

SINGS THE HITS

by

Scotto Moore

## CHARACTERS

Amanda - a radio show host

Melanie - a pop singer

Grace - a jazz singer

Carolyn - a diplomat

David - a radio producer

Ellie - a radio show host (doubled with Carolyn)

Bailey - a talent manager (doubled with David)

In blackout, a bit of music fades out, leading into a station break.

MALE ANNOUNCER

(voiceover)

You're listening to 90.9 FM, KUNI, owned and operated by the University of Northern Iowa - a proud member of the Iowa Public Radio network. The time is twelve midnight.

We hear an elegantly constructed audio collage that serves as the introduction to Amanda's own radio show, snippets of voices recorded down through time, numbers station recordings, satellite transponder signals, old time radio commercials, political speeches, scratchy 78 rpm records, culminating in Amanda, introducing her show.

AMANDA

(voiceover)

I'm Amanda Bixby, and this is Signal Loss. Tonight's episode is called "Sings The Hits."

We hear a beautiful woman's voice singing a snippet of an aria or a jazz ballad, sampled from very old vinyl or tape, scratched or warped, but eerily pretty. We listen to a solid verse and chorus of the song before it abruptly ends. Lights slowly rise on Amanda in a small radio booth, headphones on, sitting at a desk in front of a microphone.

AMANDA (CONT'D)

If the hook from that song sounds familiar to you, there's a seemingly simple explanation. The song was sampled by pop singer Melanie Wheeler on her hit song, "Ricochet," which tore up the charts last year and is now one of Wheeler's signature tunes on tour. I learned this when I guest hosted a program called Spotlight On Songs, a show that invites artists to dissect the creation of their favorite tracks. It's normally hosted by my old house mate Ellie Jamison. We got our broadcasting degrees together at the University of Northern Iowa years ago.

Lights up on ELLIE - a "flashier" personality than Amanda. Ellie and Amanda are on the phone together, as Amanda drifts out of her radio booth.

ELLIE

Amanda - hi, it's Ellie!

AMANDA

Ellie! Are you okay?

ELLIE

Of course I'm okay! Why would you say that?

AMANDA

What's the emergency?

ELLIE

Didn't David call you?

AMANDA

He emailed, but he just wanted to know if I was available and then he said you'd call me and it just sounded - like, are they firing you?

ELLIE

God no, it's nothing like that. No look, my sister's getting married, bless her spontaneous little soul, and the wedding's in Hawaii in two weeks, and that happens to be exactly when Melanie Wheeler is supposed to drop by the station and do my show.

AMANDA

Melanie Wheeler is doing your show? Holy shit, Ellie.

ELLIE

Well that's the rub - Melanie's only in Chicago for twenty-four hours before moving on with the rest of her tour, and I will be in Hawaii during all twenty-four of those hours. So I worked it out with Melanie's people that she'll come on the show with a guest host.

AMANDA

*That's* why you're calling?

ELLIE

Surprise - yes! I convinced David to let you guest host for me. This could be huge for you, Amanda! I mean I love your show, but they put it on at two in the morning here so I never get to hear it.

AMANDA

You can stream it online.

ELLIE

My point is - Signal Loss is a great little niche and the people who hear it love it, but I thought you might love a chance to interview *Melanie Wheeler*.

AMANDA

Ellie, of course I would! God - I listened to her first CD so much I think I wore off the acrylic and aluminum layers.

ELLIE

That sounds bad.

AMANDA

People used to think CDs were indestructible. Turns out, not true.

ELLIE

Anyway, I would need you in Chicago on the 23rd to meet David and get a little orientation, do paperwork, that stuff. Melanie's coming by for a noon session on the 24th. Can you make that work?

AMANDA

Of course I can make that work. Of course.

ELLIE

You can crash at my place while you're here. And feed my cats, are you allergic?

AMANDA

No, I love cats.

ELLIE

Good, wonderful, so look, all you need to do is ask Melanie Wheeler a few questions and make me proud. David will be your producer. He can be a bit rough around the edges but just trust him, he'll make everything easy for you.

AMANDA

What does that mean, "rough around the edges"?

ELLIE

I don't know, he's just very... you get used to him. He's interfacing with the tour while I'm gone to make sure everything's lined up perfectly for you. I suggest listening to a few of my old shows to get familiar with the format.

AMANDA

Ellie - I know how your show works.

ELLIE

Oh, do they actually air it in Iowa?

AMANDA

Ellie-

ELLIE

I'm just kidding! Of course Iowa has good radio, they have you don't they?

AMANDA

You should stop before I change my mind here.

ELLIE

All right, but seriously, if you pull this off... if the interview goes well and if David likes you... we could get you out of Iowa!

AMANDA

You know I like it here.

ELLIE

I know, but just think about it. Iowa Public Radio shouldn't be the height of your ambition. Think how much fun we'd have in Chicago together. Anyway, you're a life saver. Anything I can do for you, you always know I'm here for you, right?

Lights fade on Ellie. Amanda turns to the audience.

AMANDA

My show, Signal Loss, is a love letter to the world of dead and dying media - the hiss and scratch of degrading tape, the long forgotten voices of an era when people huddled around their radio sets for entertainment. Ellie's show, Spotlight On Songs, is very much a deconstruction of the current moment, through the perspective of some of the most impressive voices in modern music. Getting Melanie Wheeler on the show was a coup, even for Ellie. But before I'd be allowed to meet Melanie Wheeler, first I needed to meet Ellie's producer at WBEZ in Chicago, David Caldwell.

Lights up on Amanda, in DAVID'S office. He's in his late 30s or early 40s, in casual hipster attire, with a lightly condescending vibe about him.

DAVID

Is this your first time in Chicago?

AMANDA

I've been a few times, to see Ellie. Not for a while.

DAVID

Must be a big change of pace from Cedar Falls, Iowa.

AMANDA

How'd you guess.

