

An inside commentary on America's
pre-eminent radio-art and satire
group's latest production

negativland

over the edge
and all in **your head**

NEGATIVLAND'S PETER CONHEIM
SPEAKS WITH GAYLE YOUNG



*It's All In Your Head FM, No Business,
Favorite Things*





Downloading...



“we’re very aware of the politics, but that’s of paramount importance. I like to be an artist and activists second, not the other way around. We’re not making lousy art if we were activists.”

following two Canadian performances by Negativland, in Kitchener and in Toronto, group member Peter Conheim spoke with *Musicworks* editor Gayle Young about the history of the group and the development of the piece it had been premiering, *It’s All in Your Head*. The following text is based on that conversation.

Don has been working on particular episodes of his KPFA radio program called *Over The Edge*, [with those episodes] running, off and on, for something like thirty-five hours, maybe forty hours of air time. He’s done a ten-week series of shows, and that included a couple of five-hour shows, as well as his usual three-hour shows for *Over The Edge*—[and all of these episodes were, like the show in Kitchener and Toronto,] titled *It’s All In Your Head*, [and were] all about the supernatural God concept and what it hath wrought. All the material collected for that became the basis for putting together this live show. Since it was a radio show first, we decided to extend that aspect right onto the stage. It’s kind of an essay show: it’s like a lecture, or, as I heard someone say last night, it’s like a documentary show made up of other doc-

umentaries. It’s not a collage; it’s more of a lecture accompanied by sound.

Don has done the radio show continually for twenty-four years. It started in 1981, before he joined Negativland. When the Negativland guys first met Don and heard his weird radio show, they brought all this equipment to the station and turned the show into this blender that Don hadn’t quite been making it. Don said it fit in totally naturally [with] his show, and he soon joined the group. The band transformed Don’s way of looking at radio. The whole thing became one giant process and then, as time passed and various members of the group moved to other states, the radio show continued. Don’s the one who does it all the time, but we’re all in it periodically, in different ways.

On radio, Don would be taking live phone calls, which is a major part of the mix. He would open the phone lines and tell people, “Don’t say hello.” That’s the standby line. We’re going to open the phone but *do not say hello*. People sometimes say, “Hello, am I on?” but generally they don’t. We were planning to do live phone-ins for these two on-stage shows, but we felt it was going to disrupt the flow of the show, that it was too much of a wild card. The separation

that the phone line gives you when you’re a listener to the radio is really different than if you’re sitting in the audience watching the people react to you. It’s such unknown territory that we didn’t want to try it in front of an audience. Most people who call talk, although there are people who actually play sound mixes down the phone lines. When people get in on the mix that way, sometimes it’s just astounding what they contribute.

shaving a chimp on stage on radio

In one scene [in *It’s All in Your Head*] we simulate shaving a chimp live on stage. The character Buck Logic, who is the remote sub-host of the *Wildlife Tonight* program, has a hapless zookeeper drag a chimp out of its isolation chamber and shave it—to prove that we are all the same under the fur, as it were. In fact, my character even exclaims at one point, “It looks just like my kid!” So we’re trying to say evolution is obvious, to emphasize evolution versus creationism.

There’s lots of old-fashioned radio technique there, as well. That was my favourite part of the whole show. All of us grew up listening to classic old-

The aesthetics are always
to say that we're artists first
'round. I think we'd be
s first and artists second.

— MARK HOSLER OF NEGATIVLAND,
MAY 2005, KITCHENER, ONTARIO



a journey to Negativland

BY GREGORY PRESTON

In May of 2005, three members of Negativland—Peter Conheim, Don Joyce, and Mark Hosler—performed the world première of *It's All in Your Head FM* at Kitchener's Open Ears Festival and again at Toronto's Deep Wireless Festival. Negativland, which also includes David "The Weatherman" Wills and Richard Lyons, is respected and admired by both avant-garde and rock fans. Their press coverage speaks of their ongoing battles in the copyright and fair-use arena, and portrays them as some of America's finest political critics. Their recordings, though, are not just vehicles for opinion, but musical works in their own right. In the words of member Mark Hosler, Negativland began with their "appropriation of media and collage work from any sources that inspired them." As teenagers, they each recorded sounds within their world—TV, talk radio, movies, pets, parents, their own original music; and as Negativland they placed these sounds out of context to create new collages—short pieces are linked together and create a flow of sonic images critiquing American popular culture. Taking news stories, propaganda, and samples and dialogue from the history of recorded sound, they've opened our eyes to the manipulations of culture.

