

Audible Voice Phenomena

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AVP. Audible Voice Phenomena: Are they really from beyond the grave? Regardless of how you value them, a little knowledge about the most common varieties of them and the issues that should be addressed with them will go a long way to making your account of your investigation something others can depend on.

As stated at the end of the last lesson (Class A EVPs), AVPs--Audible Voice Phenomena--are commonly mistaken for EVP. In fact, sometimes they can literally be mistaken as EVP if they were not actually heard acoustically but turn up in the recorded evidence nonetheless. However, the initials are problematic from the get-go, since the only truthfully common feature all AVP have is that they are audible phenomena. They do not have to be voices any more than EVP have to be electronic.

However, because AVP go part and parcel with the sensory experience of investigating, great importance has been placed on their role. Some take them to be indicators of their own sensitivity to paranormal phenomena (bordering on psychic intuition, if you will). Others look to them as part of the "risk" involved in direct contact or interaction with the spirit world (perhaps not quite so significant as being intimately groped by unseen hands). All, however, come away from an investigation hoping to be able to tell others their story, and "story" is dependent on the kind of sensory detail for which AVPs are inevitably grist for mill. Consequently, AVPs are, for many, a marker of the success of their investigation, and this is why so much paranormal TV reality programming invests heavily in the showmanship of AVPs and other interactive ghost-hunting sports like seances, ouija boards, table-tipping, and other decidedly dodgy rituals flagrantly used by the so-called experts. My own calling to the field of paranormal research, however, has less to do with such forms of entertainment, and I sometimes forget that I cannot hold everyone to these standards.

Regardless of how you value AVPs, a little knowledge about the most common varieties of them and the issues that should be addressed with them will go a long way to making your account of your investigation something others can depend on.

Voices Carry: Unlike other sorts of AVP, voices come with the cache of actual words. This might be disappointing if the clarity of your recording does not bring you any closer to understanding what is being said aloud. In fact, AVPs sometimes require just as much speculation and extrapolation as Class B EVPs. However, because the anomaly was an acoustic phenomenon, not an electronic one, it means that the source of the AVP is somewhere in the environment. It doesn't matter whether or not you believe spirit communication lies outside the realm of ordinary physics; if you and others hear something in the environment, it must be originating from three-dimensional coordinates somewhere in the vicinity: if you can hear the anomaly, then the AVP is obeying the law of physics by using traditional sound waves. It's that simple.

You can plan ahead for this by charting ahead of time where you will put your recording devices and by coordinating more than one audio recorder (or by pooling the resources of your fellow investigators and their audio recording devices). With a minimum of three audio recorders properly set up in a space, you can set a trap for a potential AVP loosely using the principles of triangulation. Even more important, though, is that multiple audio sources located in different parts of the space will permit a comparative analysis later of any evidence captured. This is obviously a useful practice for the capture of EVPs, but with AVPs it addresses a major problem: the subjectivity of the human ear in the environment. Everyone may agree that they heard a voice speaking just then, but only in rare circumstances is an immediate consensus reached as to what the vocal AVP has communicated. In fact, the "agreement" about an AVP is usually the unreliable result of on-the-spot pressure to acquiesce to one or two people's assumptions about the nature of the AVP. In reality it's an exercise in group dynamics, not scientific inquiry. For example, if someone says, "Did you guys hear that just now?" and the majority response is "yes," it's more than likely that person will deploy a passive aggressive strategy to build consensus quickly before anyone can say, "No, I didn't hear it" or "No, that's not what I heard." This may not happen out of megalomania or some other self-serving agenda; it's just the way group dynamics frequently work, and paranormal investigative teams have to keep vigilance for it. Having multiple recording sources working in tandem takes out some of the subjectivity in identifying what a vocal AVP is saying, and creates a kind of 3-D snapshot of the sound that permits a comparative analysis of sources. You'd be surprised how a recording closer to the source differs from a recording across the room, and even more shocked how these differences will lead to different interpretations of the semantic aspects of the AVP.

Knock Three Times On the Ceiling (If You Want Me): From the very first time I heard the old haunted house joke about the "rapping in the closet" (as a horrible teller of jokes, I won't presume to spoil the punch-line for you here), knocks and taps as a form of ghostly communication fired my imagination. They're were so standard over the years that it's difficult for me even now to think about them in any objective way. Perhaps we can lay the blame for this on the nineteenth century Theosophists and Madame Blavatsky, who turned the knocking on the table into an archetype of cheesy seances staged in old movies. They were dramatic, and fun, and mysterious, and when the neighborhood kids and I got together after school to re-enact those hokey scenes from the Abbott and Costello films, as low-budget special effects they were elegantly simple to recreate.