DAVID

Let me ask you, I know Ellie has nothing but good things to say about you and I've heard a bit of your show, I can tell you've got a great radio voice, very  *dusky* I would call it-

AMANDA

Really?

DAVID

Yeah, it's got kind of a, suggestive quality, I don't know, anyway my point is, Ellie said you've never interviewed someone as big as Melanie Wheeler before? I mean, I'm guessing you don't really get big pop stars coming through the studios at KUNI, am I right?

AMANDA

That's definitely true.

DAVID

So let me just explain a few things about how this will work. Usually a few roadies show up first to set up the star's gear and I'll supervise loading them in. Then these stars usually roll in and they've got an entourage, which it's my job to run interference with the entourage, make sure the star's management is happy, really the whole station kind of gets involved to make sure the star is happy, the entourage is happy, the green room is stocked, all that stuff. Ellie's show is a fifteen minute segment which airs live on a bunch of stations and then gets syndicated on a bunch more, but even though it's short, we'll still be under time pressure to get the star out of here quickly afterwards so that she can get to the venue in plenty of time to relax before sound check.

AMANDA

Do we have to keep calling her "the star"?

DAVID

Well it helps not to get too personal with these folks. They're not like regular people and they tend to behave, shall we say, erratically when confronted with seemingly normal human behavior. But obviously when you sit down to interview her, we need you to be very personable, very warm, very open, very soothing, we want you to establish a connection with the star that helps her feel comfortable opening up to tell her story to you. Which, to be clear, the only story she's agreed to tell is how one specific song was recorded, and unfortunately, there are some complications here. We have a list of questions you can't ask.

AMANDA

What?

DAVID

This hasn't hit the news yet, so there's no way you would know this, but - she's about to sue her producer and she doesn't want to talk about him, at all. Do you know who I'm talking about?

AMANDA

Jason Nebula.

DAVID

Yes, aka Nebula Rising Records, aka Nebula Rising Studio, aka Jason Richards, one of the most litigious producers in rock music. Melanie's been fighting her contract practically since the day she signed it, and they only barely tolerate each other to keep making music.

AMANDA

But doesn't he co-write all her music? How are we supposed to deconstruct one of her songs without talking about that?

DAVID

That's your job to figure out. Talk about her side of the songwriting process, talk about what she enjoys about being in the studio, she's on tour now so maybe she has some good tour stories - wait, I said this was *your* job to figure out and here I am figuring it out for you. Just don't mention Jason Nebula and you'll be fine.

AMANDA

Why is she about to sue him?

DAVID

They didn't tell me, I didn't ask. Usually in the music industry it's about money.

AMANDA

Or harassment.

DAVID

Which you are not to discuss with her, am I clear? Anyway, why would you immediately jump to harassment?

AMANDA

She was nineteen when she signed her contract. Jason Nebula already had a string of number one hits under his belt. The power imbalance there is fairly obvious.

DAVID

Nineteen is old enough to sign a contract. Old enough for lots of things.

AMANDA

Old enough to regret signing a contract apparently.

DAVID

I doubt she regrets spending all her money or riding around the country in a half million dollar tour bus.

AMANDA

You can be well-compensated for your work and still be a victim of harassment.

DAVID

That is literally up to a court to decide, now isn't it? Anyway, she hasn't sued yet, so we don't know whether she's accusing him of harassment, or cheating her out of royalties, or lying about her to the press... we don't know, and Spotlight On Songs is not the forum in which we will discuss and debate the details of her lawsuit.

AMANDA

I understand.

DAVID

Good, because for a second there, you started to seem very feisty, and this show is not about feisty.

AMANDA

"Feisty"?

DAVID

See, you're doing it right now. Anyway let's do a quick walk through of the station, I'll show you the studio where you'll be tomorrow, and then I thought we could round up a few people and hit a happy hour across the street. Good chance for you to meet some of the crew here. Ellie says you're looking to get out of Iowa, is that true?

AMANDA

Not exactly.

DAVID

Well maybe we can convince you.

AMANDA

Yeah, maybe.

Lights fade on David's office. Amanda faces the audience, as lights come up on Ellie elsewhere on stage. Ellie is dressed casually for Hawaii (i.e. not in a gown for a wedding or anything formal), as opposed to being dressed casually for Chicago like the last time we saw her.

AMANDA (CONT'D)

"Happy hour" turned out to be a karaoke joint, which was all well and good until everyone from the station went home - everyone except for me, somehow, and David.

ELLIE

Ohhh, Amanda.

AMANDA

I wanted to take a taxi home to your place. I should have taken a taxi. Instead I let David drive me. His car has a great stereo.

ELLIE

Yes, trust me, I'm well aware.

AMANDA

He stopped in front of your building, and suggested we listen to Melanie Wheeler's song, to "prepare" for the show tomorrow. I said yes, which on the one hand I shouldn't have done, and on the other hand, seemed perfectly reasonable after a couple drinks and knowing that I was supposed to try to impress this guy, even though I don't really want to leave Iowa but I just wanted to make you, I don't know, proud of me anyway.

ELLIE

Amanda, sweetie-

AMANDA

I'm sorry, but it's kind of true. So Melanie's song came on the stereo. We listened quietly for a moment, I happen to really like this song by the way, and then he put his hand on my leg and said, "Maybe we can listen to this inside," and I said, "I don't think so," and I tried to get out of the car. I had to try *twice*. The second time he let me go.

ELLIE

Jesus.

AMANDA

Anyway I wanted you to know because - Ellie, did you know he was - going to be trouble? I mean, I assume you would have told me, right? Or was "rough around the edges" supposed to be code for "he might try to get you alone in his car"?

ELLIE

Amanda, I'm sorry. I didn't think - you were only going to be there literally two days, I didn't think David would make a move on you that fast.

AMANDA

"Make a move"? He wasn't asking me on a date, Ellie.

ELLIE

Look, we can talk about it when I get back to Chicago.

AMANDA

Why can't we talk about it now?

ELLIE

Because I'm - on vacation.

AMANDA

You're on *vacation*? Ellie, does he do this with all of the women at your station?