They are archivists and librarians, picking the best, worst, and most outrageous of American popular culture. From collections of 16mm films, numerous obscure and well-known LPs, radio broadcasts, and private tapes they craft narratives and original music, magnifying them to create raucously self-referential satire. They've been performing a weekly radio show called *Over the Edge* on KPFA in Berkeley, California, since 1981. The radio art tradition is the essence of their approach, with live listener phone-ins frequently included in their radio shows. The humour they use verges on surrealism, often exaggerating the intentions of their sound sources—radio ads, for example, can sound less like plugs for aftershave and more like instructions for living with your peer group.

Negativland's new live show, *It's All in Your Head FM*, had its world première at

key negativland recordings

BY GREGORY PRESTON

My first experience of Negativland was with the 1991 EP *U2*, a satire based on the band U2's popular song "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." Over sampled parts of the song, a voice repeats and expands on the words, mocking the sincerity of the lyrics. Negativland added sound clips of disc jockey Casey Kasem savaging the band on his radio show, *American Top 40*, and reading dedications before each of his broadcasts. Island Records, who controls U2's masters, stopped production of the Negativland record and had copies destroyed. Negativland was fined and royalties were assigned to Island. Mark Hosler explained that they felt like a "canary in a coal mine. [The situation was] a symptom of large corporations trying to control every aspect of people's lives... The big fist of corporate oppression came down on us because of some art that we made... They want to totally control and own the culture that they mass produce, and they want us to passively consume it. Negativland has always actively consumed it—chewed it up and spat it out and had fun with it."

Escape From Noise, 1987, is a loose exploration of information overload in today's society. The group is highly moralistic; concerned for the rights of people and about the fact that many don't realize that their rights are diminishing. There are isolated original songs written specifically for the album, synthesizer work, and longer spoken segments, but it all forms a cohesive piece, abrasive and occasionally abrupt, but serving perfectly as a treatise on the white noise of our culture.

1989's *Helter Stupid* is the band's reaction to the sensationalization of tragedy by the press. Negativland falsely connected a real ax murder to a fictitious argument had by the son (and murderer) with his family over the band's song "Christianity Is Stupid." Negativland sent out a press release claiming that they had cancelled their



time radio. Don, being the oldest of us, actually heard original broadcasts of things like *Bob and Ray*, and all these wonderful classic pieces. Mark and I got into it as kids, through rebroadcasts in San Francisco. We all come from that background. It was such a thrill to not only do those techniques on a stage, in front of an audience, *as if* it was a studio audience, but last night it really *was* a studio audience, because we were live on radio. We didn't even know the show was going to be broadcast live, I don't think, until the week before. We thought it was going to be Webcast or taped for later broadcast. But the fact that I could do this live—to me that was the ultimate thrill. Being with the studio audience, which is actually seeing you and egging you on, is very different from being in the KPFA studio, where it's a cold, sterile environment, and you have no idea of the greater radio audience. I love that mix, live to air with an audience.

We didn't know how we were going to replicate the sound of the chain, dragging the monkey in for the shave. We talked about having a big burlap sack filled with laundry or something to wrestle with, to sound like an animal, but that didn't quite work. And when I went downstairs in Kitchener, in the storage room I found this perfect chain. But it didn't sound very good when I dragged it across the table, and there was no interesting way we could replicate the sound of a chain on the concrete

floor of a zoo. This is all twenty minutes before we were going on to do the show. Then I found this piece of plastic that had all these burrs in it, and by dragging the chain across these burrs, it would get stuck and I would have to pull it, which then sounded like the chimp was resisting—[at least, it sounded like that] to me, anyway. I love the fact that I actually had to wrestle with the chain, and I was hoping that that might translate to the radio audience.

The electric shaver was also a last-minute thing. The sound of the razor shaving was so abrasively loud; it's like a skin-from-hell kind of sound. That was just a piece of sandpaper scraping against some plastic that had a rough surface, a matte surface, and we scratched the hell out of it, too. I was supposed to be really working at it, and the script has the chimp really reacting, biting me, trying to stop me from shaving it. So I had to wrestle with the sandpaper and try to make it sound like I was having difficulty getting it done. And that's when it occurred to me, that I'd brought my electric shaver with me to Canada... why don't I just shave myself on stage? It doesn't make any sense, really: you don't switch to electric for something you can't get off with a razor blade, because a razor blade is much sharper than a shaver is. But I wanted an excuse to shave on stage, I guess, so I kept my stubble intact on Saturday, left it nice and thick, and shaved it off during the show.

seeing less, hearing more

This show [*It's All in Your Head FM*] has less emphasis on visuals and more on sound. Because it is based on Don's radio show, it is almost all audio. We have all been doing that radio show in one way or another for so long that we know how to do that kind of listening and mixing, and so it was logical for us to try that live on stage.

