

Hit Play Transcription

Episode 84: Skeletons Inside Closets

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- So there's this song from 1969 called "It's Halloween" by this band called The Shaggs. The band was formed by this guy whose mother predicted that his daughters would form a popular band, so at his behest, his kids learned instruments and wrote and performed songs. His daughters hated it and were bad at it, and this song is bad. I decided to have the Neos cover it for this episode. I randomly assigned the parts- Michaela is on lead guitar, Jack is on drums, and Chan and Joey are on vocals. I was supposed to also add some rhythm guitar but I ran out of time, so this is also inadvertently a prank on these four Neos. They did their best. Enjoy. by Kyra Sims, featuring Michaela Farrell, Jackson Bird, Chan Lin, and Joey Rizzolo [30:44]
- Show Outro

Show Intro

Spooky underscoring with organ, xylophone, wolf howls.

Kyra: Episode 84: Skeletons Inside Closets. Hi, I'm Kyra, a New York Neo-Futurist. Our live show is back, but we just can't stop making art for your ears. So Hit Play continues!

If you're already a fan of The New York Neo-Futurists, or any of our sibling companies, hello! We can't wait to stare into the void… the void…

(reverberating, booming) THE VOID…

…Stare into the void with you. If this is totally new to you—welcome to it!

We make art by four rules: We are who we are, we're doing what we're doing, we are where we are, and the time is now. Simply put: we tell stories, and those stories are our own. Everything that you hear is actually happening.

So if we tell you that we are recording this part of the intro while standing under the biggest set of chimes I've ever seen, we're actually recording this part of the intro while standing under the biggest set of chimes I've ever seen, like I am doing right now. Ready to hear them?

Chimes ringing. Music resumes.

Some of the work in this episode may contain sensitive content. For more specific warnings, check the time codes in the show notes.

This episode's randomly generated theme is: Skeletons Inside Closets. *(dramatic, ominous laught)* Spooky secrets and secret spookies. Better put your brave friend in front of you while you cower through our audio hallways. JUMP SCARE! Did I get you? I bet I did.

And now, Toni will Run the Numbers!

Toni: I'M A VAMPIRE! Just kidding. I'm Anthony Sertel Dean, Technical Director of the New York Neo-Futurists.

In this episode we're bringing you 6 new plays. Six… new-ooo-OO-ooo plays…

This week's cast is Jackson "The Raven" Bird, Kyra "Spooky Horns" Sims, Chan "The Chilling" Lin, Michaela "Fear Puppet" Farrell, and me, Toni. Not a vampire.

That brings us to 398 audio experiments on *Hit Play.* How eerily close to 400. Think about the terror of editing and mixing all of those! Aaaahh! Just kidding, I love it. And I hope you love this episode too! Enjoy.

Music fades.

Play 1: Spooky Scary Skeletons (3:28)

GO!

Jack: You've probably seen it. The black and white cartoon GIF of dancing skeletons in a graveyard.

Different versions of it are among the first results to surface when you type "skeleton" on any GIF search engine.

Maybe you've heard the song that usually accompanies the full animation. It goes something like this:

> *Music:*
>
> *Spooky scary skeletons send shivers down your spine*
> *Shrieking skulls who shock your soul seal your doom tonight*
> *Spooky scary skeletons speak with such a screech*
> *You'll shake and shudder in surprise when you hear these zombies shriek*

When these dancing skeletons started making the rounds every spooky season a few years back, I was struck by a strong feeling of deja vu. I *knew* those skeletons, but I wasn't sure why.

As a little kid, I *loved* skeletons. I dressed as a skeleton for Halloween more often than not. I think one reason I liked skeletons so much as a kid was because, especially as a costume, they were non-gendered. I didn't have to pick a girl costume or a boy costume when October rolled around. I could just be a skeleton. Let other people assume what gender the bones ironed onto my matching black sweatsuit amounted to.

I'm still drawn to skeletons now—something about their simultaneous humanity and lack thereof. How they can be expressive, even without the skin and muscles that enable expression.