ELLIE

No, he doesn't - care about all of the women. Anyway, now you know, now you can avoid being alone with him and it won't be a problem.

AMANDA

I have to do a show with him! Of course it will be a problem!

ELLIE

No, Amanda, it can't be a problem. Not with Melanie Wheeler coming on your show. You have to focus on that, okay?

(MORE)

ELLIE (CONT'D)

You don't have to make me proud or anything like that, but you do have to make sure Melanie has a good time in that studio, do you understand?

(pause)

Amanda?

AMANDA

Yeah, I understand. We will definitely talk more about this when you get back.

Blackout. In the darkness, we hear the sound of someone plunking a keyboard or tuning a guitar; a few bars of music played. Lights rise on an audio performance studio, where Amanda sits on a stool reviewing a small set of note cards. Next to her is MELANIE WHEELER, at an electric keyboard, with a sampler pad nearby. Melanie is young: in her twenties. We hear David's voice from the booth off stage.

MELANIE

Can I get a little more in the monitors?

DAVID (O.S.)

Sure, how's that?

Melanie and David go back and forth a little bit, adjusting the keyboard levels, adjusting the percussion levels that come out of the sampler pad.

AMANDA

(to audience)

Melanie wasn't traveling with an entourage. Her tour was stripped down. She'd decided she didn't want to work with her usual road crew, or the usual musicians she traveled with. Instead, she'd made a snap decision to do this tour solo. Her only companion on the tour was her brother Pete, who drove the van.

DAVID (O.S.)

Amanda, can I get a mic check please?

AMANDA

Check check, one two.

DAVID (O.S.)

Okay, thank you. Stand by. You'll be on in about five.

MELANIE

You look a little nervous.

AMANDA

I don't normally host this show.

MELANIE

I know. I was looking forward to seeing Ellie again.

AMANDA

Have you been on before?

MELANIE

No, I met her backstage at a Pitchfork Festival where she was introducing bands on one of the stages. I was just breaking at the time and she was still doing commercial radio back then, one of the first DJs to play "Invisible" actually.

AMANDA

Very cool. I love that song. You know, I have to just get this out of the way, I think I listened to your first CD so much I wore off the acrylic and aluminum layers.

MELANIE

I'm impressed you actually bought it on CD.

AMANDA

I'm old fashioned that way.

MELANIE

Old fashioned would be buying it on vinyl. Although I guess vinyl is the hip thing now. God, the first time I saw my album in an Urban Outfitters, I wanted to cry.

AMANDA

Good cry or bad cry?

MELANIE

Ambivalent cry I guess. Anyway I can get you a new CD.

AMANDA

Actually I just listen on Spotify now. Oh shoot - do you get paid when I do that?

MELANIE

Theoretically.

AMANDA

I'm sorry, that was a silly question.

MELANIE

No, trust me, I ask my team that question all the time. Are you really nervous?

AMANDA

A little. Maybe we could talk about how the session's going to go.

MELANIE

Sure.

AMANDA

So David gave me a list of topics that are off limits. You don't want to talk about your producer, Jason Nebula, at all, correct?

MELANIE

Let's just stick to the music.

AMANDA

That'll be a little tough because he co-writes your music, doesn't he?

MELANIE

He takes credit for a lot more than he should.

AMANDA

But so - the format of this show is, we deconstruct one of your songs piece by piece and talk about how it evolved in the studio.

MELANIE

Uh huh.

AMANDA

Will that be - difficult to do -  
without talking about Jason  
Nebula?

MELANIE

I just want to talk about *my*  
songwriting process.

AMANDA

So he doesn't co-write with you?

MELANIE

No - I write the songs. Period.  
I'm the one who sits down at the  
piano, or picks up the guitar, and  
makes a demo. I'm the one who  
sketches out the lyrics. What  
Jason did on this record - he  
added texture to it. Beats,  
production, samples, horns,  
whatever.

AMANDA

If he's just adding production  
elements, why does he share a  
songwriting credit?

MELANIE

Because my fucking contract -  
wait, are you recording this?

AMANDA

No, of course not.

MELANIE

This is exactly what I didn't want  
to talk about.

AMANDA

I'm sorry. We won't talk about any  
of this when we're rolling.

MELANIE

I thought I was just going to play  
the song.

AMANDA

And then talk about the song.

MELANIE

Yes, about how I wrote it, and  
what it means to me.

AMANDA

Ellie usually talks about how the songs were made too. The production process. I thought you knew that.

MELANIE

Is that necessary?

AMANDA

No, I suppose not. But I mean, that's kind of the main engine of Ellie's show, I figured you knew when she booked you-

MELANIE

I haven't seen Ellie in a while. I guess I didn't know her show had an "engine."

DAVID (O.S.)

Okay here we go. How are you two feeling?

MELANIE

Just great.

AMANDA

(overlapping)

We're good.

DAVID (O.S.)

Okay, live in five, four, three...

A pre-recorded introduction plays. A medley of snippets of various pop, rock, jazz songs, and then a red "ON AIR" light comes on, and Amanda speaks.

AMANDA

You're listening to Spotlight on Songs, where we invite artists from across the spectrum to play a favorite song for us and tell us how it was made. I'm Amanda Bixby, sitting in for Ellie Jamison who's on vacation this week. With us today is one of the most striking singer-songwriters to emerge in the past couple years. Her debut album, "Surrogate Genesis," sold two million copies and her first single, "Invisible," has been sitting on top of the Spotify streaming charts ever since.

(MORE)

AMANDA (CONT'D)

Joining us here today is Melanie Wheeler. Thank you so much for being here, Melanie.

MELANIE

My absolute pleasure.

AMANDA

Tell us what you're going to play for us today.

MELANIE

Well, I figured most people have had a chance to hear "Invisible" by now, so I thought I'd play something you haven't heard yet. It's called "Ricochet."

AMANDA

Wonderful - will this song be on the new album?

MELANIE

Hopefully. Fingers crossed.