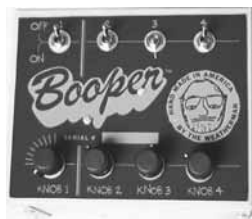
I have three boopers (a booper is a feedback oscillating device made by David Wills, the Weatherman, one of the founding members of the band). One of them is a modified shower radio that has been made to feed back. It's just an AM-FM radio that no longer plays straight signal. It's a series of feedback loops that are looped and looped and looped and looped, and they're controlled by three or four pots and buttons. David and I made it by sitting there for about four days and nights, just listening with alligator clips to different feedback loops, and how the feedback gets affected by other knobs. And you can have layers and layers and layers of these things in the box. One's a radio, one's a baby monitor, and one's a 1978 Bee Gees Rhythm Machine, which my childhood shrink gave me as a gift, actually, which has a keyboard on it. That one actually allows me to play signal-bent oscillations with keys, and then tweak the pitch and the speed of the oscillation as I hit the keys. That unit died completely after Toronto, and is, sadly, no longer in use. My fourth instrument is a pair of tweeting bird toys with a pitch control added, placed inside a toy television set with a picture of a bird on it. So I threw birds into the show periodically, which were digital birds that were horribly slowed down and wrong.

Mark played records and CDs, modified and processed—but not heavily processed. He has a very simple delay and a very simple reverb, and that's it. Don had the cart machines, plus he had



the cassette player. One of his classic techniques is simply a little portable hand-held cassette recorder with a cue button. He does lots of cueing, with a heavy delay, lots of squeaky stuff with the cassette. And he had his original booper, which I think dates back to something like 1978.

A cart machine is an old radio device set up basically to play an endless loop of quarter-inch analogue tape in a cartridge. Cartridges come in different lengths. Don records them at home with different cue points. The cue point just tells the machine to stop, basically. So he could record twenty different variations of someone saying, you know, "There is no God" or "Let us have faith," or whatever, on one cart; but each one will stop itself, so he can go to the next cart and let that sentence conclude, or he could fast-forward to the next cue point. So that's what the cues are for. And I guess you could have as many cues as you could logically fit on one of those tapes. The problem with this technique is that



the City Hall Council Chambers in Kitchener. A few days later the three members performed the piece again at the Drake Hotel's Underground in Toronto. Since then, it has been performed several times in the United States and released on CD.

Upon arrival at the Drake to see *It's All in Your Head FM*, I was given event information and a 1950s-style paper mask, which I was instructed to wear if I wanted to block out the stage and audience, and listen strictly to the "radio" aspect of the performance. The band members arrived onstage, said hello, and quickly set to work. Mark Hosler scratched and manipulated samples from LPs and CDs; Peter Conheim created swooping sounds from tone generators called boopers, and produced toy bird sounds and various effects and noises; while Don Joyce handled five radio-cartridge machines (ones that play cartridges with loops of quarter-inch analogue tape used for cueing and playing radio ads; see also the discussion on "carts" in the accompanying article by Peter Conheim); and all three read scripted commentary. Slow cross-fading of U.S. political speeches, orations by Christian leaders, and samples from vintage education media were layered over traditional American music. A blend of musics—dance, pop, Christian singalongs, countrypolitan, and original material including dubby grooves—were extended and became trancelike, seeming to converge into one. The word "Islam" surfaces in the mix, heralding the sounds of jets, seeming to crash into the World Trade Center. I felt a darkness descending. The dialogue expanded, extending to longer passages instead of snippets, and incorporating comments on religious beliefs. What was once established as good and right has dissolved into so many layers of grey. At this point I put the mask on, and although I expected to zero in on the band, what I also heard was an audience laughing along, becoming hushed when the messages were complex and serious, buying beer—and the band manipulating and moving their gear. It was not an isolated performance experience anymore; it was a living, breathing event, where all were involved in the creation. When I removed the mask and looked around, I saw a dozen people wearing theirs. It occurred to me that the mask did not have a humorous purpose, as

tour because they feared for their lives and were under investigation by the FBI. The press ran the story without verifying its authenticity. *Helter Stupid* thus pointed to the lack of accountability of the press. The album progresses to the related subjects of the entertainment corporations' responsibility, including the glorification and selling of horror in films. All this is set to disco and pop music samples. The material moves at a terrific, exciting pace and gives way to a series of tracks critiquing the manipulation of listeners by radio and record companies to market pop music as a purely consumer product.

