Episode Book

EPISODE #6719

Why Niche Communities Swear by Weird Mics

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SYNOPSIS

Niche audio communities often fall in love with unusual microphones through happy historical accidents rather than pristine spec sheets. Harmonica players turned the high-impedance Shure Green Bullet into an expressive hand-filtered instrument, while bluegrass groups coordinate live mixes by stepping around vintage-styled Ear Trumpet Labs condensers. Meanwhile, field recordists deploy passive seismic geophones to capture structure-borne low frequencies from inside bridges and ice. These loyal subcultures embrace the flaws, physical shapes, and practical limits that define their signature sounds.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Last week we did the textbook weirdos. Ribbons, boundary mics, carbon, the throat stuff. Tonight, Daniel wants us to go where those mics actually live — the strange, niche microphones that one particular community loves. Harmonica players, bluegrass bands, bat people. His question is the good one: not just what are they, but why do the people who use them swear by them, and how do they differ from the laser and plasma lab curiosities we only waved at on the way past.



Herman

And that comparison is exactly the right place to start, because the answer we kept landing on is almost none of these are exotic anything. The Green Bullet is a dynamic element. The geophone is a geophone. The dummy head is two omnis. What's exotic is the situation they ended up in.



Corn

Accidents, basically. That's the pattern. Not designs.



Herman

So the framing I'd put on the whole episode is this: the best-loved obscure mics are usually accidents that a community adopted for a reason a spec sheet can't express. Shape, price, history, limitation. Meanwhile the laser and fibre-optic and plasma mics from part one are sold on exotic fidelity claims and have, as far as anyone can tell, no user community at all. No forum where a guy in Ohio posts his plasma mic rig every weekend.



Corn

Nobody's plasma mic has a fan club.



Herman

Right. Whereas the Green Bullet has survived two discontinuation attempts because harp players physically would not let it die. That's the difference between a curiosity and a tool.



Corn

There's a second layer too, which I like more the longer I sit with it. Inside these communities, the love is qualified. Nobody in the field recording world tells you the geophone is magic. The cello players tell you the clip-on condenser is noisy on their instrument, and then keep using it. Swearing by something and being honest about it aren't opposites here — they're the same gesture.



Herman

Which is the opposite of how the exotic stuff is marketed. The laser mic brochures are all unqualified claim.



Corn

Start with the bullet. It's the cleanest example of the accident thesis.



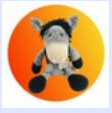
Herman

The Shure five-twenty, the Green Bullet. Nineteen forty-nine. It was designed as a two-way radio microphone. Nothing about its conception involved a harmonica. But the housing is this fat round blob that sits perfectly in a cupped pair of hands, it's high impedance so it goes straight into a guitar amp with no matching transformer, and a harp player cupping the mic seals the whole thing off and turns the amp into part of the instrument.



Corn

The hands do the equalization.



Herman

In a sense, yes. The cup is the filter. And it's worth slowing down on that, because it's a two-way control, not a one-way one. Seal the mic tight and you block the room out — the amp stops being a reproducer and starts being an instrument in its own right, distorting on purpose. Open the hands slightly and you let room tone and air back in, and the sound goes thinner and cleaner. A player can move from a dirty Chicago bark to something almost breathy without touching a single knob on the amp. Their tone controls are literally the gap between their palms.



Corn

So the microphone is only half of it. The other half is a pair of hands doing live filtering, and the amp doing the rest. It's a three-part instrument where two of the parts are a person.



Herman

And the price sealed the adoption, because the five-twenty sold for sixteen dollars fifty in nineteen forty-nine, against sixty-seven fifty for the Unidyne. That's the difference between a working musician buying one and not.



Corn

Sixteen dollars fifty. Four cups of coffee now, roughly, for the microphone that defined a genre.



Herman

The current version, the five-twenty-D-X, is still in the catalogue. It's omnidirectional, responds from a hundred hertz to five thousand, and it has a volume knob at the base.



Corn

A volume knob on the microphone.



Herman

Which sounds like a toy feature until you think about what it's for. You're a harp player holding a mic straight into a guitar amp that's on the edge of feedback. The knob at your thumb is feedback management in real time. You ride it between phrases. It's not a convenience, it's the control surface.



Corn

I retract the toy comment. That's the part I'd keep and everything else about the mic is negotiable.