AMANDA

And when is the new album going to drop?

MELANIE

Soon. Fingers crossed. Anyway, here it is.

Melanie kicks off a beat from the sampler pad, a beat that includes a recurring musical riff from an old jazz record as a sample. She then sings & plays along with the beat, either on keyboard or guitar.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

INSERT SONG LYRICS HERE

AMANDA

That was "Ricochet" by Melanie Wheeler, live in the WBEZ studios for Spotlight On Songs. Melanie, that was fantastic.

MELANIE

Thank you so much.

AMANDA

How did this song come to you? Do you start with lyrics or melody, or how does that usually work for you?

MELANIE

It's funny, when I was growing up, I used to have these fully formed melodies pop into my head almost without thinking about it, but I started to realize over time that the first melody that pops into your head isn't always, or even usually, the most interesting melody. So I started opening myself up to other inspirations. This song came when I was teaching myself production techniques, you know, learning how to sequence and program drums and that sort of thing. And so I landed on this rhythm.

Melanie triggers an isolated set of beats on her sampler.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

This was the first time where I'd put beats together that didn't feel mechanical to me, you know? I mean, this was a new experience, where I felt like technology was really opening a door.

AMANDA

What technology were you using?

MELANIE

Oh I mean - this was literally just Garage Band at the time. The tools are bone dead simple now. People are making albums on their iPhones, you know? So I just sat in my bedroom and listened to that rhythm on repeat for, must have been hours, trying out different things, changing out kits, slowing it down and seeing if it worked for a piano ballad, speeding it up, compressing it, all that stuff, until finally I came up with a tempo and a drum sound and a guitar hook that I liked.

She triggers another sample, this time adding a looping guitar riff to the beat we're already listening to.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

And then I finally started working through melody ideas.

AMANDA

All in one sitting?

MELANIE

Yeah, this was a long Saturday afternoon for sure.

AMANDA

When you were playing the song just now, there was another element coming out of the sampler, right? Something - I guess it sounded like a scratchy old record or something?

MELANIE

Oh, right. It's this.

Melanie triggers one more sample. We hear a beautiful woman's voice singing a snippet of a jazz ballad, sampled from very old vinyl or tape, scratched or warped, but eerily pretty - it's the song we heard at the opening of the show during Amanda's introduction.

AMANDA

That's beautiful. Where did that come from?

MELANIE

The studio has a whole library of samples. I'm not sure where that one came from. But when I took my demo into the studio to start working on a proper arrangement for it, someone played that sample for me.

AMANDA

Oh, just the sample? So you haven't heard the original recording?

MELANIE

No, I mean, people chop up old records all the time and catalog samples, it's just - it's a part of the machine, you know?

(MORE)

MELANIE (CONT'D)

Some people just write hooks, some people just make beats, some people just scour old records for snippets we can bend and loop or whatever. So you hear that kind of stuff while you're just hanging out in the studio, just free floating in the air sometimes, and I remember hearing this one and just thinking, there was something really sort of, haunting about it I guess.

AMANDA

Yeah, it's sort of mournful.

MELANIE

Right, but it's pretty at the same time. It just *fit* what I was already doing organically with this song.

AMANDA

The studio must know what the source recording is, right?

MELANIE

I'm sure the studio knows. I'm not going to ask. I mean, I like that it's mysterious to me.

AMANDA

That's so weird. It's like I recognize it. Like I've heard it somewhere before.

MELANIE

You never know. Sometimes people go into the studio and record some new hook and then distress it so it sounds like it's really old. Like, people will press original stuff to vinyl just so they can scratch up the vinyl and then make an old-sounding sample out of it. This could be anything really. But like I said-

AMANDA

You want to keep it mysterious.

MELANIE

It's just a buried texture in the song, you know? It's not like it's adding meaning or whatever.

The "ON AIR" light goes dim.

AMANDA

(to audience)

The show was over quicker than I expected.

MELANIE

Was that good?

AMANDA

Yeah that was great! Was I good? I mean-

MELANIE

Of course! What do you think of the new song?

AMANDA

I get the feeling I'm going to be listening to it many many times.

MELANIE

You're not just saying that to be nice?

AMANDA

Melanie - no, I thought I told you, I'm a huge fan. Really!

David enters.

DAVID

That was a wonderful performance, Ms. Wheeler. Do you need any help packing up your gear?

MELANIE

Pete's out in the bus. I'll go get him.

DAVID

Sure, I'll show you out.

AMANDA

Pretty sure she knows where the bus is.

DAVID

Well, just in case.

AMANDA  
If she gets lost, she can ask me.

MELANIE  
I know where the bus is.

AMANDA  
That's what I figured.

MELANIE  
Will I see you at the show  
tonight?

AMANDA  
I didn't think to get a ticket.

Melanie produces a backstage pass and hands it to Amanda.

MELANIE  
Backstage pass.

AMANDA  
Seriously?

DAVID  
You wouldn't happen to have two of  
those?

MELANIE  
Nope.

Melanie exits.

DAVID  
Well aren't you something.

AMANDA  
Oh. I'm sorry, was I not supposed  
to take this?

DAVID  
On air talent gets all the perks.

AMANDA  
Did you - want it instead?

DAVID  
No, I just thought - your last  
night in town, I thought we'd hang  
out tonight. Especially after last  
night-

AMANDA  
What do you mean, after last  
night?

DAVID  
I thought we had a connection last night.

AMANDA  
What connection?

DAVID  
What are you planning on doing with yourself until the concert tonight?

AMANDA  
I have some editing to do for Signal Loss.

DAVID  
Ah right, your 2am show.

AMANDA  
Most stations run it at midnight.

DAVID  
Well, I wouldn't want to interrupt your very important work. Do you need a studio?

AMANDA  
I could use a studio mic, yeah.

DAVID  
You can hook into that little board there. I'll make sure Pete knocks before he comes to get Melanie's gear.

AMANDA  
Thanks.

