into a place in the forest, spending a time listening silently, listening to archival recordings of people that were there before, and only then a discussion can take place.

And, you know, over the course of that 45 minutes or so, people have been both physically engaged, and also, you know, mentally or mindfully engaged.

And I also think that the trees themselves become an active participant once that you're opening up to that.

I think that the process itself is opening the participants up to being more amenable to one another.

Mack: Yeah, it's an interesting space to enter into, especially because I got the feeling that maybe it took away some of the framing of the conversation that was normally there.

In a way everyone was experiencing the land through sound on its own terms, and sort of stripping away some of that cultural framing that maybe these two different cultures have placed around the land.

I don't know if that speaks to you?

Brian: Yeah and it seemed that the participants, particularly the local participants, were drawn to memory first.

So, they often talked about how they experienced the forest as children and that sitting there and listening open that up again and sort of reminded them of those experiences.

And then in turn that gave, you know, it gave people that were not local, a

chance to see a side of a local residents that they don't get to see in media or the newspaper, or even just traveling through there on their own.

That's the opening spot to then have those larger conversations over time about the political stuff or about land use or about the environmental issues as well.

But it doesn't all happen at once and it doesn't all happen within an hour.

Mack: Right.

I liked the way you spoke in the piece about sound and the forest mediating the people.

It reminded me, I was actually just teaching yesterday, the work of Barry Truax, who is an acoustic ecologist, and he talks about how, from an engineering perspective, we always talk about sound needing a medium, so it needs the air molecules to resonate through or it can resonate through the water, whatever, but sound always needs a medium.

But Truax says that when it comes to communication, you know, sound is a medium in itself and he likens it to a medium between people and their environment.

And so, we can always sort of customize that medium, right?

Like we can change the medium of sound in lots of different ways. We could create a giant PA system and extend our voices outward, or we could put on noise canceling headphones and be in a privatized sonic medium and kind of block out the environment.

But it seems to me that what you're doing is trying to pull back some of those technological interventions and see what kind of medium the sonic

domain of the forest wants to be and what kinds of changes it wants to make in us, which I think is really interesting, giving it a kind of agency or noticing the agency that it already has.

Brian: Well, yeah, I think that's it.

And again, it's fairly passive. I mean allowing the forest to speak, or it already is, but we often just don't notice it.

I think that's really, really important.

I mean, obviously the listening practices have a long history, you know, from Pauline Oliveros and Anna Lockwood and Hildegard Westerkamp and Cage of course, but, you know, placing it within the historical and the cultural context just allows for another layer of understanding and meaning to come out.

Mack: Have you been able to sort of isolate a practice here that maybe you're going to be able to teach to others who might be able to lead similar listening spaces in their own communities?

Is this something you're thinking about?

Brian: I think perhaps if there's anything that I could try to, you know, share is to get people to think about the places where they are and pay attention to those places and then have some kind of a response to those places.

I mean, essentially, that's basically what I've been doing.

I also think that the archival component is really important.

A lot of the research that I've done has been with sound archives and weirdly when you're in the natural environment of the forest with that

soundscape, and then you insert an archival recording for everyone to listen to, you have this weird break between past and present, or they get mixed together, I guess.

And that seemed to be a really interesting moment for a lot of people because it felt sort of like a haunting or a ghost-like quality if we were in the exact places where these people worked or may have lived.

And to see how much it's changed, but also to hear their stories as a kind of cautionary tale about boom and bust cycles, about endless extraction, about not taking care of the land.

[Person Singing]

Mack: Thank you so much for, for sharing this with us. I really appreciate it.

Brian: Sure. My pleasure.

[Singing Fades]

[36:10]

Mack: And that's it for this episode of Phantom Power.

Thank you to Brian Harnetty.

The music you heard today comes from Brian Harnetty's album, *Shawnee, Ohio*.

You can find transcripts and links to some of the things we've heard about and talked about today at phantompod.org.

And you can also subscribe to our show there or wherever you get your podcasts.

We'd love it if you'd rate and review us on Apple Podcasts and tell some friends about us on social media.

Forrest Listening Rooms was produced and edited by Brian. Harnetty.

Additional editing by me, Mack Hagood.

Phantom Power's production team includes Craig Eley, Ravi Krishna Swami, and Amy Skjerseth.

Take care and see you next month.

[Music Fades Out]