Herman

Here's the detail that I think is the whole episode in miniature. In the late seventies, Shure told its dealers the Green Bullet was being discontinued — two-way radio dealers weren't moving many, which was the market the thing was nominally for. And the news reached harmonica players anyway, this is pre-internet, and Shure started getting phone calls and postcards telling them it was the best harmonica microphone in the world and they'd better not stop making it.



Corn

Postcards.



Herman

Postcards.



Corn

A community lobbying a company to keep a product the company thought had no community. That's the purest form of swear by it I can imagine.



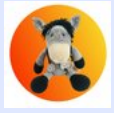
Herman

It's still in production. The lobby won.



Corn

And the crystal mics next door to it are the sadder version of the same story.



Herman

The crystal element mics, yes. These are the ones with the Rochelle salt piezoelectric crystals. And you have to appreciate what the blues literature says about them, because it's so backhanded it's almost poetry. Crystal mics fall far down the list for general vocal reproduction and would normally not be considered useful in a performance situation. In the blues world, however, they have quite an important place in the tone of amplified harmonica.



Corn

"Not useful in performance, except in the performances that mattered."



Herman

That's the limitation-as-feature thesis wearing a hat. The boxy, midrange-y, distorted character is exactly what amplified harp wants. Dennis Gruenling, who plays and deals in these things, says they produce a warmth and highs and lows other types can't, and then adds, they haven't made good ones in decades.



Corn

He sells microphones he believes stopped being made properly decades ago. That's either a scam or a religion.



Herman

It's a supply chain, is what it is, and the supply chain is mortal. The Rochelle salt crystals were prey to heat, moisture and humidity — these are fragile, perishable elements. There's a detail about Rochelle salt that I find almost too on-the-nose to be real: the stuff is water-soluble. Not sensitive to water in the way electronics generally are, where you dry it out and hope. It dissolves. A humid summer could kill an element just by existing near it. So the very property that made the tone possible is the property that guarantees the tone's extinction.



Corn

A microphone with a weather forecast. And in nineteen ninety-nine Hohner bought the molds and the last existing stock of the piezoelectric salt crystals. Their version, the Blues Blaster, ended in twenty-thirteen.



Herman

Ended as in ended.



Corn

As in nobody can start making them again without re-engineering the lot, and nobody's going to re-engineer a crystal element for a market of a few thousand harp players. Which means the existing vintage bullets are appreciating collectibles. There are dealers who sell only vintage bullets with vintage elements, on the explicit argument that they hold and increase their value.



Herman

A microphone as a store of value. The community isn't just choosing a sound anymore, it's deciding who can afford to join.



Corn

That's the downstream effect I find quietly significant. The entry price of amplified blues harp tone is climbing, and it will keep climbing, because the element is extinct.



Herman

Okay. Counterweight to all that mortality: the bluegrass scene, which solved the same problem — small community, specific sound — with a mic you can actually buy.



Corn

Ear Trumpet Labs. It's a father-daughter operation in Portland, Oregon, eleven models, and they have become the go-to microphones for bluegrass and Americana in a way that's almost invisible from outside. Brandi Carlile uses one called Myrtle. Gregory Alan Isakov uses the Louise. Elvis Costello, Old Crow Medicine Show, The Decemberists are all users. The Violent Femmes recorded an entire live unplugged album across radio stations using just two of the Edwina model.



Herman

Two microphones for an album. For a band.



Corn

The signature use is the single shared condenser. The bigger models — the suspended-ring designs like Myrtle and Josephine — exist specifically so a whole band can stand around one microphone. And the thing that makes it work is the part I find fascinating, because it's not audio engineering at all. A forum post I've seen from someone who saw two amplified bluegrass shows put it perfectly: everyone on stage shared a single mic, the mix was determined by how far everyone stood back from it, and you step forward for a solo.



Herman

The mix is choreography.



Corn

The founder, Philip Graham, teaches it formally — he runs a thirty-minute workshop at the IBMA World of Bluegrass literally titled How to Mic a Bluegrass Band, with a band standing in to demonstrate the moves.



Herman

Thirty minutes to teach what a mixing desk does by moving your feet. I want you to notice we've now covered a microphone adopted for its shape, a microphone adopted for its price and its wrongness, and a microphone adopted as a social contract. None of that is on a spec sheet.



Corn

None of it. Fidelity is almost never the argument. The argument is how the thing behaves in a room with humans around it.



