

Fake Radiolab: Audio and Ideology

Adam Mirza and Akiva Zamcheck



Audio 1: Listen to “Studio NYC,” from *Fake Radiolab*.¹

Audio and Ideological Production

With what authority do podcasters and radio hosts whose voices reach millions compel their listeners to buy in? The current age of intravenous media consumption warrants study of the role of audio manipulation in reproducing ideology. Popular topics of NPR-style general-interest podcasts sit at the intersection of cognitive psychology and mass media, which was the thematic starting point for our project, which began in 2019. *Radiolab* blazed a path presenting a virtuosically edited narration of reality, and influenced other shows that distill complex phenomena into soundbites while coddling or infantilizing audiences through audio manipulation. Our self-styled anti-podcast began as an effort to parody them, but developed into a deeper study of contemporary audio aesthetics.

Our starting point has always been a series of questions. How do podcasts and radio shows leverage audio forms to frame pseudoscience as fact? What special role do radio hosts and podcasters play in repackaging ideas churned out through academia and disseminated via mass media? The tools of right-wing shock jocks are relatively clear: what corresponding aesthetic hallmarks speak especially to the liberal segment of the U.S. population? In *Fake Radiolab* we try to magnify these audio maneuvers to draw attention to their underlying nihilistic snark, inscrutable postmodernism, and withdrawal into pure aesthetic experience. Our research process has entailed experimenting with form in studio sessions, performing in public contexts, and collecting and integrating feedback of all kinds into our work. We believe that our basic question – by what means do radio hosts and podcasters intoxicate their audiences and turn their listeners’ minds into

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mush? – as well as a larger, overarching question around whose interests such programs serve are best explored through demonstration and performance.

For this edition of Current Musicology, we present “Studio NYC,” the first track from our upcoming album. To supplement the track, we provide an introduction and historical overview of the project as well a discussion about the form and process.

Fake Radiolab, Live and in Studio, Since 2019

Before the pandemic, we presented the first versions of *Fake Radiolab* in New York City and Miami as a live performance act: a (purported) live radio podcast taking place during an experimental music concert. In Fall 2020, we shifted our focus to the recording studio, and in December 2020 (with Rimona Afana as a guest vocalist) we recorded new material towards an eventual album release.

Working in the studio amplified already existing de-synchronizations between the live and pre-recorded which had infused all aspects of our project. From the first performance, we live-improvised over pre-recorded material creating an audio mish-mash, a sound collage of our voices alongside other audio fragments. Operating remotely in 2020-21 in preparation for a subsequent telematic concert introduced a new layer of audio production to our signal chain, and along with it, the possibility for further interventions, ambiguities, and manipulations. The Zoom era created new openings; split by monitor screens and widely tolerated unreliability of latency, software, and individual playback, no one would experience a virtual concert-session in the same way. This was true even for us, two performers performing “together,” separated by 865 miles between Atlanta and Brooklyn, with a minimum theoretical latency of 4.6 milliseconds accrued by the digital data that traversed this distance at the speed of light. In practical terms, an audio streaming plugin allowed us to broadcast our audio to each other as well as to our host re-streamer, the Experimental Sound Studio (ESS) in Chicago, at a latency no faster than 100ms, which is about the time it takes to get from the end of one word to the beginning of the next (unless, of course, you think about it too much, in which case it begins to affect your performance by introducing thought-latency, which can induce innumerable other forms of feedback-related issues, difficult to diagnose or treat). With further internal system latency and additional multi-camera video feeds sent through the video streaming software OBS into a separate Skype session, the only thing we were sure of was that no one would hear or see the same thing.

When we finally reunited for in-person performances in 2022 and 2023, some conceptual preoccupations of the pandemic era felt quaint and archaic. Nonetheless, we found that our experience with networked audio had expanded our approach to signal flow. We reworked our digital feedback loops by plugging our mixers into one another’s, and re-conceived a latency-oriented tribute to

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Alvin Lucier's "I Am Sitting in A Room" focused on spoken word mediated by a feedback system of digital processing. We transposed visual components we developed for virtual concerts as live-projections for in-person concerts. We set up USB webcams that display what's going on with our hands/instruments, and we mix in overlays of screens from both of our computers, including Max patches and our digital audio workstations. In conjunction with these projections, we narrate our signal flow to expose our manipulations and the processes we implement.



