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Paul Franson Interview – Reflection

Introduction

California's Napa Valley¹ runs north to south for about 30 miles, ranges from one to five miles in width, and is located approximately one hour north-north-east of San Francisco. It is renowned for its wines, and is considered one of the premium wine regions of the world. For the past ten to fifteen years it has also become well-known for its restaurants. As the area most closely identified with “wine country cuisine”, the valley enjoys award-winning restaurants in most of its five towns².

Because of its attractions and reputation, the Napa Valley is a prime tourist area. For this reason, it is difficult to find reasonably-priced restaurant *food*, but it is easy to find high-priced restaurant *cuisine*. One of the most knowledgeable journalists on the valley's wine, food and cultural activities is Paul Franson, a former founder and president of a Silicon Valley public relations firm, who has lived in the Napa Valley for a number of years. He currently resides in the city of Napa, the Napa County seat situated near the south end of the valley.

In his writings, Franson frequently mentions two of his pet peeves: the cost of local wines in local restaurants, and the noise level of those restaurants. On March 1, 2010 Franson was interviewed about restaurant noise at his home by Mick Winter, masters candidate in Creative Media at the University of Brighton in the United Kingdom.

During the course of the interview, there was a disruption due to a telephone call received by Franson. Although I have not *transcribed* this phone conversation, I have chosen to leave it in the audio portion of this assignment, as it demonstrates a real-world event during the interview process.

Preparation

As does the interview subject, I live in the Napa Valley and am familiar with the various restaurants he mentions. I prepared for the interview by printing out and reviewing the list of valley restaurants that have been awarded stars by the San Francisco Bay Area Michelin Guide³, and another list based on the San Francisco Chronicle's—that city's major newspaper—rating of the noise (decibel) levels of Bay Area restaurants⁴.

While I did not write down questions to ask Franson⁵, I did mentally prepare, and was aware of the

1 See “About Napa Valley”, *NapaNow*, www.napanow.com/aboutnv.html

2 See information on all Napa Valley restaurants, *NapaNow*, www.napanow.com/restaurants.html

3 See *The Michelin Guide – San Francisco Bay Area and Wine Country*, www.michelinguide.com/us/sf_stars_2010.html

4 See *SFGate*, <http://tinyurl.com/napafood> for decibel ratings of Napa Valley restaurants

5 I recognize that this does not match the recommendations of the Oral History Association “Interviewers should prepare an outline of interview topics and questions to use as a guide to the recorded dialogue,” and as a precaution I would likely write down questions in advance for my next interview, whether I felt it necessary or not.

information I had hoped to obtain from him. During email conversations prior to the interview, he stated that he was not an acoustic expert, but did have experience and opinions about the noise level of Napa Valley restaurants. I assured him that was sufficient.

I arrived at his home and set up my recording equipment. I used a Zoom H2 recorder⁶ with its own built-in microphone. After testing the sound levels for a moment, we began an informal conversation and a short while later I started the “official” interview. Note: Because a number of references in the interview are understandable only to those very familiar with the Napa Valley restaurant scene, I have frequently used brackets [] or footnotes to add supplementary information to the transcription of the interview as well as to this reflective essay.

The interview lasted for approximately 22 minutes. It took five hours to transcribe the interview. During this process, I used TrakAxPC software⁷, listening to the recorded track at a very slow, but still understandable, speed.

Interview

I felt that the interview went well. Franson and I are friends, so there was no need to establish a comfortable working relationship. Because we are both knowledgeable of the Napa Valley, there was little need for explanation or clarification at any point, although as noted above, I have done some elaboration in the transcription for the less-knowledgeable reader. Although I introduced Franson in the “lead” at the beginning of the interview, giving his name, background and qualifications for the interview subject matter, next time I would follow the recommendations of the Oral History Association⁸ and include in the introduction my name, the day and year of the session, and the location where the interview took place.

The only interruption during the course of the interview was the telephone call that Franson received. Although his answering machine was turned on, it was quickly obvious that the telephone call was too disruptive to continue the interview. We stopped the interview (but left the recorder running), Franson talked to the caller, and we then returned to the interview. As noted above, I have kept this disruption in the full audio file, as it does helpfully indicate a glitch in the process. In my next interview, I will request—prior to commencing the interview—that the subject make sure that all of his or her telephones, whether mobile or landline, are silenced.