With some light digging, I discovered that, while I recognized the skeletons in the GIF from a mid-80's Disney music video compilation tape we had growing up, the dancing skeleton cartoon *originally* comes from an early Disney project called *Silly Symphonies*—which was a sort of testing ground for new animation techniques.

The Skeleton Dance, as it is officially known, was the *very first* Silly Symphony. It debuted in 1929. The full version gets pretty surreal—the skeletons don't just dance around, they take their bones apart to use as musical instruments and put them back together in grotesque inhuman shapes.

Music: Eerie piano and bells

Individual bones, separated from the full body, are often how we find the remains of ancient humans. It's astonishing how much we can learn from, say, a single human femur. When I took Intro to Biological Anthropology in college, my professor told us one trick of the trade that crushed every dream I had about my non-gendered skeleton friends: just by looking at the bones, especially the pelvis, archaeologists can determine the sex of a human specimen.

It doesn't matter how the person lived in their society at the time—whether they presented as a gender different from the one they had been identified as at birth, as I was beginning to do at the time when I was sitting in that lecture hall listening to my professor—hundreds or thousands of years later, we'd still look at their bones and mark an F or an M on official analyses and use gendered pronouns for them in published papers.

It was a total gut punch. There's a lot that medical transition can do to make a trans person feel more at ease in their body, but it can't change the shape of pelvis bones. My skeleton, my deepest core, would eternally clock me. I hated being confronted by that reality, but it didn't make me love skeletons as a concept any less. That GIF from the "Skeleton Dance" remains one of my favorites to deploy all year round, and that "Spooky Scary Skeletons" song is basically my anthem this time of year.

But "Spooky Scary Skeletons," was *not* the original track paired with the cartoon in 1929—even if it plays backing band for the animated skeletons on all of the most-viewed bootlegs of the cartoon on YouTube these days.

Underscoring: Tinny xylophone and cartoon sound effects

The music for "The Skeleton Dance" is a non-lyrical orchestral piece composed and arranged by Carl Stalling. A pioneer of animation as a new medium, his belief was that every move, every action in an animation should match the music composed for it. That principle is on full display in the original cartoon—clacking bones, expressive horns—the music acts almost as sound effects or dialogue.

If Stalling could see the cartoon's legacy today, he might be disappointed that the cartoon has become much more popular with someone else's music tacked on top of it—music that fits remarkably well, but doesn't achieve the same beat-by-beat match.

That music, the "Spooky Scary Skeletons" song, was written by Andrew Gold. Most remembered for writing the *Golden Girls* theme song, Gold wrote "Spooky Scary Skeletons" for a children's Halloween album in 1996.

Ten years later, Disney used Gold's song in a sing along home video, filling the song visually with a combination of new footage and clips from the 1929 Skeleton Dance.

But the song and cartoon truly became one in 2010 when creator TJ Ski, unable to find that low budget kids' sing along video, was therefore motivated to post the entire skeleton dance cartoon with the entire audio of "spooky scary skeletons." That video garnered thirty million views and resurrected both the song and cartoon into a perennial internet meme with remixes and mash-ups galore.

Gold lived to see the early blossoms of his song's rebirth before passing in 2011.

The cartoon and the song weren't intended for one another, but by being locked together in an undying dance, they were given a new breath of life…

Eerie piano and bells return.

In recent years, the idea of archaeologists being able to identify the assigned sex of a person years after their death via the shape of their bones has been weaponized against trans people—as a way to prove that biological sex is forever immutable and to try to convince us not to medically transition because apparently it will never fully work if some hypothetical archaeologist a thousand years from now will just misgender us anyways.

Fortunately, this has led *real* archaeologists to point out that it's actually a lot more complex of a situation. There's so much variance among humans that the "tells" determining the sex of a set of bones can actually be tough to discern sometimes. We also have better technology now so we don't *just* have to rely on bone structure—and that, if anything, tends to show how much more varied sex characteristics are than most western ideals would have you believe. And more and more, archaeologists turn to contextual information, like grave goods, to indicate a person's role in society and how they themselves identified—to learn more about the person's *whole* story.