Video 1: "We Are Sitting In a Laptop," clip from *We've Been Canceled!*, Live-Remote Telematic Performance of *Fake Radiolab*, 2020.²

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Video 2: “I am Sitting in a Room,” clip from *Fake Radiolab* “Episode 9: Live from Belgrade,” with guest Nikola Pekovic, May 2023.³



Video 3: “On Technology, Music Research, and Media,” a video clip from *Fake Radiolab* “Live from Park City,” July 5, 2023 (VU Symposium, Utah).⁴

Now, in July, 2023, we are sharing this work at an inauspicious time. As war rages in Europe, NPR shows and related podcasts are capable of reproducing ideology with potentially catastrophic consequences. We are thankful to *Current*

Musicology for sharing our media critique, and call for musicologists, composers, scholars, students, and people from all walks of life to turn off, tune out, and drop in for real discussion, analysis, and critique of ideology disseminated through authoritative voices in mainstream news and media.

On Form and Process⁵

This project has always involved an effort to research a topic aggressively before meeting. For our first foray, we considered radio plays. We were preparing for a live concert, and there was a necessity to create some sort of score or script, including a structure for whatever combination of live improvisation and interplay with pre-recorded material was going to happen.

A key thing that came out of our first performance was the idea of creating backing tracks and improvising with them. Backing tracks let us perform live, improvise, have enough texture and most of all, a predetermined structure. We react to audio files throughout most of the piece. These audio files have taken on double dimension because they are embedded into our live speech-performance. Sometimes they are triggered by live speech through a Max patch. In our shows, the most challenging (and time-consuming) aspect is sound-checking and live mixing. When we get it right, the audience is thrust into a space of general mystery.

There was a practical justification for the structure we initially developed, which led us to think about the larger form/format/genre of our piece. There were other fixed media pieces slated for our first show. Our aspiration was to map the larger form of the concert onto our new piece (as a “live podcast”). By weaving this new piece deeply into the concert by re-activating it between pieces (and even, to the consternation of some composers, during pieces), we tried to move away from the standard form for the “new music” concert (i.e. piece one, piece two, piece three, etc.), to provide something a little more stimulating for the audience.

We realized live podcasts are like concerts of new music, potentially. If we assume the role of radio hosts, we need to have some sort of content to comment on. We decided the thing we’d be “covering” as radio commentators would be a concert which was actually occurring.

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Video 4: A clip from *Fake Radiolab* “Episode 1” at Mise-en Place, Brooklyn, March 2019, in which we experiment with the use of vocal ‘patter’ to signify the close-mic style on NPR radio programs.⁶

How is material prepared?

Audio files for a performance have functioned as a sort of score for us, as they can be laid out on a timeline with specific duration. The two of us also compose written scores. We each work on very different aspects of the performance, so we’ve tended to construct and rely on different scores representing our individual workflow.

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Performance Score

T	Visuals	Akiva Synth	Akiva Mic	Adam Samples	Adam Mic
A) 20 s	Black Screen	Synth sequence - sudden start, full volume, gradual slight decresc to mf			
5 s	Ding, Dong (Live foley with bells and metallic objects ringing into mic)	Radiophonic sounds	
1 min	... 3-5 flickers of camera angles Happen randomly during this time	.. + white noise waves	Scratchy sounds sand paper, stuff getting dropped, sudden scream	Triggered micro fragments of voice and other samples, Some glitchy some looping	Voice fragments ("uh"/oh.." ah!) (hi pass filter, thin, with some distortion)
20 sec		Synth fade out only white noise waves	Fade out	Fade out	(breathing?)
3 sec	GP	GP	GP	GP	GP
5 sec	Random Video	GP	GP	GP	GP

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	shots-flicker on and off (instantly) in silence, one per second				
10 sec	... (irregular, with more silences)	Randomly unmute Adam for split second (irregular) Try to cue each other	"Hi" "Hello?" "Adam?" (repeat, alternate spoken fragments with other sounds in between)	Randomly unmute Akiva For split second (irreg Try to cue each other	Read text as fast as possible (random effects)
30 sec	... (improv)	Denser textures		Denser textures	
30 sec	Pulsing video	Growth, experiment, synth jam building		Swirling samples	"Check. Check"

PRECONCERT CHECK

Sample rate

- Audiomovers plugins at 44.1khZ
- OBS/ software

Sound at home

- Washing machine / shower (remind Rimona!)
- Dehumidifier
- Akiva turn off overhead fan

Audio /video Sound check

- latency/ sync with video
- Clicking in audio
- Stereo audio

Initial Setup

- Adam Camera 1
- Level check

Figure 1: Adam’s performance score and preconcert notes for Live Virtual Concert “We’ve Been Canceled!” Emory CompFest/Experimental Sound Studio, February 2021.



