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JOYBUBBLES | B. 1949

Dial-Tone Phreak

By ELIZABETH McCracken
Published: December 30, 2007

Someday there will be no need of the dial tone, and for a few of us it will be as if the voice of God has gone dead. That reassuring voice that will speak to anyone who knows how to listen: like God, it exists everywhere and yet only in your cupped ear, even if you're a small blind boy with a reputed 172 I.Q. whose parents are fighting late at night.

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Victor Schragar

Joybubbles's phones (top phone for incoming calls only).

This was in the early 1950s. He was still Josef Engressia then, born in Richmond, Va., and phones were solid objects. All those lovely, palpable parts: the dial, the curved metal tooth that stopped a fingertip, the 10 finger holes, the curled cord from mouthpiece to phone body that could be straightened out but boinged right back. The thin cable that ran from the back of the phone to the wall, and from the wall into the world, a secret passageway as sure as any rabbit hole or mirror. A phone could be endlessly caressed and — if there were noises to drown out — listened to. Phones didn't care that he couldn't see.

"Lots of scary sounds and stuff at night," he'd say, years later. "Sometimes I'd hug my phone up close and listen to the dial tone, the soft hum of the dial tone that was always

there."

Ask any mother: children love telephones. "I'm a telephone man forever," he told his mother when he was not quite 4. The family moved a lot — his father was a school portrait photographer — but the phone lines followed him. The phone directory was his favorite storybook, with all the new exchanges and Dial-a's: Dial-a-Joke, Dial-a-Devotion and Dial-a-Prayer, 24-hour-a-day voices, improvisations on the dial tone: something to listen to when you have no one else to call.

The boy decided to talk back to the phone. Not to other people, not right away: to the phone line itself, and in its own language. At 7, with his perfectly pitched ear, he heard through the receiver the tone that controlled long-distance connections, 2,600 cycles per second. "I started whistling along with it," he said, "and all of a sudden the circuit cut off, and I did it again, and it cut off again. And gradually . . . I figured out — back in the

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mid-'50s — just how to do it.”

Those tones were how telephones spoke to one another. Once you'd cut the circuit off, you could call anywhere you wanted. He became a student of phones and phone systems. He heard noises on the line and called the phone company to find out what they meant. By the late 1960s he was a student at the University of South Florida, whistling long-distance phone calls for his classmates at a dollar a pop. In 1971, Ron Rosenbaum, in his landmark *Esquire* article, called him “the original granddaddy phone phreak,” though he was only 22. The phone phreaks were a subculture of pranksters and oddballs and proto-hackers who loved phone lines the way some boys love train lines: for their intricacies, their puzzles, the way they led as far away from home as you could get and then back again. They looked for weakness in the lines, flaws in numbers that allowed them to skip around the globe, from Moscow to Saudi Arabia to California. Some phreaks whistled; some duplicated tones with electronic keyboards and tape recorders; some built dialing boxes; at least one used a giveaway whistle from a box of Cap'n Crunch cereal. Two — [Steve Wozniak](#) and [Steve Jobs](#) — went on to invent Apple computers.

But that same year, Joe Engressia was arrested in Memphis on charges of defrauding the phone company and stripped of even the toy phone he kept on his desk. He claimed he got arrested on purpose, to get the attention of the phone company so they'd employ him. It worked: he got jobs for phone companies in Tennessee and Colorado as a troubleshooter and operator. He gave up illegal calling but spent the rest of his life playing with lines, looking for defects and reporting them.

In 1988, he decided to cast aside the memories of his unhappy childhood — he said he'd been abused by a nun at a school for the blind — and thereafter declared that he was 5 years old. In 1991, he changed his legal name to Joybubbles. He handed out his telephone number and invited strangers to call. He counseled them on how to stay young forever, according to the principals of his invented Church of Eternal Childhood, whose motto was “Re-envisioning a new past in the present is important for our future.” When he discovered that the [University of Pittsburgh](#) had the complete run of “Mister Rogers' Neighborhood” on tape, he went on a pilgrimage: he rented an apartment nearby and spent hours in the library listening to every episode, sometimes hugging a stuffed globe, huddled under a blanket. Then he returned to his home in Minneapolis, a tiny, unlighted apartment filled with phone equipment, stuffed animals, old cassette tapes, plastic toys. He lived on disability payments. He didn't take care of himself. “I don't want to grow old,” he told his friend Steven Gibb.

Children love telephones. Joybubbles, who was 5 years old when he died this year, and 5 years old the year before that, 5 years old for almost 20 years, was no exception. “What a wonderful thing a telephone is,” he said on *Stories and Stuff*, one of his own Dial-a's, which he recorded to voice-mail using his own phone. His mother had hoped he would outgrow his fascination with the phone, but as he told the phreak historian Phil Lapsley, he had two words for her: “Fifty years.”

You can listen to old installments of *Stories and Stuff* on the Internet. Joybubbles's voice is nasal and careful. He remembers the deaths of Kennedy and Oswald; the pleasing thwack-thwack of people walking in flip-flops; a play group he went to in the early 90s; the terror of his father hitting his mother. He talks about his dear friend Dawn Waters, a rich woman from Melbourne who called him after he appeared on an Australian radio show, who phoned nearly every day, who flew to Minneapolis to visit him at the drop of a hat, who adopted him in a special healing ceremony.

“Take care of each other, stay strong, find some time to play,” he says at the end of most



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recordings. “Don’t let God laugh alone.”

When Joybubbles died, Steven Gibb arranged a telephone memorial, a sort of Quaker service over phone lines, a conference call four hours long with 50 people telling stories. His friends had been trying to find rich Dawn Waters of faraway Australia, and the first thing Gibb had to explain was that Dawn did not exist. She was a 5-year-old’s imaginary friend: powerful, loving, able to fly through the air whenever he needed her.

Listening to Joybubbles, you can hear the make-believe in every sentence — not a grown man acting 5 years old, but one pretending, like Fred Rogers before him, that he is talking directly to everyone who might hear him, children and eternal children, one at a time, in a voice that tries to imagine the loneliest child in the world, and what would comfort him.

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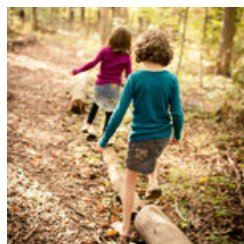


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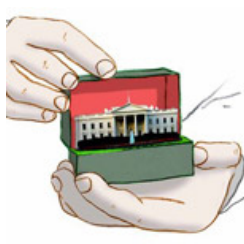
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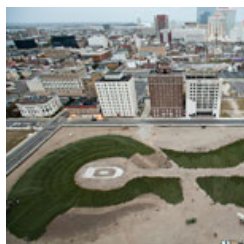
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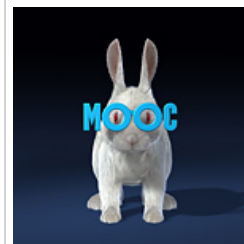
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