Herman

Which is a good hinge, actually. Because those are mics a community adopted because of a shape or a history. The next cluster are mics a community adopted because they capture something a normal microphone physically cannot. Structure-borne sound. Ultrasound. The spatial cues of a head.



Corn

Field recordists first, and the geophone, which is my favourite thing in this whole episode. A contact mic is almost completely insensitive to air vibrations — it transmits only structure-borne sound, whatever the solid it's stuck to is doing. The LOM Geofón takes that one step further: it's a passive seismic transducer, originally geology and oil-prospecting equipment, and it needs no power at all. It responds only to the motion of the surface it's mechanically coupled to. Stick it to a bridge, a tree, a railing, and you get the sound inside the object.



Herman

No power. It's a rock that listens to other rocks.



Corn

A rock with a magnet mount. Or a spike, or a suction cup. LOM says it sounds best on metallic objects, large structures, trees and ice, and that it gives a darker, weightier sound than piezo contact mics. One field recordist, Andrej Chudý, put it in a way that stuck with me — it accentuates the low-end frequencies and makes you feel like you're experiencing them from the inside of the recorded subject.



Herman

From inside the bridge. That's the whole pitch.



Corn

But now the honesty check, because this community does it every time. Robbie Elias, who uses one, is very clear the Geofón is not a magic, everything-I-record-with-it-is-great microphone. It's a supplementary mic. You use it to pick up low end that you mix in later, as a layer. Daan Hendriks says almost the identical thing about his contact rig — a specific piece of kit he rarely uses, but when he does, it's as a layer.



Herman

They swear by it and they use it maybe one track in ten.



Corn

Swear by it, reach for it rarely. Those coexist. The field recording community is probably the most precise about that of any group we looked at — their gear lists read like love letters with footnotes attached.



Herman

Wildlife recordists next, and the parabola — that's the dish on the stick everyone's seen and nobody's thought about.



Corn

Cornell's Macaulay Library, which is the big archive for this, says parabolas and shotguns are the two systems most used for wildlife recording, and that parabolas tend to give cleaner recordings with less background noise than shotguns under the same circumstances. Which surprises people, because the shotgun looks like the serious tool.



Herman

The dish looks like something you'd use to contact a satellite. The expensive-looking one loses.



Corn

The physics is lovely. A dish of around fifty to sixty centimetres concentrates on-axis sound onto a mic at the focal point — it's a passive, noiseless amplifier. The figures from the Wildlife Sound Recording Society: twelve to fifteen decibels of gain at one kilohertz, about twenty-five decibels at two kilohertz with a twenty-inch dish. And because the gain rises with frequency, it's ideal for exactly the thing it's used for, which is birdsong. You can pull one songbird out of a canopy two hundred feet up.



Herman

No batteries, no noise floor of its own, and it flatters the frequencies birds actually sing in.



Corn

It's the perfect specialist. And the specialization is the reason the community defends it so specifically — Sound On Sound notes the significant off-axis coloration, so in a dense space where sources blend and move, an overgrown woodland, it's bad. It's at its best in calm, open ground pointed at a single source. The dish diameter also puts a floor on the low frequencies it can capture.



Herman

A tool with a narrow use case that its users will tell you, unprompted, the boundaries of. There's a personality type here and it's the same person in every one of these communities.



Corn

What's that?



Herman

The person who bought the weird tool and now has to defend it to normal people at parties. Look — everyone we've discussed so far has had to answer the question why don't you just use a normal one.



Corn

The parabola people least of all, honestly, because the answer is audible. You point the dish at the bird and the bird arrives.



Herman

Fair. ASMR next, and this one's interesting because the community is still arguing with itself.



Corn

Binaural. Two microphones placed where a person's ears would be, often inside a dummy head, capturing the tiny differences in timing, volume and tone between left and right, so that your brain reconstructs the sound in three dimensions — on headphones, specifically. The reference instrument is the Neumann KU one hundred, a dummy head modelled on average adult head dimensions with an omnidirectional capsule in each ear. And the framing I like from Sound On Sound is that your eardrums themselves work like pressure-operated omnis, so human hearing is essentially a spaced-omni array.



Herman

The dummy head isn't imitating a listener. It is one, minus the rest of you.