Following these developments has made me feel a bit more at peace about a hypothetical archaeologist digging up my bones one day and potentially misgendering me. I mean, at the end of the day, archaeologists are just like me. Really, really *really* big fans of skeletons. If I even leave bones behind, my apparent gender will pale in comparison to the pure excitement of digging up a human specimen from the turn of the twenty-first century. And what will I care anyways? I'll be long gone.

But those regularly regenerating dancing skeletons in the graveyard from 1929—whose genders, by the way, none of us have any idea—have a lot more to their story too. We can dig all the way down, through many layers of Earth, down to the bones… and once there, realize that, who they were then, is not all of who they have become. We all have skeletons inside of us, but those skeletons are not *all* of who we are.

Ending stinger of "Spooky Scary Skeletons" plays

Play 2: tic tec tac (11:45)

GO!

Rhythmic tapping

Kyra: It's like a
A creature that burrows
Like a virus, a predator, a parasite

Breathing

And it gives you two minds
And double hearts
Two faced and wild

High moaning

Do you know what it is?
It's like a

Shuddering sigh

Or a groan
Or a
WHY CAN'T I STOP

Laughter

Or a
nonsense
illogical
Spontaneous burst of

Singing

You know
You know what I'm talking about
Don't you?
Don't you?
Don't you?

Don’t you?

Sounds end

Just ride it out.

Play 3: Candles in the closet (13:16)

GO!

Chan: Today I am admitting to a past crime. Right now I am at my kitchen stove melting down soy wax in a pyrex jug inside a simmering pot.

This will make sense soon.

Underscoring: synthesizer and hand drums

So in elementary school, they would have students do these fundraisers by selling catalog goods and if we achieved certain monetary benchmarks, we would get prizes. I hated it because it meant I had to go out and talk to people in the real world. At the time we lived in this suburban apartment complex with mostly young families and some elderly folks. I was maybe 9 years old, out by myself, knocking on doors, showing strangers the paper catalog with images of taco holders, candles, various decor, asking if they wanted to buy anything. And a few people took pity on me.

Two elderly women a couple doors down bought the taco tray, the glossy image showing it overflowing with tacos. Another woman had bought a set of autumnal candles. They gave me cash and I filled out their orders on the form and submitted it to my teachers.

Hold on, my wax is melted now, so I’m going put in some essential oils, and I only have lavender, this big bottle, so that’s what I’m using.

Weeks later, I got my order. When I went to give the elderly women their taco tray, they asked “where’s the food?” and I said it was just the tray and they got so mad. I had no idea they were expecting the tray to also come with the cheese and the ground meat. It’s not my fault that the catalog was misleading.

But the bigger issue was that it hadn’t occurred to me to write down which apartment people lived in. It had been so many weeks that I forgot what the woman who bought the candles looked like, so I didn’t know what to do with the candles. So I hid them at the very back of the top shelf of my closet behind all the sweaters and the bulky clothing and I tried desperately to forget about them and hope that I never ran into this woman again, whose face I didn’t even

remember. She must have assumed I stole her money. I didn't even want the candles. It became a dark cloud over my head every day. I couldn't push it out of my mind. Every time I went inside the closet, I would feel shame and fear, thinking that one day the police would find me and put me in prison.

Half a year later, my mother was cleaning the closet and was confused to find the set of 3 candles. And she interrogated me about them and I feigned ignorance. I don't remember what happened to the candles at the end. Maybe I threw them out, too ashamed to ever use them.

What's the moral of the story? I don't know, making kids do fundraisers and talk to strangers is dumb and dangerous. But I have done wrong and I hope to right it. So…

Ok, the wax is now ready. I have a bowl ready, it's a ceramic bowl that I made at my pottery studio a few weeks ago. So now what do I do… so now I'm going to pour this. I'm going to move my laptop aside so I don't make a mess. Hold on, I should've prepped the space a little better. I have the wicks already set in place there and now I'm going to pour the wax into this vessel. Wow this is almost like a perfect amount of wax that I prepared.