David turns to exit. Almost against her better judgment, Amanda stops him.

AMANDA (CONT'D)  
Do you think I could call her studio to find out where that sample originated?

DAVID  
What? What sample?

AMANDA

Were you not listening? The sample we discussed just now on the show, the old jazz recording she didn't recognize. Maybe if I call her studio, I can find out what it's from.

DAVID

Call her studio? Are you kidding? We only barely got her to agree to come on the show, and we promised not to talk to or about her label, before during or after the show.

AMANDA

Aren't the recording studio and the label different things?

DAVID

No, legally the studio is just an arm of the label, and the label is Jason Nebula. And I'm guessing Melanie will not be pleased if she finds out you called Jason Nebula to ask about his contribution to her favorite new song.

AMANDA

I mean, obviously I'm not going to call and say "Hi, I'm the guest host from Spotlight On Songs, would you please give me a list of the samples you used on Melanie Wheeler's new single."

DAVID

Yes, that is the first among many things you are not going to say to anyone about this sample.

AMANDA

But let's say for the sake of argument that I simply called up Nebula Rising Studio as a fan, as someone who listens to Spotlight On Songs, someone who loves Melanie Wheeler, someone who is just curious about mysterious old jazz recordings, all things that are true by the way, and just innocently asked who the performer was on that old jazz recording that I just heard on the radio, what possible harm could come from it?

DAVID

Amanda, if Ellie comes back from Hawaii and finds out you did anything to damage the station's reputation with Melanie Wheeler, you will suffer for it, do you understand? Just let it go. Stick to your weird little midnight show and let this go.

AMANDA

I'm not going to hurt Ellie's reputation. Obviously. I just know there's a story behind that sample, I can feel it, you know?

DAVID

No, I don't know.

AMANDA

The whole point of my weird little midnight show is following hunches about old recordings. I've got a hunch about this one.

DAVID

Use Shazam.

David exits. Amanda turns to the audience.

AMANDA

Of course I intended to use Shazam. All I had to work with was the sample that Melanie played on the show, which I was able to clean up with software to eliminate what seemed to be surface noise or tape distortion.

(MORE)

AMANDA (CONT'D)

The cleaned up sample sounded like this.

We now hear the sample for the first time clear and unmuddied: a gorgeous woman singing in pure tones, accompanied by just a piano and maybe drums. Amanda holds her phone up - she is Shazam-ing it.

AMANDA (CONT'D)

Shazam came up empty - no match. But I had something now that I didn't really have before. Listen again.

The sample plays again start to finish.

AMANDA (CONT'D)

I had lyrics, which are searchable. I plugged them into Google, hoping for a quick answer to this minor mystery. Unfortunately the answer was itself another mystery. The sample was the call sign for a numbers station. I've dedicated more than one episode of Signal Loss to numbers stations because I find them fascinating and eerie and melancholy, and the very definition of mysterious. Numbers stations are shortwave radio stations that operate on various frequencies around the world. They're believed to be operated by spy agencies, broadcasting single use ciphers to be decoded by agents in the field. But anyone can hear these signals if you know where and when to tune in. Some of the most popular numbers station recordings have been collected and released by niche labels over the years. And one characteristic of many of these stations is that they open with some kind of signature: a sound effect, or a piece of music. In this case, Melanie's sample was the signature for a station commonly referred to as E75.

In the background, we hear the sample, now filtered as though we're hearing it over a ham radio. It's followed by

a woman's voice (a voice we will later recognize) reading out a series of numbers.

VOICE

Three nine seven one five  
Six six four seven five  
One nine two seven four  
Nine two zero two eight

AMANDA

Someone in Nebula Rising Studios must have heard this numbers station recording and decided to sample it. Wouldn't be the first time - the Wilco album *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* is named after a numbers station recording.

A snippet of a woman saying "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot" is heard; the original sample can be found on *The Conet Project* album, disc one track four, "Phonetic Alphabet - NATO".

AMANDA (CONT'D)

That night, I went to see Melanie Wheeler in concert at the Vic Theatre, a thousand seat venue where rising stars play. I went backstage before the show with my shiny backstage pass, and I tried to stay out of everyone's way, but Melanie spotted me during her sound check and convinced me to join her in her dressing room afterwards.

Melanie and Amanda in Melanie's dressing room.

MELANIE

Now I can't stop thinking about that sample. I keep coming up with stories in my head about who the woman singing is and what the rest of the song must sound like. I mean there must be more to it, you know? I almost called the studio and asked them to send me the whole file but fuck those guys, the last thing I want to do is talk to anybody there if I can help it.

AMANDA

Well, as it turns out-

MELANIE

No no - I can tell you're just bursting to tell me something and if it's about the sample, I don't think I actually want to hear it.

AMANDA

Really? You really don't want to know?

MELANIE

Did you really find something out?

AMANDA

I did. I mean, I didn't find everything out that I wanted to, but I cleaned the file up and I did some digging and, I mean, do you want to at least hear what it sounds like without all that tape hiss and distortion?

MELANIE

I don't know, do I?

AMANDA

Well, there's a voice there, you know, I'm guessing someone like you, someone who thought she had something maybe, like a shot at something, and thanks to you, she's finally getting her due, you know?

MELANIE

No she's not. She's an anonymous texture buried deep in the mix. Buried so deep we probably aren't even bothering to clear the sample because it's transformed so much.

AMANDA

It's not just a sample, Melanie - the hook for your song mirrors what she's singing. You're *using* her as the foundation of the song. You're not worried about clearing that?

MELANIE

Clearing samples is the label's business. If we get sued, Jason takes the hit, not me. That's one of the very few protections I seem to have in my contract.

AMANDA

Except it's your credibility too,  
isn't it?

MELANIE

What did you learn about this  
sample that makes you so worried  
about my credibility all of a  
sudden?

AMANDA

Nothing. I mean, I don't know  
anything about who's singing on  
the recording or what the rest of  
the song sounds like. But the  
snippet itself, the sample you're  
using, is the call sign for a  
numbers station.