But, of course, as adults and serious paranormal investigators now, our standards and expectations have changed. We still use knocks and taps as a primitive yes/no code--a kind of low-tech K-2 meter. (See "Lesson #4: Identifying Class A EVPS (Part II).") When part of a structured vigil in which controls can be placed on the environment and the activities within it, these percussive sounds can still be a significant form of communication, especially if they are initiated by an unseen presence. And when investigators initiate the technique, and knocks are returned in a decisive and predictable manner, it can be downright exciting. Therein lies the key to interpreting the percussive AVP. Yes, their cause and source are an intriguing phenomenon. (And, in this instance, AVP is accurate only in the sense that knocking is used in lieu of a voice.) But are they always intelligent?

Too often, we live under the delusion that daily human activity is cleanly segregated from the animal world, and we place a great deal of trust in our walls as barriers to wildlife, but the simple truth is that animals infiltrate our space frequently--and especially under the cover of night. Some individuals are completely disarmed by how loud the scratching sounds of a single mouse can actually be, never mind larger vermin such as rats. But, place the sounds in a potentially paranormal context, and you can see the likelihood for misunderstanding. Starlings, sparrows, and other common urban birds can populate our eaves with the greatest of stealth, detected only by the sounds of their coming and going. We imagine barn owls to be the hackneyed realm of grade school clip-art or your uncle's stories about "the old country," but in truth predatory animals are just as likely to take up residence right over our heads when we don't expect it. Raccoons hug close to outer walls just beneath the foliage and make noises on the outside that can translate to strange scrapes on the inside. Termites munch. Moths flutter. And cats, besides stupidly savaging just about anything that catches their focus, will cry concupiscently into the night, at times sounding like infants and at other times sounding like Paula Abdul. We are animals sharing our spaces with other fauna, and our own noises have become norms of civilization to the point that other animals' noises strike us as paranormal. Give the animal world some credit, since it moves and pulses through our space with the same rhythms of life as ours. Some of those rhythms are likely to be detected when you're trying to conduct a paranormal investigation.

Similarly, we have a tremendous capacity for denial about the instability and mutability of the buildings in which we conduct our investigations. Before assuming out of hand that a regular pattern of taps is coming from beyond the dimension of death, do some old-fashioned sleuthing of the immediate environment to find out if appliances are responding to regular internal processes, or if the building infrastructure is responding to changes in air density, temperature, humidity, and so on. There's a great deal more pattern in these processes than one might imagine, and they can easily be mistaken for attempts at spirit communication. Of course, test the likelihood of this as well, rather than dismiss taps and pops from being potentially intelligent communication. Bait further responses, and look for consistency. Calculate your odds of the responses being intelligently driven, random occurrences, or the effects of other regular processes. An honest analysis of the recorded evidence may help you to determine whether or not the taps and knocks are conveying their own communication, or whether the participating investigators are responsible for creating the illusion of communication.

Unchained Melody: One variety of AVP commonly reported is the musical variety, especially in cases involving a history of music or musical instruments: that honky-tonk mellodian at the haunted cathouse; the somber three-note phrase on a viola at a music hall; the ephemeral recital by a contralto voice in an opera house; or even the favorite tune paranormally whistled before the fireplace of the master bedroom. When musical instruments and vocal genres are heard anomalously, and their exact nature can be corroboratively and accurately described by others who are present, not only should the recorders keep running, but investigators should capitalize on it whenever possible. When music is heard as a collection of instruments, it is thought to be a marker of a residual haunt--a detail in a place's "memory" of a former time. However, when music is heard and seems to showcase an individual's talent or creative urge, it is potentially an intelligence that has just put out an invitation to interact with it via the medium of music. AVP singing is especially emblematic of this. For example, if a child's lazy little sing-song voice is heard, one should immediately begin soliciting contact by singing nursery rhymes. We've had occasional success with the sing-a-long, too (allowing enough time in between rounds, of course, for the entity to sing on her own). Doing your homework about the location and knowing what types of music, lyrics and songs might be identified by any spirit occupants may ingratiate you later on and give you the edge you need to initiate contact. However, this technique takes commitment. Investigators are sometimes too quick to abandon it because they're embarrassed by their voices, or because they have other burning questions with which to interrogate the spirits. Again, consider a musical AVP as a kind of privilege in the spirit of a backstage pass, and cultivate a continued interest in music as a form of communication or a prelude to it.