So if you were scammed by a little Chinese girl while you were living at the Savannah Sound Apartments on North Point Boulevard in Tallahassee, Florida two decades ago, I'm sorry. And I'd like to make it up to you. So if you email me at chan@nynf.org, and let me know that this was you, I will ship you this bespoke, handmade, one-of-a-kind candle I just finished making. And again I'm very, very sorry.

Play 4: Behind The C-Word: The Haunted Saga (17:32)

GO!

Dramatic horns

Toni: Welcome to *Behind the C-word*, a deep dive, investigative look at seminal works of Neo-Futurism. I'm your host, Anthony Sertel Dean. Tonight: a series of plays that are chilling, thrilling, and forever young.

In the summer of 2019, Neo-Futurist Kyra Sims asked a question that would echo through the ages: a question of fear. Of Age. Of Masculinity. Of Simplicity. We hope to take on that question tonight. Along with its reverberations. Questions like: Who am I? Am I just? Am I old? Am I Man?

Let us begin with a reading from her script (copyright 2019 Kyra Sims).

“Blackout. Sound cue at Go.”

What a chilling start. Now, to understand this “sound cue”, we must look at a little process from *The Infinite Wrench* where we ask you for money. (Venmo @nyneofuturists) There are two donation bins with a writing prompt on each. One week, I decided that the donation prompt should not be a word, not a phrase, not an idea, but it should be a sound. I was finding many strange sounds those days, browsing the vast library of soundsnap.com. But nothing could prepare me for what I heard when I pressed play on this sound:

A cartoonish voice exclaims, “Sweet sour chicken!”

No, this was not the winning sound cue that night. However frightening it may be, this sound lost the audience donation vote. The winning sound? Well, the winning sound can never escape my ears. Not anymore. It is…

A voice saying, “I’m just an old man.”

And from this rather youthful-sounding man’s exclamation, Kyra Sims crafted something undeniably ghoulish… in the middle of the summer.

Ominous ambient sound.

“The play begins with Neo-Futurists milling and seething about the stage. After a few moments of this…”

“I’m just an old man.”

“They hear the voice. When this happens, all Neos stop, and a light moves across all of their faces, now looking out, into the audience.”

“I’m just an old man” sound stutters.

“Blackout. The light moves over them again, but this time one of them is missing. The light catches the two Neo-Futurists who are centerstage who look at each other. The two Neo-Futurists upstage slowly leave. The light returns to the two Neo-Futursists downstage, who begin to hold hands. Blackout.”

Ambient sounds intensify.

“An upstage door is spinning with a flash of light. Another upstage door is spinning with a flash of light. Both upstage doors are spinning with flashes of light. Growing from this blackout, we see it.”

“An old man” sound cue, pitched down creepily

“The Neo who is downstage is running in place, lost their friend, but the old man is coming towards them slowly slowly reaching, reaching out to grab them as they are running in place, but no movement, until we again are in blackout. Lights are up, and the two Neos we lost before have re-entered. They are also wearing masks—I don’t know what masks, they change every now and then. He reached them. The old man reached them. Light flash, scream, the play is over.”

Wow, I’m metaphorically shivering with fear.

Now, to understand the experience of being “just an old man,” we thought there would be no one better to speak to than – no, not an old man.

Robin: My name is Robin Virginie, I originated the track of the Old Man.

Toni: Robin what was it like to don the mask of the Old Man?

Robin: It was an incredibly powerful experience. It’s something I won’t soon forget. The mask itself is very enveloping. We are who we are, but when the mask is on, you are without a doubt the Old Man and that’s very powerful.

Toni: Do you yourself feel older after embodying the Old Man?

Robin: I’ve had the honor to play the old man a lot of times, and at the beginning, it felt ironic. Me, me, Robin, portraying the Old Man… but I’ve grown into it, and I think now, I’d say we’re one in the same, so yes I do feel older.

It could’ve been “I’m an old man” but it’s “I’m *just* an old man,” and that is also where Kyra Sims really dove into a very deep and meta and very interesting point of view that can be seen and interpreted in many different ways, but I’d say, saying you are “just” “merely” an old man really means distilling yourself to an essence that is so pure, that is so purely “old man,” that no one can deny that fact, and that’s beautiful and that’s art.