Figure 2: Akiva working on his score for a live in-person performance, Belgrade, May 2023.

For our second performance, at the University of Miami, we built an intro track and related scores, specifically designed for this new concert. We became interested in making the project more site-specific. And topical.



Figure 3: Adam and Akiva at the “Live from the Coral Gables Planning Committee” performance at the University of Miami, May 2019.

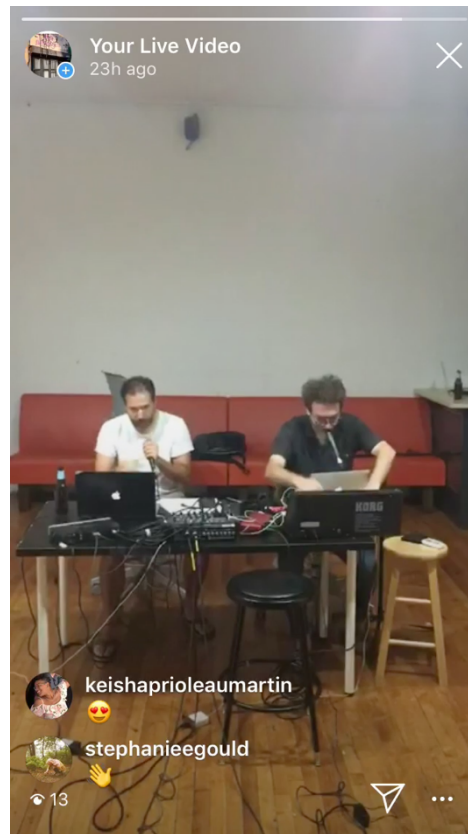
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We felt that, unlike the slow process of composition of abstract academic music which we were pairing *Fake Radiolab* with, podcasts are often ‘of the moment.’ We thought we’d try and emulate that in our performance, while also being aware of the performance practice of live podcasts, which become visual forms when they are streamed with video. This became a defining concept that we started playing with. At this point, our premise was fairly clear: we were hosting a live “podcast” recorded and streamed live from the place in which we were having a “new music” show. At the performance in Miami, we incorporated some local news and issues that had directly impacted our performance and preparation. This episode was titled: “Live from the Coral Gables Planning Committee.”



Audio 2: A clip from *Fake Radiolab* “Live from Coral Gables Planning Committee” in Miami, May 2019.⁷

For our next episode, we were back in New York and focused on studio work, meaning we didn't actually have a “concert” we were working with (or against!). However, we did a livestream on Instagram, which was quite successful. There were about 3,000 viewers, or something close to that. In any case, the number three was in there.



Video 5: A clip from *Fake Radiolab* “Live on Instagram,” August 2019.⁸

What is the set up?

The first thing we have always done is assemble “a studio.” This is not inconsequential to our process, the actual setup of the studio. For our album, what we landed on (what we eventually achieved) was basically a sort of dueling setup, like battle stations. This stands in contrast to the common electronic music duo format (which we had mostly done before), with two people at their laptops, side by side. In our battle station format, we have a baffle between us to help with isolation. This allows us to effectively process each other’s live signal and to control feedback.

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Figures 3-4: Akiva setting up his “battle station” in the Atlanta studio, December 2020.

The original battle station format facilitated social distancing. we set this up when one of us flew from New York for our recording session in Atlanta during the peak of the pandemic. The format made for some interesting conceptual paths. Together in a room, separated by the baffle and literally concealed from one another other, the arrangement felt like an iconic studio set-up for the pandemic situation.



Video 5: Recording “Late Nite Jamout 2” in Atlanta, with guest vocalist Rimona Afana (out of frame), December 2020.⁹

This arrangement also propelled our dive into performative punditry. For our discussion segments it triggered some of the antagonism (and class antagonism) inherent in social distance pageantry.¹⁰

What problems and disagreements emerged?

We’ve tried to craft this thing so as to be topically substantive. Not just random collage. And yet, we’ve also ended up with a lot of improvisation. The long-form studio album, which we are working on, has been slow going because we had to address various questions and disagreements. Is this really a studio album? Is it a recording of an improvisation? Or is it, you know, a deeply crafted song?