MELANIE

So that means what? You know who  
owns the copyright?

AMANDA

No.

MELANIE

Or using it's fair use?

AMANDA

No, I don't think so,  
theoretically someone out there in  
the world could claim copyright...

MELANIE

And then it'd be their lawyers  
versus Jason Nebula's lawyers.  
Which, fuck Jason Nebula's  
lawyers, by the way, did I mention  
that?

AMANDA

I'd heard rumors...

MELANIE

What did you hear?

AMANDA

There was a whole list of  
questions I wasn't supposed to ask  
you.

## MELANIE

Jason Nebula sexually assaulted me several times in the recording studio when we were making my record. Like, I'm trying to sing and suddenly his hand is down my pants, kind of thing. Here I made such a big fucking deal about kicking my mother out of the studio so I can work like an adult, and what did it get me. Hit record, big tour, and Jason Nebula's hand down my pants. And I'm thinking, this shit, can't possibly, go on like this forever, I've been writing these songs since I was sixteen and I'm finally getting a chance to record them, with the biggest producer in Los Angeles, and god damn it, his hand is down my pants. Anyway, it's my word against his and he's a total professional when there's engineers in the room or studio musicians or whatever, so I figure out that I can record my own vocals in my apartment and just bring them in, but he's like, they're never good enough, they always need sweetening, every fucking song *requires* getting me alone in a vocal booth, *jesus*. But here I'm thinking it's *worth* it because *my* songs are going out into the world. And then I find out he's got his name all over the publishing. Like, every single song is split with him for publishing. He was my producer, not my songwriting partner, but fuck, it was my first record, half of a shit ton of money was going to be great, except then I learn that all the recording costs are coming out of *my* half of what the record earns, and *he's* the studio so he's making bank and I'm out on tour in a van that some punk band drove into the ground and abandoned, and I might *still* be thinking I was on top of the world, if I hadn't spent *so much time* in the studio being casually assaulted by that guy.

AMANDA

I'm sorry.

MELANIE

Why would you say that? Why would you ever say that?

(pause)

But thank you. I tried telling my mom and she just fucking laughed in my face because I was the one who had kicked her out of the studio in the first place. She was like, "Didn't I tell you? The music business is no place for a teenage girl," and *obviously* that's true but it *shouldn't* be true, I mean, *some* of these teenage girls *must* be making it in the music business without - whatever, I mean, that's not the experience I had regardless.

AMANDA

Have you ever listened to the lyrics on that sample?

MELANIE

No. Didn't even occur to me there were lyrics.

AMANDA

I cleaned up the recording and was able to decipher them. Just two lines. "Time always runs the wrong way, when the stakes are high, and I've only got one chance to say goodbye."

MELANIE

Well, that's depressing.

AMANDA

Maybe. I mean, sometimes you say goodbye for very good reasons.

MELANIE

My song means something very different knowing those lyrics are buried in the mix.

AMANDA

Well, you're the only one who knows that.

## MELANIE

No. Jason fucking Nebula knows too. The last good idea I got from him was the idea to use that sample.

Lights fade on the dressing room as Amanda turns to the audience.

## AMANDA

The story should have ended there. A numbers station is a dead end, by definition. But it turns out I wasn't the only one who found that old jazz recording to be quite intriguing. National Public Radio is syndicated across several thousand affiliated stations across the country. Spotlight On Songs - unlike Signal Loss - is heard on most of them. And because Spotlight On Songs doesn't stick to a particular genre, its listeners cut across a wide band of music aficionados. One such music lover was Grace Ridley, who tracked me down via email after her young daughter heard me guest host the show. We spoke on the phone, probably right around the same time Melanie Wheeler's van was leaving Chicago.

Lights up on GRACE RIDLEY, alone on stage, on the telephone talking to Amanda. She appears elderly in this scene.

## GRACE

Thank you for agreeing to speak to me. My daughter heard you hosting that program - Spotlight On Songs.

## AMANDA

Where are you calling from, Grace?

## GRACE

I'm in Milwaukee. The reason I'm calling is because - my daughter is a very big fan of Melanie Wheeler, and she tuned into your program yesterday.

(MORE)

GRACE (CONT'D)

And she swore she heard something familiar, so we listened to the show together later on your web site, and sure enough, I heard my voice on your program, and I wondered if you could help me understand how that's even possible.

AMANDA

(to audience)

It turns out Grace was a jazz singer... well, not anymore, but in her younger days. She believed it was her voice in the sample from Melanie's single, although she believed that the original recording was long gone. But she definitely recognized it.

GRACE

Well, yes, I definitely recognize the song, because I wrote it.

AMANDA

That's incredible that you wound up hearing it on the radio.

GRACE

I suppose that's true. Especially because I haven't heard it since the day we recorded it, and I don't know anyone who has a copy of the recording.

AMANDA

Oooh, the archivist in me really wants to know how that happened.

GRACE

Well, the song was a gift for someone I loved very much, and she took the original recording with her - when she left.

Lights start to transition - we are flashing back into the past to an empty night club, where a younger Grace stands on stage at a microphone.

GRACE (CONT'D)

In the early 80s I was singing in a night club in West Berlin.

(MORE)

GRACE (CONT'D)

This was before the Wall fell,  
back when West Berlin was still  
completely surrounded on all sides  
by East Germany. We were a tiny  
little island of freedom in the  
middle of an oppressive state, and  
I was working for the USO, singing  
for American troops stationed  
there. That's where I met Carolyn.

CAROLYN enters, a smartly dressed young woman - impeccable  
English with the slightest hint of a German accent perhaps.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Sorry dear, we're closed for the  
night. I'm just squeezing in a  
little extra rehearsal time after  
hours.

CAROLYN

I know Inga. She let me in to see  
you.

GRACE

Did she now.

CAROLYN

I heard your performance tonight.  
I quite enjoyed your singing.

GRACE

Well thank you.

CAROLYN

If you don't mind my asking, where  
do you get your songs?