Toni: Months passed, Halloween passed, and we all got a bit older. Did we become more man? Well, to answer that question, I wanted to speak to another Neo-Futurist. The one to take up the mantle of haunter after the old man’s reign had faded.

Katharine: Hi, this is Katharine Heller, and I am the author of the play “haunted 2.”

I felt this play needed a sequel because the first one was so good and there was something about the “haunted” (1) “I’m just an old man” that I couldn’t help but think of the line in my own head (and maybe it just made me laugh) “I’m just a little baby.” Making it a different story, as if it

were the beginning of the Old Man. I mean, who's to say if the Baby becomes the Old Man? But in my mind, it was sort of a commentary on motherhood or parenthood and how scary it is, to be honest. I didn't mean to get too deep into it until I was reading it back after I wrote it, and I noticed the layers of the terror of having a little baby. So it could be the Old Man that grows up to be the person that maybe, his mother didn't love him. Who's to say? But for me, "haunted 2" is about parenthood and fear of becoming a parent.

Sing-song voice saying, "I'm just a little baby."

Fear stays with us throughout our lives. However hard we might try, hiding, waiting, there is always another old man or tiny baby just around the corner. And sometimes they're within ourselves.

Two years passed, two more Halloweens, and memories of old men and babies had almost vanished from the public consciousness. That is until one Neo-Futurist knew what had to be done.

Rudy: My name is Rudy Ramirez and I am the author of "haunted 3."

Sing-song voice saying, "I'm just a tiny trans."

I think "haunted 3" is a departure from "haunted" 1 and 2 in that "haunted" 1 and 2 are a little more general, like anyone can go into those plays, it can relate to a wider swath of people I think, and "haunted 3" is a little more niche. It's inviting, perhaps, a sect of people who don't get a lot of space onstage or otherwise to see themselves reflected, and that's where I wanted to explore more personal stories of hauntings within this trilogy.

Whenever something terrible happens to me personally or to trans people everywhere, I'll turn to whoever is near me or to the invisible camera that I think follows me and say "yo, I'm just a tiny trans, what the fuck? This is just me doing my best, I'm just a tiny trans." And that is boomed into this world in a way that takes up space and doesn't apologize for it, and I really appreciate that in this play.

Sing-song voice saying, "I'm just a tiny trans."

Toni: We may not know what will next haunt the Neo-Futurist stage, but through understanding how we are haunted, we may look to a more hopeful future. A future where we may grow old together. We thank those hauntings that came before, and to conclude, we had to speak with the one who concocted the original mid-summer terror.

Kyra: *(laughs)* Well, it was a fun summer.

Toni: But Kyra, who is the Old Man to you?

Kyra: I think I feel connected to his cartoony voice, just saying who he is… feels like me. I do those things.

Toni: And Kyra, what haunts you?

Kyra: Oh my god. That mask. I never had to wear it. I tend to write plays that I don't have to do the hard parts in, and I've just heard tales of the status of the inside of that mask. That definitely haunts me more than anything. I'm scared of swarms. I'm scared of flying. I can do it, but…

Overlapping voices of interviewees naming what they're haunted by.

Toni: Thank you for listening to *Behind The C-Word*. Until next time, keep jumping for numbers, and jumping into discovery.

Dramatic horn music.

Play 5: Skeleton on the couch (28:25)

GO!

Michaela: When I go home there is a skeleton on the couch
And I sit next to him
Sometimes he'll say hello and stand up and kiss my shoulder
Sometimes he'll just say hello
Sometimes he doesn't even look at me.
The skeleton and I watch the movie *Love Story* every time we sit.
The Skeleton knows almost all of the words.
He loves to whisper the part where Jenny says
"Love means never having to say you're sorry"
I don't know if The Skeleton actually believes that
But he seems to repeat it a lot,

Sound of coughing

And the skeleton gets a small twinkle in his eye every time he says it
Which could be a tear, or it could be a twinkle…

Static intensifies, then cuts out

Or it could be the lights.