Upon reflection, it is clear that towards the end of the interview I brought up several subject areas (mobile phones, ambient noise, and others) almost as an afterthought, when the primary subject (restaurant noise levels) had been completed. Those additional subjects were secondary, but I felt that they were important enough in a discussion about the soundscape of the Napa Valley that they should at least be briefly discussed. Knowing my own opinions about these subjects, I wanted to hear from someone else, and Franson obliged.

Transcription

As expected, transcribing the interview was a slow process, but it was a necessary step for both the project and the researcher. Transcription makes the interview accessible to those unable to listen to an

⁶ Zoom, www.zoomh2.net

⁷ TrakAx, www.trakax.com

⁸ Oral History Association, *Principles and Best Practices*, <http://www.oralhistory.org/do-oral-history/principles-and-practices/>

audio recording of the interview and allows for more rapid review and study of the content of the interview. I personally gained a deeper understanding of not only the discussion itself but of the methodology that I used for the interview, as the transcription process demanded my full attention to each and every word of the interview, and the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Since I did not have actual transcription equipment with foot pedals, I “moused” my way back and forth on my desktop computer between my word processor (OpenOffice⁹) and my audio player (TrakAx, mentioned above). Although not ideal, this process worked, primarily because I was running the audio player at a very slow, yet still—barely—understandable speed.

During the latter part of the transcription process, I began to wish I had just “shut up” during the latter part of the interview. There was a time toward the end of the interview when the energy had obviously begun to lag, and it was apparent that the subject of restaurant noise had been exhausted. If I had stopped the interview then without asking about mobile phones, ambient noise, hypersonic speakers and silent discos, I would have had less to transcribe. However, asking about those subjects seemed like a good idea at the time. During my next interview, I intend to be somewhat more restrictive about how many topics I bring up, and weigh carefully how critical they are to the interview.

Other Thoughts

Towards the end of the interview, I referred to a list of certain restaurants that had received Michelin stars which also had quite high decibel ratings. I had only one copy of this list. Showing Franson the list during the interview interrupted the interview somewhat and in retrospect I should have had *two* copies of the list, and given Franson his own copy before the interview started. We could even have discussed the list prior to commencing the interview.

I have found no academic studies or even media articles on restaurant noise in the Napa Valley. Franson's journalist background and restaurant expertise—he is arguably one of the two most knowledgeable media professionals on the Napa Valley restaurant world—provide a valuable view into the problem of noise pollution in restaurants. He more than confirms, through having visited perhaps *all* of the community's restaurants, what I have experienced visiting far fewer of those restaurants.

The Oral History Association in its Evaluation Guidelines¹⁰ asks:

1. Do the biases of the interviewer interfere with or influence the responses of the interviewee
2. What information is available that may inform the users of any prior or separate relationship between the interviewer and interviewee?

While I share Franson's bias towards overly-noisy restaurants, I do not believe my particular bias interfered with his responses. Franson and I do have a relationship separate from the interview, and that is mentioned elsewhere in this reflective essay. It had no negative bearing on the interview.

After listening to the recording of the class session that I was sent, I feel the need to mention that my primary goal was not primarily to discover new information—although that was one of my goals. My major goal was to record an interview with a knowledgeable person about a sonic problem experienced, knowingly or not, by millions of people. (Although Napa County has a population of only 120,000, it receives nearly five million visitors a year.) The interview was intended to be a *sonic interview*, not an

⁹ *OpenOffice*, www.openoffice.org

¹⁰ Oral History Association, *2000 Oral History Evaluation Guidelines*, www.oralhistory.org/do-oral-history/oral-history-evaluation-guidelines/

oral history, although I recognize that it could *in the future* become an historical document. I base my understanding of “oral history” on the commentary from the website of the Oral History Association¹¹, which states that both interviewer and interviewee “have the conscious intention of creating a permanent record to contribute to an understanding of the past” and that “The content of oral history interviews is grounded in reflections on the past as opposed to commentary on purely contemporary events.” The situations we discussed were in the present rather than the past, but the acoustical problem in restaurants is ongoing and, if large-scale changes are made in Napa Valley restaurants, this interview can serve as a marker in a timeline of increasing acoustical awareness.