GRACE

I write most of them.

CAROLYN

Oh I presumed as much. What I  
meant was - where do they come  
from?

GRACE

You mean how do I write? Just  
comes naturally I suppose.

CAROLYN

Not to everyone, or the night  
clubs would be filled with singers  
like you.

GRACE

Night clubs are filled with singers like me, but most people just play it safe. "Nellie Brown sings the hits!" "Jimmy Lang sings the hits!" But I've got a little niche here singing original music.

CAROLYN

You bring in real music aficionados.

GRACE

That's kind of you to say.

CAROLYN

It's true. I watch the people here every night. You have real fans.

GRACE

You've been coming in every night?

CAROLYN

Since I discovered you, I suppose. A couple weeks ago.

GRACE

Thought I recognized you.

CAROLYN

Is that so.

GRACE

You moved closer and closer to the stage every night. Always sit by yourself, unless some drunk idiot lands at your table before you can tell him to get lost.

CAROLYN

I don't mind the drunk idiots. Everyone here is lonely, most of the time anyway.

GRACE

Suppose that's true.

CAROLYN

So tell me how you write your songs. What inspires you?

GRACE  
Could be anything really. The important thing is - you have to pay attention, to the moments you're in.

CAROLYN  
Like this one?

GRACE  
Suppose that's true. What's your name?

CAROLYN  
Carolyn.

GRACE  
I'm Grace.

CAROLYN  
I know as much. When you're finished rehearsing-

GRACE  
I'm probably good for the night.

CAROLYN  
-perhaps you'd care to get a drink with me?

GRACE  
Clubs in this neighborhood are all closed by now.

CAROLYN  
My flat is close by here. It's a nice night for a walk.

BAILEY enters - a crisply dressed man in a suit. He was clearly expecting Grace to be alone.

BAILEY  
I thought the club was closed for the night.

CAROLYN  
Inga let me in.

GRACE  
This is my friend Carolyn.

CAROLYN  
Hello.

Bailey sits at a nearby table.

BAILEY

Don't let me interrupt. Wait, let me guess - too late, right?

GRACE

Carolyn, this is my manager, Mr. Bailey.

CAROLYN

Good to meet you.

Bailey lights up a cigarette. We split the scene between Grace talking to Amanda; and Grace, Bailey and Carolyn in the night club.

AMANDA

Was he your manager with the USO?

GRACE

No, he was someone who heard me for the first time in West Berlin, and thought I could be a successful recording artist someday. He wanted to help me launch a solo career, once I left the USO.

AMANDA

And what was he doing to help make that happen?

GRACE

Initially - boosting my confidence, introducing me to local musicians, suggesting additions to my repertoire. He floated me some cash for better wardrobe. Encouraged me to try writing my own songs, which I was most of the way toward doing on my own but it was good to hear him say he liked what I wrote. He said he could get me into a local recording studio to make a demo once I had a few really good songs under my belt.

BAILEY

Did you see the show tonight, Carolyn?

CAROLYN

I did.

BAILEY  
Grace is quite a talent, isn't she?

CAROLYN  
I would say so.

BAILEY  
Do you think you'd buy a record if Grace released one?

CAROLYN  
I don't own a record player, I'm afraid. I travel a bit too much to collect records.

BAILEY  
If you heard Grace on the radio-

CAROLYN  
I would definitely stop to listen.

BAILEY  
There, you see?

GRACE  
You don't need to convince me of anything, Mr. Bailey.

BAILEY  
Carolyn, would you mind if I had a few moments alone with Grace before Inga kicks us all out?

CAROLYN  
Of course.  
(to Grace)  
Perhaps I'll stop in to hear you sing again sometime.

GRACE  
I'll be here.

Carolyn exits.

AMANDA  
So the sample that Melanie is using must be from your demo, is that it?

GRACE  
Well, no, I'm afraid I never did record that demo. Mr. Bailey had conditions.

(MORE)

GRACE (CONT'D)

He was expecting something from me that was a little beyond the typical professional obligation.

AMANDA

Really?

GRACE

That surprises you?

AMANDA

I just kind of wonder if any woman ever breaks into the music industry without facing "conditions."

GRACE

You're asking the wrong gal, I'm afraid. But I wasn't interested in Mr. Bailey's conditions, and I said as much to him.

BAILEY

I'm not going to keep asking you, Grace. You realize that, don't you?

GRACE

I didn't lead you on in some way, did I, Mr. Bailey? Did I ever once give you the impression that I was interested in giving you more than a financial split of my supposedly lucrative future in the music business?

BAILEY

No, I will admit, in retrospect, your coyness and apparent interest in me seems to have been a product of my imagination.

GRACE

So where does that leave us?

BAILEY

Leaves us with nothing much that I can see.

GRACE

You want back the clothes you bought me?

BAILEY  
Considering it.

GRACE  
I saved the boxes.

BAILEY  
Did you now.

GRACE  
Just in case.

BAILEY  
Well that was thoughtful. I'll  
think about it. See you around,  
Grace.

He exits.

GRACE  
The next night, Carolyn was back  
to see me. And for some reason  
that night, I was actually a  
little nervous.

Carolyn enters to watch Grace. Music comes up behind her,  
but she doesn't sing.

GRACE (CONT'D)  
Most of my friends in the city  
were musicians, you see. I guess I  
was excited to finally meet  
someone outside my normal circles.  
I guess I was excited to finally  
have my own true fan. I suppose my  
behavior toward her was a little  
unprofessional, but Carolyn was  
clearly an adult. We saw quite a  
bit of each other over the next  
couple weeks.

Lights up on a tiny living room, where Grace and Carolyn  
sit on a couch together, Carolyn perhaps smoking a  
cigarette as they each drink wine and listen to records.

GRACE (CONT'D)  
You come in every night around  
8pm. What do you do with yourself  
during the daylight hours, when us  
night owls are tucked away safe in  
our beds?

CAROLYN

It's not worth mentioning. Nothing as glamorous as singing for a living.