Dispepsi, 1997, confronted the Pepsi-Cola Corporation head-on by using rewritten lyrics from commercials mixed with celebrity endorsements from the once-important Coca-Cola / Pepsi war—served on a bed of hip-hop and dance beats. Much of the material comes across as rap from another dimension. PepsiCo decided it was wiser to ignore the recording than tempt bad publicity with a lawsuit. *Negativland* incorporated fragmentary bits and pieces of sound, many of them cross-referencing the group's other songs. You hear bytes of "U2" and "Christianity is Stupid" where you least expect them.

Negativland's 2005 album *No Business* includes a fifty-two-page treatise entitled "Two Relationships to a Cultural Public Domain," plus a whoopee cushion emblazoned with the copyright symbol. The recording itself is a collage directly commenting on copyright violations and sampling: all sounds are from samples. The standard and disco versions of Ethel Merman singing "There's No Business Like Show Business," are chopped to the point where Ethel sings about stealing music, not audience adulation. Similarly, Julie Andrews sings "raindrops on kittens, schnitzel on roses" in "Favorite Things." Speeches against Internet downloading ask "Why?" The Beatles answer "Because." It all wraps up with Judy Garland singing the in-concert version of the title song, but with her flubs magnified. It is a very comedic album—extremely precise and satisfying.



at the end of every show Don has to re-cue every single cart.

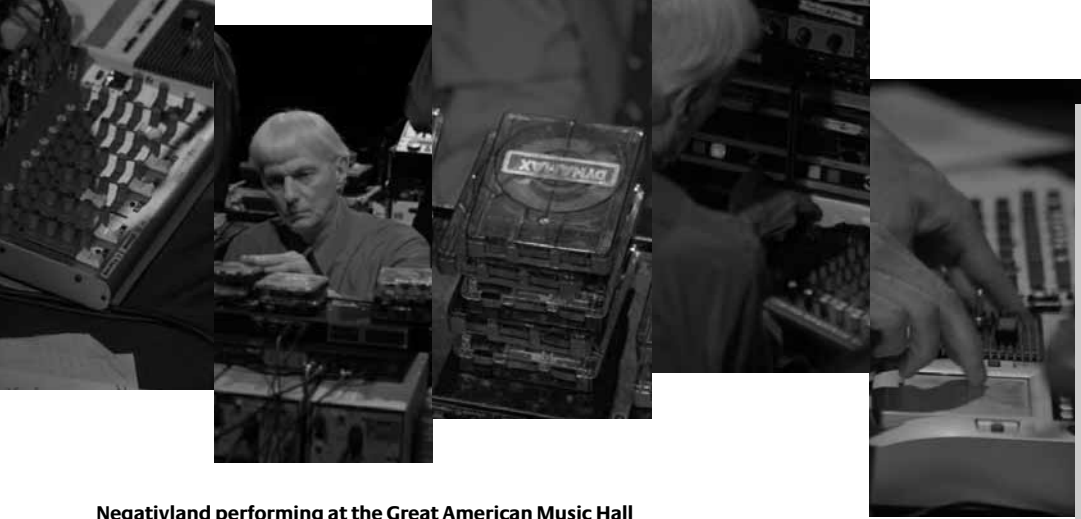
Don used five cart machines simultaneously, I have no idea how he did it. I have no idea how Don does anything [laughs]. It's a great big mystery. I mean he only has two hands. He's only cutting back and forth between two cart machines at once. But he must have other ones running. I guess having five going at once speeds up the process of switching carts, because he can pre-load tapes in the machines, and just be ready to punch them in and punch them out.

