



[ SKEPTICAL INQUIREE BENJAMIN RADFORD

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# Playing to an Empty Room: Ghost Hunting and ‘Singapore Theory’

Q:

I saw ghost hunters using something called “Singapore Theory” to find ghosts. What are they referring to?

—D. Parsons

A:

Rich Newman, author of several books on ghost hunting, including *The Ghost Hunter’s Field Guide* and *Ghost Hunting for Beginners*, endorses “Singapore

Theory,” which assumes that

playing music from a particular era (that, presumably, of when a spirit was actually alive) will instigate a response on the part of the ghost. . . . Since you do not know what particular era a spirit may be from, you will probably want to keep a folder of MP3s that range across time . . . [including] classical music, some Civil War-era songs, jazz from the turn of the century, blues, and more. . . . By re-creating the environment the spirit was once comfortable in while alive, you may get the responses you want and capture some evidence of the haunting. (Newman 2011, 90–91)

Ghost hunters have used some version of this for decades, for example hiring re-enactors to perform scenes a ghost might have experienced or using antique items that were common during the era in which a ghost they’re trying to contact was alive (such as using Civil War-era items to try to contact Gettysburg spirits). When the technique is formally described—instead of simply put into practice—

it may be known by various names including “familiarization theory,” but when applied to music intended to provoke ghostly response, “Singapore Theory” is its common name.

At first glance, “Singapore Theory” seems vaguely plausible: if there’s a spirit present, and if it can hear, and if you know what music he or she liked when alive, then one or more famously fickle ghosts might respond favorably to that music by making contact.

However, a closer examination of the circumstances of ghost hunting reveals that none of those conditions are present: Ghost hunters do not know—and *cannot* know—for certain that a ghost is present (if a scientifically valid way to detect the presence or absence of ghosts existed, then we’d have proof of spirits). More to the point, even if a ghost was suspected of being present, it would be virtually impossible for a ghost hunter to correctly identify a par-



ticular piece of music that a particular long-dead unknown person might have listened to, much less enjoyed or had some connection to, at some point anywhere from months to centuries earlier.

A bit of historical perspective helps inform the discussion. To take the United States as an example, hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Germany, Italy, France, Ireland, Spain, and elsewhere helped settle this country. Chinese laborers, for example, worked on railroads and in laundry houses in the Old West; many of them spoke little or no English. Unless a ghost hunter happened to find a song that was popular around 1850 in Shanghai, for example, which a young man destined to die in the Old West might have learned to play on a *pipa* (fretted lute) or *yehu* (fiddle), the chance of musically connecting to this ghost are slim.

## **Just because a person lived during a certain era doesn't necessarily mean they listened to and enjoyed whatever music was popular in a specific area at that time.**

What if the ghost you're trying to communicate with is Navajo or Hopi, and the only meaningful music are traditional tribal dances he or she grew up with? What if the ghost you're trying to communicate with was born in Russia in 1790 and never spoke a word of English and certainly never listened to any Civil War-era songs or jazz?

Just because a person lived during

a certain era doesn't necessarily mean they listened to and enjoyed whatever music was popular in a specific area at that time. For example, though the jitterbug was especially popular in the 1930s and 1940s and Elvis Presley was popular from the 1950s onward, many people of the era didn't like—or listen to—that music at the time, and many people still listen to that music decades later. Mozart and Beethoven are world-famous but that doesn't mean their music was familiar at the time all over the world, from Indonesian fishing villages to Brazilian farms.

If you could somehow know (or determine with a high likelihood of accuracy) that a given location had been visited only by a few people who could possibly have died there—and you have thoroughly documented those people's backgrounds—then you might conceivably be able to select music that they might have listened to. For example, if a ghost hunter visited a remote cabin far out in the Nevada desert that was known to have housed only a single Gold Rush miner hermit, or a compound in Antarctica where only a few dozen people had lived, then you could have a chance at selecting music that people who once lived (and possibly died) there might have enjoyed. There is simply no way to accurately identify every single person who may have died in a particular place.

