

History Channel

by stephen hastings-king

The James Joyce Drum and Choral Society was a recreational association made up of machine gunners who spent missions in turrets half out of B-17s. They made large, resonant drums from materials they found on base and performed deep rhythms that seem to reference the Royal Drummers of Burundi even as no recordings of them circulated in the 1940s. We have in the Archive a single acetate recording. On it, the drumming is interspersed with segments sung/shouted from Ulysses in intricate dialogues of rhythms and pitch, timbre and resonance. We also have a few notes that allude to how the ineluctable modalities of the visible and audible were transformed by the experience of hanging in a transparent egg half out of a B-17 at 10 thousand feet waiting to be spattered like paint.

We have a recording by a second group called The Abraham Lincoln Brigade that specialized in performing segments from Hamlet from the viewpoint of Abraham Lincoln at the Ford Theater on April 14, 1865. The acetate begins with furious drumming and a repeated chant of: "Alas poor Yorick/ I knew him Horatio/ a man of infinite jest" that ends abruptly with the arrival of a bullet at 2 minutes. The rest of the recording is a long strange, high-pitched drone. Notes link the drone to what it's like to lose consciousness after getting shot in the head. In the long version, to which only scattered references survive, the drone would eventually be broken up by slashes of the din and clatter of Abraham Lincoln being carried from the theater.

Now an elderly gentleman is looking directly into the camera from a stuffed chair. Beneath his glasses he is a soft heap. The invisible interviewer asks about being a gunner. The response details an aggregation of long cold bone-rattling flights spent hanging half out of a bomber in a transparent egg full of panic and

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engine noise amid the flack and fighter fire and how in dreams he would spin in the egg spitting bullets ack ack ack until he shot the propeller off the plane he was in. And while the response disappears the gentleman from the present, his name and other coordinates stream across the bottom of the screen, a bulletin about a story that is breaking elsewhere.

We made drums from barrels and other hollow things. We learned patterns then aligned texts with them. They had to be complicated because we wanted to pay attention and get to another place. At first we practiced and planned. Then we found out that a nearby radio station had a recording device. Cutting a record made what we were doing real and turned us into an official something. So we made up a name for our official something. But we had to keep changing it because people kept not coming back. The name turned on us, so we stopped making records.

The invisible interviewer's arm reaches into frame and hands the elderly gentleman an acetate record in a plain brown sleeve. He takes it and is still, silent and looking.

After a while he says: We made this to not be listened to. We wanted to put everything we saw and heard here, get it outside of ourselves and put it in a somewhere. We thought maybe if we did it we would be able sleep through the night and not be awakened by the same dream of spinning around and around in the turret full of panic as it crosses a field of invisible death. None of us ever listened to this. That would be pouring the war back in through your ears. We put it somewhere where it could be found so that any one of us could dig through the box and pull it out to hold it and know that all that shit is on this acetate and that this acetate is a thing that is here and I am outside of it holding war in my hands.