I tried to convince him before this trip, I said, "Don, why don't we just buy you five portable CD players and why don't you just make a bunch of CDs?" And I thought, Boy, am I smart; this is going to just save everything. Well, no, because when you hit stop on a CD player it resets to zero and with a cart, you hit stop and it just stops right where you left it. He could pull the cart out of the machine and it's stopped on the word "and" and he could stick it right back in the machine and it will say "and." That is a very big part of what he does, to cut up sentences and rearrange words. Last night I just thought his manipulation was beautiful. He created a lot of new juxtapositions that we had never heard in rehearsal, because he only had three cart machines in rehearsal. It works, but I just don't know how he keeps it straight in his mind to have five of them. I'm thinking about Don's trunk—he carries about a hundred of them in a steamer trunk. That's really the Don Joyce method: that won-

derful analogue tape. And frankly, it's the only analogue tape aspect of *Negativland* that's left.

He went to the Guelph University's student radio station to find his fourth and fifth cart machines. We only brought three, and we thought we should get the extra two not only for backup in case one of his went down, but just to add to the overall texture. The two from Guelph were in horrible shape. (The Guelph radio station was not using them; they were in the closet.) They worked, but one was super sibilant and one was quite the opposite, it was complete mud. They had level disparities and all kinds of crazy stuff, so it was rough. But Don made it work.

We were going to talk to the person from Guelph, [to see] if they wanted to sell them. But we were overburdened with stuff to bring back to the States already. Cart machines are not hard to find. You can find them on eBay; you can find these nice dual ones. But because of how much they weigh and the cost to ship, I don't know if it's worth it. What we really need is a set of 50Hz, 220-volt cart machines for Europe. When we've played in Europe, we've had to borrow them. It worked fine the last time, but the ones we got in Germany are being decommissioned as well. And that's important, because even with a voltage converter the motor runs slower. Over there the electricity is at 50Hz instead of 60, so the motor slows down.



Negativland performing at the Great American Music Hall

My other band, which is a film-projector orchestra called Wet Gate, has just been invited to Australia. We have 60Hz motors in our projectors. They'll give us 110 to 220 step up or step down transformers but they don't convert the hertz. So our machines are not going to run on speed, and the motors might overheat. Same problem as with cart machines, theoretically—unless there's a 50–60 switch of the motor, which there probably isn't in cart machines. Some projectors have them and some don't. The ones that Wet Gate uses just happen to not have them. So it's an issue. And that's actually more important than getting more North American cart machines.

those quiet Canadians . . .

I love playing to smaller audiences, especially doing intimate shows like the two we did in Canada. I have no problem coming halfway across the country to play to 175 people. We've never—at least, not since I've been in the group—done a purely improvised show. This one was the first: with the exception of the written scripted sections, the show is totally improvised. We didn't know how anybody would react. We didn't know if they'd sit through two hours of radio—quote unquote—without a lot of visuals. We didn't know if the material was going to be too inflammatory for some people.

The Canadian response has been pretty interesting compared to when we played here in 2000. We had a lot of visuals then, something like eight to ten 16mm film projectors, five slide projectors, and all of our sound equipment on stage. It was much more a rock 'n' roll show, with tons of imagery, more skits and physicality. In Toronto [that year], at the Opera House, the response was very muted. People afterwards said they really liked it, but we thought we were having a terrible show, because people just were not reacting. So then when it came time to do this really cerebral show, this radio show, in Canada, I thought, Oh no. This is going to be like an iceberg. No one's going to say a word. They're going to be too busy thinking about it. Those quiet Canadians just aren't going to say anything. And then last night people were hinging on stuff I never would have imagined they would have laughed at—all throughout the show. I was amazed.

god is a problem

The show is concerned a lot with debunking the religious concept of a supernatural God. It's a philosophically based dialogue about the thinking and believing processes themselves, along with some science about how brains work and the metabolism of thought. It remains a tricky business, considering the contemporary cultural power of the religious right. The show is not about the religious right though, it's about more than that, it's about the all-con-

I had first thought, but had the serious aim of helping us enjoy a deeper collective experience.

Two hours passed, and the work became a revelation: how could a scripted sound collage of religious viewpoints entertain and inform without being boring or obtuse? The work presents a point of view that's expressed through tight editing, with no time wasted. The actual performance aspect was impressive. I marvelled at the organization, discipline, and attention to detail that were involved in a two-hour live show improvised around scripted sections. Musical ideas flowed from one performer to the next—less like rock, and more like a symphony. The slow unfolding of sounds and samples was like a huge cloud rolling overhead—there were so many details, yet you could always discern the cloud's overall shape and magnitude. The blending of sound sources—often layered as a looped byte, creating its own groove for the voice portions to lie atop—reminded me of the dub excursions of the Orb, where a performance or recording is not a series of related songs but a trip with a beginning, middle, and destination. The band comments on the holy war waged by the U.S. in Iraq, and the swing to the right. America has found itself in a religious war, sees no honourable way out, and is determined to win by might, rather than respecting other cultures' beliefs.