The level of specificity of subject matter as a “podcast” is another major question. Whether we are playing real “characters” as podcast hosts transforms our treatment of the topics that emerge. Whether political rants are experienced through “straight discussion” or edited into a kind of warped form; whether they should be based on familiar, “real,” identifiable personages – this has been a point of disagreement. One of us has more hesitation about incorporating recognizable figures if he doesn’t feel sufficiently informed. This is also an aesthetic issue. What is the style of the performance piece we are creating? Is it a sort of fantastic radio play? Are we dabbling with mockumentary? Stylistic questions constantly emerge.

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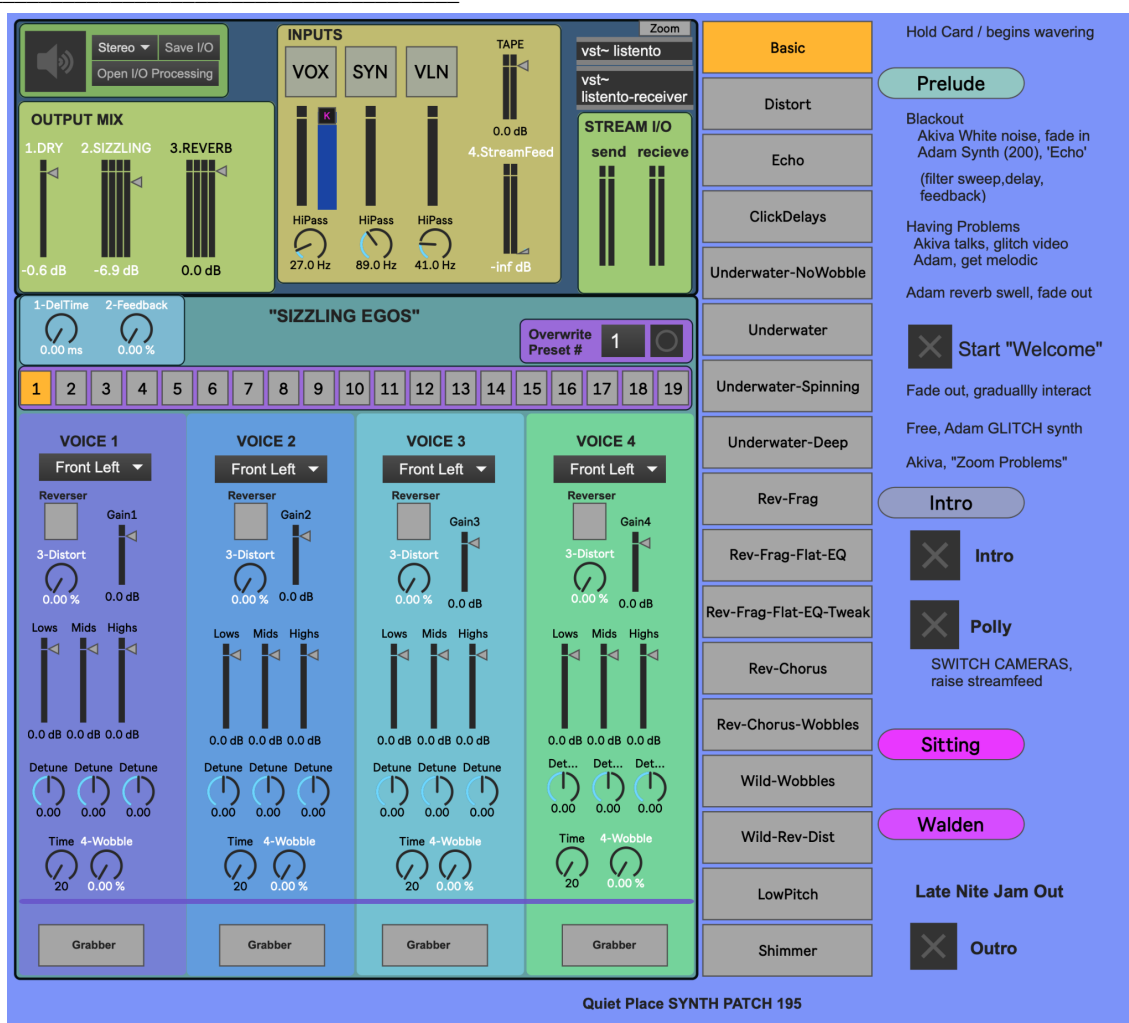


Figure 5: Adam’s Max patch-score for the performance “We’ve Been Canceled!” February 2021.

