

Atoms | Program recalls old-time radio shows

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Thornton man brings storytelling online

By SHAWN MACOMBER

Telegraph Correspondent

The "Atoms, Motion and the Void" podcast begins with a twinkling piano aloft in swirling ambient atmospheric noises, rising slowly, until the gravelly, almost other-worldly voice of Sherwin Sleeves surfaces to captivate with another expansive, philosophy-laden tale that despite its oddity nevertheless is rendered so perfectly it becomes eminently believable.

Indeed, so convinced was this reporter by the world of "AMV" (www.atomsmotion.com), I addressed my initial e-mail requesting an interview to Sherwin, who, it turns out, is a fictional character.

"My name is Sean Hurley, I'm 39, married, with a one-and-a-half year old son," the response came back. "I'm a stay-home daddy, but I also have a fulltime job as a medical transcriptionist. My alter ego, Sherwin Sleeves, is 79. He lives at the top of Marked Mountain in a log cabin in Lemon, New Hampshire."

Well, at least that's sorted out. Now I know how those fooled by Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds" felt the next morning. After overcoming my surprise and scolding myself for not being a more eagle-eyed gle-eyed reporter, I queried Hurley as to the origins of Sleeves.

"I have done a lot of writing in my life, just for pleasure and actually stopped about two years ago," Hurley said. "While dabbling with the idea of getting into voice-over work, I stumbled over the Sherwin voice. I started doing 'Atoms, Motion and the Void' without much thought at all. It just occurred to me to start telling stories using the Sherwin character and then setting down appropriate music."

"There's usually a period of about 10 seconds where I begin to blend into Sherwin, but then it's all him," he added. "It's actually fairly pleasant. To me, he seems quite a separate person - distinct and unusual and intact. But not me."

"Atoms, Motion and the Void" is "a representation of every fictional idea I've had, set into a new ligature," Hurley explained, adding, "I hope, at a certain future point, to collapse a lot of it into a stage performance, a la William Burroughs or Spalding Gray."

Burroughs? Gray? The brilliance of Hurley's conceit, the melody of his prose and the off-kilter nature of the stories he tells suggests such aspirations are not outside the realm of the possible. And his attention to the smallest of details in an uber-immense universe, as reflected in the show's title, which Hurley explained "comes from an atomist concept of Leucippus and Democritus as to the nature of the universe," is among the rarest qualities in an artist,

"I honestly am not an expert in what any of the great philosophers have said about atomism," Hurley continued. "I simply have drafted the notion into my own conceptualization of the world. If you asked for a direct translation of the title I would say that it just referred to ... everything. 'Atoms, Motion and the Void' is, in one big story form, my real, symbolic, spiritual, and intellectually reconstituted understanding of the universe and our place in it."

"Aside from its obvious likeness to old-time radio, I think it harkens back to the 19th-century practice of publishing novels in serial form in magazines."

In this day and age of incessant complaint about even those advances which clearly benefit humankind, it is difficult to find someone unwilling to take the technophobe bait, but when asked whether something immeasurable was lost when oldtime radio serials were killed off by the advent of television, Hurley refused to indulge.

"I have the tendency to think that something is always being gained or opened even if there's an appearance of loss or closure," he said. "I don't think that you could really revive, outside of fetish-type circles, old-time radio shows. I don't think I'm really trying to. I think of 'AMV' as a long, dark film. And by dark, I mean imageless."

Pursuing this motif even further, Hurley has provided the University of Connecticut students currently redesigning the "Atoms, Motion and the Void" Web site "conceptual guidelines" encouraging them to incorporate 1940s rocket ships into the design.

"If you look at one of those old rockets, they look like they're both from the past and the future simultaneously," he said. "Using the Internet to present an old form of radio adventure presents a similar ambiguous juxtaposition."

But I think one thing that makes 'AMV' work is an internal acknowledgement, or fictional consanguinity, with these notions of collapsing time. The story itself plays with ideas of time, identity and being. And for that reason, I think it all matches up."

It's a little difficult to sort out exactly what Hurley is getting at there unless one has heard the program. Suffice to say, it is a one-of-a-kind production as intriguing as it is unique and certainly worth an audio trip up Marked Mountain.

For the time being, though, it might be just you and old Sherwin up there.

"I really have not tried to spread the word about 'AMV' yet," Hurley said. "I don't know exactly how to do it. I don't have a lot of extra time, so I mostly just try to make the episodes. I suppose the 'Field of Dreams' cliché comes to mind, but I think I'd still keep building it even if they didn't come."

"I would never have thought of doing such a thing in my life," he continued. "And I don't know if I actually did think of it. I think it maybe found me. And I don't mean that in a BS way. I mean that it comes from my center, and it uses me to my fullest extent. There is nothing else I can add to it.... It sponges me out."

The gap between Sherwin and Sean, it seems, shrinks by the moment.