Corn

It's the world's most expensive set of ears. And the ASMR community has split three ways over it. You've got the dummy heads, you've got the ear-shaped silicone mics — the 3Dio style, basically two rubber ears on a bar — and you've got in-ear mics that sit in your own ears and record your personal head. The dummy heads capture the most realistic cues, but they're large and expensive, and the actual creators mostly want something they can whisper around and move their hands past.



Hilbert

Hilbert's Anteater Trivia. A single giant anteater's home range can cover several square kilometres. I have never covered several square kilometres. I have a desk.



Herman

He's got you there.



Corn

The ear-shaped bar does look faintly ridiculous, I'll grant, but the physics is real — the pinna, the outer ear, is doing the sculpting, and a silicone ear does an approximation of it. The unresolved part is the fun part, though. Clau Nader runs something called ASMRNet, research comparing mono versus stereo versus binaural for ASMR triggers, and it's ongoing with participant opinions divided. There is no settled answer on whether the binaural gear actually improves the tingles.



Herman

A community that built its whole aesthetic around a technology it hasn't confirmed works.



Corn

Welcome to audio. We built the recording industry on vinyl before we understood tracking distortion.



Herman

Bat detectors. Last stop on the specialist tour, and the one where the problem is the most basic.



Corn

The problem is beautifully stated by one of the builders: it isn't that bats' frequencies are higher than we can hear, it's that the range is twice as wide as the human audio spectrum. Forty-four kilohertz versus twenty. Any system designed for human-audible sound — capsules, filters, the whole chain — is designed for the wrong range.



Herman

A mic isn't just too deaf, it's too narrow. You need a capsule that's wide in a direction no music gear ever needed.



Corn

And the builders solve it with astonishingly ordinary parts. Electret capsules rarely spec above twenty kilohertz, but Knowles MEMS capsules reach eighty kilohertz — one builder reports a six-millimetre electret that still works to about forty-five. There's a published detector design using a Knowles MEMS mic, a fifteen-kilohertz high-pass filter, and a commutating mixer chip that tunes across ten to seventy kilohertz, replacing a radio chip that's gone obsolete.



Herman

A bat detector built from a hearing-aid part and spare change.



Corn

That's what it is — the Knowles capsule is the kind of thing that goes into hearing aids and phones, produced by the millions. And then the cleverness is in the detection scheme, the heterodyne trick: you mix the ultrasonic call with a local oscillator, and the difference comes out in audible range, so you hear the bat as a chirp dropping through frequencies. Different species echolocate at different frequencies, so you can identify the bat by ear.



Herman

Hold the whole frequency problem in your head for a second. The birds wanted directionality, the field recordists wanted the inside of objects, the ASMR people wanted the shape of a head. The bat people want a spectrum twice as wide as anything human equipment was ever designed for. Every one of these communities is defined by a physical problem, and the microphone is just whatever survived contact with it.



Corn

That's the cleanest contrast with part one's lab curiosities, too. The laser and plasma mics promise better fidelity in principle and serve nobody in particular. Every mic we've covered tonight serves somebody specific, badly, on purpose.



Herman

Before we go further — is there a mic you actually use that you'd defend like this? Because you have a DJ rig and I have opinions about it.



Corn

The M421, actually, on toms, though that's hardly obscure — half a million sold since nineteen sixty. It's a broadcast mic that became the standard tom mic because of a presence bump around four to five kilohertz and a five-position bass roll-off. The obscure one I love is the Coles 4038, the BBC ribbon from nineteen fifty-one. Flat from thirty hertz to fifteen kilohertz, figure-of-eight, still handmade, and the reason people still fight over it on drum overheads is it imparts a thickness — cymbals sit back instead of attacking you.



Herman

You just described a vintage microphone the way Gruenling described a crystal element. Warmth, nobody makes them like the old ones, everyone argues.



Corn

I said the pattern was universal. I didn't say I was immune.



Herman

That's the most honest thing you've said tonight.



Corn

What about you, though? You're the one in this flat who refuses to replace anything that can be fixed. If a community formed around a bad microphone tomorrow, which one's yours?



Herman

Anything with a volume knob I can reach without looking. The Green Bullet people and I would get along.



Corn

You'd hold it for a week before deciding.



Herman

I'd hold it for a week because that's how long it takes me to test a thing properly. That's diligence, not slowness.



Corn

The distinction has never once been obvious from the outside.



Herman

From the outside everything I do looks like napping. I was thinking about the crystal mic ending, though. Twenty-thirteen, the Blues Blaster stops, and that's not a product line dying, that's an entire tone becoming second-hand. Twenty years from now the last working crystal elements will be in the hands of collectors who never play them.