But in fact, most locations where ghosts are reported (historic hotels being a perfect example) are exactly the places where thousands, or tens of thousands, of travelers from all over the world have stayed at one time or another. Hubs of travel—such as airports, bus stations, train stations, and hotels—are exactly the locations where people of wildly varied cultures, languages, customs, and musical preferences are likely to have visited (and perhaps died) over decades and centuries. Assuming ghosts exist, realistically and statistically the chance of any given particular jazz or Big Band tune that a ghost hunter happens to have and chooses to play in a particular location being familiar to a particular ghost is vanishingly small.

Nor is there any established range for ghosts: Does a ghost haunt only the room where he or she died or a whole house or a whole neighborhood or a whole state? Sometimes ghosts have been reported not where they died but where they lived and worked—their businesses and saloons, for example. Depending on which arbitrary “ghost rules” a person assumes ghosts obey, any ghost might haunt any location.

Unless ghost hunters can somehow correctly identify the age, race, religion, gender, social class, nationality, and other personal information of a particular ghost, there is virtually no chance that whatever music they select to prompt the ghost would be relevant to them. The ghost you are trying to woo into conversation with what you imagine might possibly be familiar tunes to them might have died five months ago or five hundred years ago. He or she might have been raised on blues, jazz, classical, hard rock, rap, or music from other countries. It's even possible that the person never heard any music at all while alive, if for example he or she was born deaf or died shortly after birth.

Without knowing any of the correct biographical details of a ghost, it is virtually impossible to accurately predict what music they might have heard, much less enjoyed. Keep in mind that recorded popular music has existed only since about the 1930s. Thus as a practical matter it would be difficult for a ghost hunter to even obtain and play recorded music that anyone before that era would recognize.

Even if a ghost hunter could somehow correctly determine a ghost's favorite *type* of music, it would be of little help since in reality most people's musical tastes are far more specific. They might like rock and roll, for example, but that doesn't mean they like anything that might be included in that category, from Guns 'N' Roses to Air Supply; a person who likes country music might like Johnny Cash but not the Dixie Chicks, and so on. No music style is homogenous. Because not all jazz, bluegrass, or rock is the same, the likelihood that whatever MP3 music

files Rich Newman or another ghost hunter might have brought to play would just happen to be music that the dead spirit would recognize and respond to is remote at best.

Ghost hunters using “Singapore Theory” are instead forced to draw from pop culture stereotypes and tropes. They make (largely baseless) assumptions about what sort of stereotyped ghost they expect might haunt the location (a gunslinger, a slave, a soldier, etc.). As with most ghost hunting protocols, there’s no logic, evidence, or science behind the method; it’s based on little more than speculation and guesswork.

To see just how absurd “Singapore Theory” is, imagine ghost hunters a century from now trying to use it to communicate with an American alive today: Without a clue about the age, race, gender, or culture of that hypothetical person, what music could they possibly choose that would be liked or familiar to him or her? Eazy-E? George Jones? Yanni? Taylor Swift? The Beatles? Aerosmith? Mozart? Youssou

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N’Dour? Ludakris? Shania Twain? Megadeth? Lady Gaga? Ricky Martin? Michael Jackson? Shakira? Vivaldi? Bob Marley? The Everly Brothers? Nirvana? Ragheb Alama? Frank Sinatra? Warren Zevon? B.B. King? Woody Guthrie? M.C. Hammer?

All these musicians—and thousands more around the world—created music that at one time or another, among

people of a certain age and sociocultural demographic, was popular. But just because a person was alive at a time when a song was popular doesn’t mean they ever even heard it. As a rule, Baby Boomers listened to different music than their parents did as well as than their children did. But that’s not always the case: new generations are being exposed to music from many decades earlier, and thus some teenagers today are just as familiar with Miley Cyrus as the Beatles.

The fact that “Singapore Theory” and other such methods are taken seriously by many ghost hunters as a proven and credible technique should be concerning; if these experts, who write books and teach classes on investigation, don’t recognize the absurdity of this ghost hunting technique, what does that say about their other advice and instruction? ■

#### Reference

Newman, Rich. 2011. *Ghost Hunting for Beginners: Everything You Need to Know to Get Started*. Woodbury, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications.

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