Next the skeleton might take me down to his office
Where he honors the ones who have passed before him.
He watches Sonny Bono's funeral
Toy Caldwell's 60 Minutes episode
Olivia Newton John's Grease reunion performance
Karen Carpenter singing "They Long to Be Close To You"
The skeleton loves these videos, and watches them multiple times a day
He loves to honor the dead.

Then I'd leave the skeleton alone to rewatch his videos
And I walk upstairs and try and distract myself from the skeleton in the basement.

The skeleton comes up the stairs after he finishes honoring the dead
He sits back down on the couch and I go ahead and sit next to him.
He wants to watch *Love Story* again and I say that's fine, and we watch *Love Story* again
And he whispers that love means never having to say you're sorry
Right on cue
And there's a twinkle in his eye
Right on cue

Then, after we finish *Love Story*, he can go to sleep
He takes his pills
And I tuck him in
And the Skeleton coughs and
And I look at him and imagine its the last time I'll see him
And I go downstairs and eat dinner
Because it's only 7 o'clock
So I eat and pretend there's not a skeleton sleeping above my head.

Play 6: So there's this song from 1969 called "It's Halloween" by this band called The Shaggs. The band was formed by this guy whose mother predicted that his daughters would form a popular band, so at his behest, his kids learned instruments and wrote and performed songs. His daughters hated it and were bad at it, and this song is bad. I decided to have the Neos cover it for this episode. I randomly assigned the parts- Michaela is on lead guitar, Jack is on drums, and Chan and Joey are on vocals. I was supposed to also add some rhythm guitar but I ran out of time, so this is also inadvertently a prank on these four Neos. They did their best. Enjoy. (30:44)

GO!

Guitar and drums

Chan and Joey: *(singing, out of sync)*
It's Halloween
It's Halloween
It's time for scares
It's time for screams
It's Halloween
It's Halloween
The ghosts will spook
The spooks will scare
Why even Dracula will be there *(Joey laughs)*
It's time for games
It's time for fun
Not for just one
For everyone
The jack o' lanterns are all lit up
The dummies are made and stuffed
By just looking you will see
It's this time of year again
It's Halloween
It's Halloween

Chan: *(off mic)* Oh my god. Okay. *(sighs)*

Chan and Joey: All the kids are happy and gay
There doesn't seem to be a cloud in their way
But when it's over and they've had all their fun
They'll wish that Halloween had just begun

Chan: I think I'm doing okay so far.

Joey: I can't… I'm gonna… I'm gonna find a melody. There's no melody.

Chan: When does this next part start?

Joey: This is terrible.

Chan and Joey: Oh there are witches, goblins, and frankensteins and zombies
There are tramps, pirates, angels
Let's have fun and give many cheers
For Halloween comes but once a year
It's time for games
It's time for fun
Not for just one
For everyone
It's Halloween
It's Halloween
It's Halloween
It's Halloween!

Jack: Oh my god. That was horrendous.

Show Outro

Spooky laughter and eerie xylophone music.

Kyra: Thanks for Hitting Play and then listening to *Hit Play*.

Thunder clap.

I hope you had a spooky skeleton time with us. If you did, and you liked what you heard, subscribe to the show, tell a friend, leave a review on your listening app of choice! It really does help us out. If you want to support the New York Neo-Futurists in other ways, consider making a donation at nynf.org, or by joining our Patreon–Patreon.com/NYNF. We have a Sticker-of-the-Month club that is very, very good. Our October sticker was a ghost holding two hot peppers.

Want to suggest a theme for a future episode? It's fun! For the rest of season 3, we will be selecting themes randomly from a pool supplied by our patrons!

This episode featured work by: Jackson Bird, me (Kyra Sims), Chan Lin, Anthony Sertel Dean, and Michaela Farrell. Our logo was designed by Gabriel Drozdov. Our sound is designed by Anthony Sertel Dean. *Hit Play* is produced by Anthony Sertel Dean, Lee LeBreton, and me, Kyra Sims. Take care out there! *(laughs ominously)*

Music fades out.