I was unable to find any acoustic engineers in the Napa Valley, so there was no opportunity to obtain *technical* acoustical information from anyone local. Overall I enjoyed the interview, both because I always enjoy talking with Franson, and because I considered the entire process useful and educational. The problem, for many people, of high levels of noise in Napa Valley restaurants remains. Measurement of decibel levels has already been conducted by the San Francisco Chronicle¹². Average decibel levels are generally below (not always by much) the danger levels for sound (85 decibels), a danger far greater for the staffs of those restaurants, who spend many hours a day working in them, than for those of us who simply pass through now and then for a meal. However, for the comfort of many patrons, and the health of all, the sound level of restaurants should not lurk at the danger level threshold.

As Franson points out, designing—and especially retrofitting—a restaurant for better acoustics can be very expensive. However, the major obstacle in dealing with noisy restaurants is psychological, in relation to both restaurant owners and diners. Most people by nature do not like to complain, they feel powerless to help initiate any change, and they recognize that they can always simply not return to a particularly noisy restaurant. Unfortunately, the problem is systemic, and there are fewer and fewer restaurants, bars and other establishments where one can carry on a conversation within a comfortable sonic environment.

Studies exist that appear to demonstrate that louder music¹³ and faster music¹⁴ increase the rate of drinking and eating and thus, with eating at least, result in faster turnover of tables. Yet another study indicates that slower music, while increasing dining times, also increases the amount spent by diners on beverages¹⁵. This is consistent with a study that showed that playing classical music rather than Top 40 music in an American wine cellar, although it did not increase the *number* of wine bottles sold overall, did increase the *sales* of more expensive wine, resulting in greater overall income.¹⁶

The psychology of the restaurant owner is a major factor. The common belief is that, in most restaurants, loud is good. Noise means energy, and energy attracts customers. Further studies are needed that may demonstrate that this belief is not always applicable; that customers—and income—are lost because of high levels of noise, and that psychological and physiological stress take their toll on both customers and restaurant staff. Acoustic designers acknowledge the validity of current studies

11 Oral History Association, *Principles and Best Practices*, <http://www.oralhistory.org/do-oral-history/principles-and-practices/>

12 *SFGate*, Napa County Restaurants, <http://tinyurl.com/napafood>

13 N. Guéguen, C. Jacob and H. LeGuellec. 2004. “Sound level of background music and consumer behavior: an empirical evaluation. *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 99, 34-38.

14 H. McElrea and L. Standing. 1992. “Fast music causes fast drinking”, *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 75, 362.

15 R. Millman. 1986. The influence of background music on the behavior of restaurant patrons. *Journal of Consumer Research* 13, 286-289.

16 D. Areni and D. Kim, 1993. “The influence of background music on shopping behavior: classical versus top-forty music in a wine-store. *Advances in Consumer Research* 20, 336-346.

yet also state that each bar or restaurant must conduct tests itself in order to determine the best results for its income and its customers.

There are ways other than loud noise to convince patrons, and prospective patrons, that a restaurant is worthy of their patronage. Rooms can be acoustically designed so that the energy of the room is high but conversation remains not only possible, but comfortable—even with music. Other forms of music can be used, such as ambient music¹⁷ (a term coined by Brian Eno), or generative music¹⁸, a genre pioneered by Eno.

This interview provided, and for me reinforced, information that indicated the extent of the restaurant noise problem in the Napa Valley. It gave no overt solutions, but did suggest that greater responsibility by patrons—and non-patrons—might be effective in at least addressing the problem. It also suggests to me that increased public awareness of the problem and its magnitude—and the likely numbers of people who are bothered by the problem—might lead to public action.

A signed form from Paul Franson granting permission to use the interview's audio file and transcription for scholarly purposes is on file.

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17 *Ambient Music Guide*, www.ambientmusicguide.com

18 *Generative Music*, www.generativemusic.com or *Intermorphic*, www.intermorphic.com