But, though that was the focus of the show, on my streetcar ride home I was tapping along to the recollected music, repeating bass lines, with the voice loops running around in my mind. This is what makes Negativland so interesting and undated, and suggests why they are still active after twenty-five years. It explains why so much has been written about them, and though they will be spoken of in the future as political activists and forerunners of an inevitable change in fair use of samples, their CDs will still be played for the musical experience. Their messages are lifted from the murky subtext and made perfectly clear. They show us that the truth was always there, needing only to be identified and brought to the foreground.

Gregory Preston is a writer, composer, and regular contributor to Musicworks. He is currently composing an electroacoustic symphonic tone poem.



Negativland performing at the Great American Music Hall

suming idea of a God. And at the same time, it sends up fundamentalism in all its forms.

I remember we were worried in 2000 when we took very broad swipes at Christianity and fundamentalism in our *True/False* show. We played it in Tulsa, Oklahoma, literally down the road from Oral Roberts University, which is this Blade Runner-esque constellation of weird looking, blobby buildings, and the Praying Hands that are two stories tall with bats flying around them at night, and all this wackiness, and it is just Jesus twenty-four hours a day. And people came to that

show, no one stormed out in horror. They loved it, they laughed hardest at the stuff that savaged fundamentalism.

But it's preaching to the choir, you know. There's not going to be any uproar in any country we would take this to. I wish there were, actually.

The grotesque spectacle of the Terry Schiavo affair a few months ago—the so-called debate about whether she would be taken off life support—actually blew the lid off. It changed everything—and so much for the worse. At the very least, it shed a harsh light on the sheer veracity of these people's beliefs, and on the vast amount of power they wield. They even roped supposed liberal Jesse Jackson in on their side! It was something that I, at thirty-seven years old, almost never thought I would see in my lifetime. Growing up in Berkeley, living on this little island, and thinking there were other people like me, knowing that there were at least some people like me out there.

God is a problem. God's a real big problem in the States now—the separation of church and state is almost gone. It's eroding more and more every day. I don't know how much of an effect that's had on people in Canada, watching this spectacle in the U.S.A. We're waging a holy war in Iraq—this crusader, absurd concept. Everything is so laced with religion.

When we came off stage last night, Don and I were talking about this, and

he said, "Yeah, I'm still recording stuff off the air. There's still so much stuff on this topic." And I said, "Yeah, we could just go on forever with this show, and it would evolve every month or so because there'd be some outrageous thing that came down the pike that's good to work with, because of the times we live in right now."

Further information on Negativland can be found on their Web site, <www.negativland.com>.

Gayle Young is a composer and performer who writes about contemporary music and sound arts and edits Musicworks magazine. She recently completed music for Tree, a film by Shelley Niro, which was premiered by Liason of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT) in May, 2006.

Peter Conheim joined Negativland in 1996 and is also the co-founder of Mono Pause, an improv-ethno-situationist group, and Wet Gate, perhaps the world's only "all-16mm-projector" band, both from the San Francisco East Bay. He also plays bass for Malcolm Mooney (of Can) and co-directed a documentary on product placement in Hollywood cinema, Value-Added Cinema, with Steve Seid.

fyi Sample-heavy Negativland have a lot in common with John Oswald's Plunderphonics, featured in an article by Chris Cutler in *Musicworks* 60.

résumé français

En mai 2005, Negativland donnait en création *It's All in Your Head* au festival Open Ears de Kitchener et au festival Deep Wireless de Toronto. Bien que le groupe soit connu surtout pour ses contestations des lois de droits d'auteur, le musicien du groupe Peter Conheim discute ici de leur travail musical, de l'influence de la radio et de leur opinion sur le néo-conservatisme américain, « l'ennemi ultime de l'humanité ». Les collages audio de Negativland trouvent leur origine dans l'émission radiophonique *Over The Edge* de Don Joyce pour la chaîne KPFA de Berkeley (Californie). Leurs performances incluent des techniques employées depuis longtemps à la radio. Sur scène, ils utilisent autant de l'équipement audio standard que des appareils électroniques de leur fabrication, sans compter de l'équipement « d'origine » comme des chariots destinés à la publicité radiophonique qu'ils utilisent pour réaliser des collages audio en temps réel.