Blowin' In the Wind: My two parrots and I have a routine we follow every week when the neighbor's gardener fires up the old leaf-blower: we sing. The unrelenting and obnoxiously loud drone of that machine becomes a note, around which I and my husband and the birds just invent silly songs. Besides being a good way to stay sane at that time of the morning, it also illustrates a phenomenon about sound that is found in paranormal investigating: we hear patterns of sound in the noise matrix, whether a leaf-blower, a window fan, nearby freeway traffic, staccato raindrops, or the subtle buzzing of our own equipment. It's a psychological phenomenon called "apophenia": involuntarily finding form and pattern in random input. Pareidolia is a version of the phenomenon more widely known: the identification of human traits in the randomness of images and sounds (such as faces and voices). The collective term used by paranormal investigators is "matrixing." The Audible Voice Phenomenon is particularly prone to this pitfall because, when investigators are anticipating

paranormal experiences and keep their senses attune to them for long periods of time without result, their fatigued senses begin to make up for what's been missing. (I can vouch, for example, that after I've been on investigation for over four hours, I almost always begin to feel as though something unseen is stroking my head.) When continuous random sounds provide a backdrop of white noise over a prolonged period, the ear will eventually find order in the randomness, and quite often pareidolia will occur: human speech will seem to manifest out of the noise.

When pareidolia occurs as an AVP, it is usually very compelling as a subjective experience. Typically, the investigator thinks at first the voice is a figment of the imagination, but the more she listens, the more she hears it. Others can be persuaded (i.e., "psyched out") to hear it as well. I can already hear the protests to this last statement, but tell me as a child you were not convinced that you were actually hearing the ocean in the conch held up to your ear? To add another dimension of persuasion to this phenomenon, scary places invent a context where people expect to hear unusual sounds. When the camp counselor pulls a serious look over the dying embers of the bonfire, shines a flashlight under his chin, and says, "Even today, the legend says that, if you listen real close, the screams of terror of the dying men can still be heard on the wind," you probably thought you heard something kinda sorta like a scream on the wind. The power of suggestion is a kindred dynamic to the phenomenon of pareidolia. Be aware of it. Expect it. And be prepared to rely on your recorded audio for an objective record of the sound--if any is there! Remember, you're just as likely to carry this psychological phenomenon into the evidence analysis as you are to carry it into the field.

Unlike EVPs, AVPs inspire greater excitement over the possibility of being an active and immediate participant in a paranormal event: on the scene, and directly experiencing evidence of a ghostly presence or hearing the words of the wandering departed. We think of them as desperate attempts to draw our attention, or habits taken up in absentminded nostalgia for a lifestyle long since left behind in the world of the living. This is only natural, given our own motivations to seek out proof of the paranormal. However, we also must remain wary that we are not reading too much into the sensual world to the extent of imagining all audible sounds are paranormal. If AVP cannot be substantiated by the collected data, then they have little to contribute to the general cause of paranormal science. Consequently, they should not be held up as evidence. If, on the other hand, you see yourself as a ghost adventurer, collecting stories of the thrilling hunt, such experiences are indispensable to the making of a good yarn. I don't begrudge the paranormal hobbyist the pleasure of telling a compelling ghost story involving knocks and sighs in the dark. If you demand proof, however, of the paranormal, put your money where your mic is: rely on the strength of the evidence to provide an accurate and objective record of the phenomenon.

And with that, I can finally say what I've been waiting to say for half a dozen paragraphs: ladies and gentleman, that's a rap.

Hear are a few illustrations of the types of AVP I discussed above.

Knocks and Bangs_____

Music and Other Sounds_____

Voices_____

Example 1

Hard knock death

In this particular case, the clients had complained of hearing anomalous percussive sounds for years. Consequently, we gave any knocks like this one more serious attention.

Example 1

Give a little whistle

The content of this clip is self-explanatory. However, it might be worth noting that whistling was captured the next night, making the repeating whistles more than coincidence.

Example 1

Go get a camera!

Go get a camera! (amplified)

An investigator hears the voice of a spirit girl saying, "Help me," and the wireless audio is "rolling," turning a subjective anecdote into documented evidence. It doesn't get better.

Example 2 (knocks

Bang! (Room 1)

Bang! (Room 2)

Here's a parallax view of a potentially paranormal event. In the first clip, investigators hear a loud bang in the adjacent room, where another audio source (the second clip) captures the sound loudly and clearly. To date, no cause for the loud bang has been ascertained.

Example 2 (music)

Do you hear someone whistling?

Anomalous whistles are the most common variety of musical AVP and EVP, followed by singing.

Example 2 (voices)

Listen-up! (Room 1)

Listen-up! (Room 2)

In Clip 1, a fellow investigator and I do our thing, when unexpectedly I pick up a response on my Listen-up. Once again, two sources are recording: one in the room with us and one closer to the source of the response.

It's the first time we've been able to catch an AVP that might have otherwise been mistaken for a poor EVP in the evidence review. Nevertheless, note the discrepancy in my interpretation of the AVP versus what Clip 2 actually seems to capture instead.