So far, the result has tended towards a hybrid form. Whereas we have real public figures that we actually dramatized in our initial performances, most of these have become more obscure.¹¹ Some were even replaced with animals, partially because a collaborator has a knack for voicing animals and inserted them quite effectively into our recent instantiations. Having personified squirrels, racoons, and other urban forest creatures “call in” à la discussion segments on NPR or BBC served our political satire, especially in our recent piece, “Live from the Atlanta Democratic Party Headquarters.”¹²

In previous versions (now we call them episodes) the form was directly a result of the context: a new music concert in a specific place. Moving a live performance project into the studio to make an album required thinking of an appropriate topic/genere/form. What began to emerge for our recording project was something about the impact of the pandemic on performance / virtuality and the move to new multimedia studio cultures. In the Zoom age, everyone is a multimedia artist. This become more explicit in our Emory/Electronic Sound

Studio performance, “We’ve Been Canceled!” where we tried to address the sound of cancellation, from a technical perspective (signal cancelation) and a social one. Audiences have also influenced our content and the form. “We’ve Been Canceled!” for example, was geared towards a university audience.

We continue to have serious disagreements about the political issues we cover. Resolving these disagreements within the timeline of preparation for a given performance has usually proved impossible. An ongoing question regards the form our criticism should take. Should we carry out more explicit criticism of political content on NPR, *New York Times* podcasts, and other related shows, or is the method of exposing ideology covertly, by mirroring audio aesthetics and manipulative tropes, more effective? In preparation for recent concerts, Akiva argued in favor of trying to unambiguously depict the means by which such programs have (deceptively) whipped up support for the U.S war machine. Adam argued that we should try and unmask tropes from this wing of the media alongside a broader exploration of audio production as a mode of insidious coercion.

Our set-up allows us to express disagreements (with each other) in multiple ways. We are plugged into each other’s systems, so we can subvert/co-opt each other’s signal by processing it. We can mute each other. And we hash things out in dramatic exchanges voiced by the characters we perform. A direction we’ve tended towards is to expose our project and its limitations. We project our signal flow and our patches, we narrate our process, and we don’t tie up our disagreements or contradictions in a neat little bow.

We do have an important point of agreement though. We both recognize emergent media forms that combine discussion and data with audio manipulation to present a manufactured and highly ideological version of reality. What meaningful interventions can we make with this level of unity? We’re trying to figure that out through feedback of all types, especially through collaboration with scholars, musicians, artists, activists, and all others interested in developing creative resistance to reactionary media.¹³

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Figure 6: Adam's setup in Atlanta for "We've Been Canceled!" for Emory CompFest 2021/ Experimental Sound Studio "Quarantine Concert" series.



Figure 7: Fake Radiolab "Episode 9," Live from Belgrade, May 2023.

Notes

¹ *Fake Radiolab*, “Studio NYC,” July 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxPR53iuinA>

² *Fake Radiolab*, “We’ve Been Cancelled (Live-Remote/Telematic): ‘We Are Sitting in a Laptop,’” Emory CompFest/ESS 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VKAh994ZfY>

³ *Fake Radiolab*, “Episode 9: Live from Belgrade, ‘Sitting in a Room,’” May 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=le75b5JU98E>

⁴ *Fake Radiolab*, “On Technology, Music Research, and Media,” VU Symposium, Utah, July 5, 2023, <https://youtu.be/kCLEJpuWOp8>

⁵ This section derives from a transcription of a recording of a discussion between Adam and Akiva made while recording our studio album in Stone Mountain, Georgia. Interspersed are photo documentation, scores, and relevant clips from various instantiations of the show.

⁶ *Fake Radiolab*, “Episode 1,” *Mise-en Place*, Brooklyn, March 2019, https://youtu.be/WP_N744V7Xg

⁷ *Fake Radiolab*, “Live from Coral Gables Planning Committee,” Miami, May 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ko8Gz5fcd8A>

⁸ *Fake Radiolab*, “Live on Instagram,” August 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/jHv52yOZEB4>

⁹ *Fake Radiolab*, “Battle Stations,” Atlanta, December 2020, <https://youtu.be/7CgrEqPI8Qk>

¹⁰ This became one of the discussion topics in “We’ve Been Canceled!”

¹¹ In “Studio NYC,” remnants of a few of our favorite characters remain, including voiced quotations of dubious assertions about human history by the psychologist Steven Pinker.

¹² “Live from the Atlanta Democratic Party Headquarters,” was recorded in Atlanta in December 2020, a week before a runoff election in which the outcome of simultaneous elections in Georgia could determine which political party secured a majority in the U.S. Senate. We played fictional pundits at the DNC Georgia headquarters, who claimed to stream “live from the current beating heart of the U.S. political landscape.”

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