

Vocal Yokel

From a small town in Georgia to the 'Prairie Home Companion' stage, Fred Newman has long delighted audiences with a dazzling array of sound effects straight from his mouth. Now he has a new book that promises to put a little 'zip in your lip.'

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By Chris Bynum

Staff writer

Fred Newman is the saboteur of modern communication. People would rather talk to him than e-mail him. After all, he's the guy who honks, barks and quacks for a living.

The sound-effects guy on NPR's "A Prairie Home Companion" has turned sounds into a universal language. Anyone can say a door creaks, but how many people can make the sound of a creaking door so specifically that the listener can intuit the thickness and age of the door and just how far it has swung open? When Newman makes the sound, they even know if it was opened by an angry person, a sneaky person or merely the wind.

Newman can screech like a car ("There's no shortcut; it has to be done like you're a 6-year-old"), crash into a wall ("Let the crash explode out of your mouth") and mouth the sound of a radiator spewing ("Finish it off with 'shhhhus'-es and sizzling 'S' sounds"), all in the privacy of his Manhattan home.

Mouth sounds are his specialty. Heck, they're the bread-and-butter career of this Harvard business school grad, who shares his secrets for "putting more zip in your lip" in the book "Mouthsounds" (Workman, \$13.95, CD included).

The book offers more than 200 "special effects" you can make with your mouth, from baby voices to a cell phone ring to a hand saw to cricket chirps to laser guns to water dripping.

Newman credits his Southern roots for this wordless repertoire, and anyone who has heard the sound of a mosquito in the night knows a Southern upbringing is not a silent nurturing. The sound of the screen door with the Merita Bread sign shutting at Jack Fling's Cash and Carry Gro' (" 'cause there wasn't enough space on the Coca Cola sign to spell out 'grocery' ") was as worth remembering as the story swapping that took place on the wooden Coke boxes turned sideways, Newman says.



He grew up in the storytelling town of LaGrange, Ga., where those who practiced the verbal folk art "swapped sounds like trading cards."

But as decades have gone by, Newman's appreciation of sound, no matter how modern, started with some old-fashioned chewing of the fat.

"(The grocer) Fling would say, 'I'm gonna unwind this story,' " says Newman, who recalls as a small boy blowing the paper off a Popsicle just about the time the country store proprietor would begin a tale.

"The first story I remember as being magic. The story must have gone on for who knows how long. It was a yarn that would unwind. All I know is that when he was finished, the two Popsicle sticks in my hand were naked, and there was a puddle of orange liquid at my feet," Newman says.

Newman embarked on his career path long before the Southern guy with the Ivy League degree went to work at Newsweek while doing stand-up comedy on the side. Newman was the grammar school kid who offered trumpet fanfares when his teachers entered the room and introduced homework assignments with drum rolls.

He grew up doing construction work, where the only person he knew in "showbiz" was "Tony Grant's father who ran the drive-in" theater. Grant lived inside the screen.

Newman was fascinated that "six inches away from me was Deborah Kerr." He was smitten with "making a living that way." Newman began that career working with Muppeteer Jim Henson, later hosted the new "Mickey Mouse Club" (yes, when Britney, Justin and Christina wore ears) and now appears on the PBS reading show "Between the Lions" when he's not the sound effects man for Garrison Keillor.

Twenty-six years ago, Newman moved to Manhattan, where he resides with his "very loud family" -- a wife, two children and sundry pets. He navigates the city on bicycle -- without a helmet, he says, because he "wants to hear" the sounds around him.

"The subtleties of sounds provide clues that communicate and connect us to the world we live in," writes Newman, whose wordless vocabulary encompasses the past (the sound of a rotary dial phone, of a homing pigeon taking off or last year's model of a computer printer), the present (sirens, alarms and the new, improved, faster computer printer) and futuristic noises (the "galactic gizmo").

But the richer the texture and the association of a sound, the more Newman is drawn to it.

"Electronic sounds are less interesting," he says. "They are not directly attached to the physical world in the way that a door squeak is. You know immediately how

big the door is and how quickly it was opened in real time."

Newman's book explains the how-to of mastering such sounds. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then uttering a sound is worth a thousand adjectives.

"Sound-making, like life, requires a playful, fearless spirit; you have to be willing to look and sound like a moron and act in exactly the manner teachers told you not to," he writes.

Not only does Newman share the secrets of his craft, but also his advice for putting one's best tongue-thrust forward. He suggests avoiding dairy products before making mouth sounds because milk, cheese or yogurt can "alter the saliva-and-mucus balance in the mouth and throat."

Newman takes the serious student on a journey from the hard palate to the esophagus, by way of the uvula and the epiglottis. Nostrils and teeth and lips, however, are not excluded. It's Newman's knowledge of and skill in the use of these human parts that allows the story of Knuckles the Cat (handed down by the grocer Fling) to unfold to its fullest. In this short tale, the listener has heard a cat meow and growl and hiss and gallop against a backdrop of mosquitoes buzzing, a screen door creaking, an old Chrysler DeSoto cranking up, an elephant trumpeting, bacteria growing in a sink and ants walking on cotton candy.

He awakens the listener to sounds that become "auditory Q-Tips." One's memory and recollections are stirred not by words, but by familiar vibrations and whirs and whistles and musical instruments and touchstones with nature.

In 1979 Newman began his first version of "Mouthsounds," most of it written from a balcony at the Soniat House. Newman's memory of the French Quarter is as vivid as his sound re-creations.

"Real lips on a real trumpet, big doors, a cacophony of street preachers, muffuletta vendors and river calliopes. And a real church bell . . . few cities have those sorts of sounds," he says.

So, is making sound, like music, a form of art? Or is it noise that can be music to the ears?

"Well, I describe myself as the chimpanzee on roller skates on 'A Prairie Home Companion,' " says Newman, who lets his entertainment voice melt into a fatherly voice. He begins a bedtime story.

The exact words aren't important. It's a tale about a furry brown rabbit peeking his tiny head out of a hole from his haven in a white wonderland. Over the phone, Newman mimics the haunting sound of a winter wind blowing, bringing the picture of whirring snow into vision.

The adult listener is sitting at a desk looking at sunny 70-degree skies outside her office window. There's a chill in the air.

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