Corn

And someone will be selling a modelling plugin that claims to reproduce it.



Herman

And it'll be close, and it won't be the same, because the plugin won't melt when the room gets humid. The physical fragility was load-bearing.



Corn

I'd push on that gently — the Geofón shows the opposite arc. That one started as oil-prospecting gear, a tool of an industry that abandoned it, and a tiny Slovak maker turned it into the object of desire for field recordists. Supply chains die and get adopted. The accident runs both directions.



Herman

Hm. That's the better version of the point. Tools have afterlives.



Hilbert

The bluegrass trio at the Freemasons' hall, the one I told you about. Colin, the mandolin player, he still won't rehearse the step-back. I drew them a diagram in March. Laminated. Rhythm players stand this far back, lead steps to the line marked with the arrow. I measured the distances with a tape measure at the hall, at the community centre, and at the fairground stage — three venues, three sets of distances, because the ceilings differ.



Hilbert (continued)

Colin says the diagram is cheating. I say pointing a speaker at a man's ears is cheating. They use the one mic because they say it's the honest way to amplify a band, and then they stand wherever they like. In June their guitarist had a wedding, a family thing in Ramat Gan, and I stood in. Guitar, not mandolin. I'd rehearsed the diagram, obviously, even if they hadn't, so I stepped forward and back for the whole set, and the balance was the best that band has ever sounded. Colin disputes this. He wasn't there. Herman, you spent half an hour tonight explaining gain staging to people who own microphones. Tell him.



Corn

Well, if you moved to the marks and they didn't, you were the only one mixing.



Hilbert

Thank you. They've asked me back for the December gig. I said only if the diagram goes up on the wall first. Colin's a good player, mind. Best mandolin in the room on any night I'm not holding a guitar.



Herman

Hang on. You rehearsed their choreography alone, with a laminated diagram, for a band you're not in.



Hilbert

Somebody had to know the distances.



Herman

The fairground stage. What were the numbers there?



Hilbert

A metre and forty for rhythm, ninety centimetres for the solo step. The hall has the longer distances, the ceiling's higher. It's in the diagram.



Corn

The ceiling affecting where you stand — that's real, actually. A higher ceiling means a longer reverb tail, so you push back to keep the room out of the mix.



Herman

He measured three venues and the band argues with him. That's tonight's whole thesis wearing a bow tie — a tool nobody designed, defended by the one person who takes it seriously.



Corn

We did an episode ages ago on building your own speech recognition tools, and the same thing kept coming up there — people choosing the inconvenient, controllable option over the polished default. This is that, with microphones.



Herman

So here's the thing I'd take from the whole night, if you're taking one thing. The question to ask about any tool a community swears by is never is it good — it's what does it make the people around it do. The Green Bullet makes you ride a volume knob with your thumb. The bluegrass mic makes a band rehearse its choreography. The parabola makes you stand in a field pointing a dish at one bird. The love isn't in the specs.



Corn

It's in the behaviour the tool imposes. Every one of these is a social arrangement with a transducer attached.



Herman

And the open question that leaves me with: if the best-loved obscure mics are accidents and limitations, what's the current bad microphone that's a future community waiting to happen? Something on the shelf right now that a spec sheet calls wrong, that in thirty years nobody will be able to buy anymore.



Corn

Given the pattern, I'd watch whatever the cheapest, most physically weird thing on the market is. That's historically where the accidents come from. Sixteen-fifty and a shape that fits your hands — nobody planned that, and it's still in production seventy-seven years later.



Herman

And the mortality part stays with me, too. The last crystal molds went to Hohner in ninety-nine and production ended in twenty-thirteen, and that's a door closing one hinge at a time. Scarcity decides who gets to join the next generation of a community. Somewhere right now there's a microphone at the start of that same quiet fade-out.



Corn

Producer credit as ever to Hilbert Flumingtop, who is apparently available for December gigs if you need a guitarist who knows where to stand.



Herman

If you want more of this, try episode four, If Your Voice Ages, Does Your Fine-Tune Become Useless; and episode ten, How ASR Went From Frustration To … Whisper Magic. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast. If tonight changed how you think about any microphone you own — good, bad, or destined — leave us a review on Spotify. It helps people find the show.



Corn

We'll be back soon. See you then.

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