GRACE

You're sitting here right next to a singer, you're as glamorous as me.

CAROLYN

Anyway, it's not worth mentioning.

GRACE

Trying to preserve a little mystery about yourself I see.

CAROLYN

When you're on stage, you become mysterious. Did you know that? You get a look in your eyes that seems - distant, like you're channeling some other person. Are your songs make believe, or are they about you?

GRACE

You've heard my songs as much as anyone by now. What do you think?

CAROLYN

I don't know, I really don't. You're still mysterious to me too, Grace Ridley. Do you ever imagine yourself being famous? Singing all around the world?

GRACE

I might have imagined that once or twice.

CAROLYN

What about your manager, Mr. Bailey? I'm sure he's imagined the same thing.

GRACE

I'm afraid Mr. Bailey and I parted ways. He was interested in a different kind of arrangement than me.

CAROLYN

Oh. That's disappointing.

GRACE

I don't imagine anyone really comes to West Berlin to discover the next singing sensation. Anyway I'm pretty satisfied where I am.

CAROLYN

Perhaps today you are. Why should you resign yourself to obscurity?

GRACE

I might say I've got a pretty sweet gig. Singing my own tunes every night to an audience that mostly just ignores me, could be a lot worse.

CAROLYN

I want the whole world to hear you, just like I do.

GRACE

Carolyn - I don't think anybody hears me like you do.

Lights fade on the apartment, back to Grace chatting with Amanda.

AMANDA

Were you and Carolyn romantically involved?

GRACE

Well, that's a complex question. We weren't involved sexually - I was just too young and too insecure and the times were just - what they were. But I'm sure we had feelings for each other, even if we didn't say it. I wanted to tell her, but I didn't have the courage to tell her directly during one of our middle of the night chats. So I did the next best thing. I wrote a song for her, and one night I told her, "I'm going to sing something special for you on Friday night," which was three days away. I wanted to wait until Friday because those were big nights at the club and I wanted her song to have a good audience.

(MORE)

GRACE (CONT'D)

But she said, "Why don't you sing it tomorrow night instead," and right then I should have known something was wrong. But I said, "Sure thing, I think it's ready, if you can't wait til Friday to hear it," and she said, "I can't wait."

Lights up on the night club. Carolyn sits alone, with a 1980s era portable tape recorder and hand-held microphone on her table in front of her.

GRACE (CONT'D)

So there she was, right at 8pm as usual. And she had a tape recorder with her, and for the first time, I felt nervous being on stage in front of her, because she was going to capture this moment and it had to be perfect. But you know, I'm a professional, and I had told her that song was ready, and I meant to sing it.

A theatrical light isolates Grace as she begins to sing the Song.

GRACE (CONT'D)

AT FIRST, THE SMOKE INSIDE THE  
ROOM BURNED MY EYES  
GETTING USED TO PAIN MEANT QUICKLY  
GETTING WISE  
SUDDENLY THE LIGHTS ARE BLAZING  
SUDDENLY A VOICE I'M RAISING  
REACHING OUT TO YOU

CASUALLY I CROSS THE STAGE AND  
LOOK YOUR WAY  
NEITHER ONE OF US CAN THINK OF  
WHAT TO SAY  
BUT WHEN THE LIGHTS GO DOWN I'M  
STEADY  
SUDDENLY MY HEART IS READY  
REACHING OUT TO YOU

TIME ALWAYS RUNS THE WRONG WAY,  
WHEN THE STAKES ARE HIGH  
AND I'VE ONLY GOT ONE CHANCE TO  
SAY GOODBYE

THESE DAYS WITH YOU  
 FELT LIKE SOMETHING PRECIOUS, LIKE  
 A PEARL  
 THESE DAYS WITH YOU  
 CHANGED THE WAY I SEE THE WORLD

ALWAYS IN A SHOW YOU REACH THE  
 FINAL BOW  
 SWEAR YOU'LL KEEP IN TOUCH BUT  
 IT'S AN EMPTY VOW  
 BUT I WILL KEEP YOUR MEMORY  
 AND KNOW THAT I WILL ALWAYS BE  
 REACHING OUT TO YOU

Carolyn claps softly when the song is over.

GRACE (CONT'D)  
 What'd you think?

CAROLYN  
 What do you call it?

GRACE  
 It doesn't have a title yet.

CAROLYN  
 Then I shall refer to it as  
 "Untitled" on the label of the  
 cassette.

GRACE  
 Did you record the whole set?

CAROLYN  
 I did. I have your songs  
 memorized, of course, but someday  
 I imagine my memories of - this  
 time - will begin to fade.  
 (pause)  
 Grace - I won't be back tomorrow  
 night like usual. I won't be  
 coming back at all, actually. I've  
 been - transferred.

GRACE  
 Just like that?

CAROLYN  
 Just like that.

GRACE  
 How could that happen so suddenly?

CAROLYN  
It's not worth mentioning.

GRACE  
I see. Where are you going?

CAROLYN  
I can't say.

GRACE  
Will I ever see you again?

CAROLYN  
No.

GRACE  
Ah.

CAROLYN  
Your untitled song was lovely.

GRACE  
I won't be singing it again I'm  
sure.

CAROLYN  
Thank goodness I thought to record  
it.

GRACE  
Take good care of that tape.

Carolyn turns to exit, finds Bailey standing in the doorway.

BAILEY  
So let me see if I understand this  
correctly. Your friend Carolyn is  
walking out of here with a master  
tape of a live recording, and  
you're not even asking her for a  
copy? I thought I taught you  
better about this business.

GRACE  
You taught me plenty about this  
business.

CAROLYN  
This recording doesn't concern  
you.

BAILEY

Is that so. Because I couldn't get her to record for me, and I was her manager. Did you know I set her up with this gig in the first place, after the USO had her stuck across town in a cafeteria? I negotiated her rate with Inga, and only asked for a modest percentage for myself. I figured someday I would recoup my time when we finally recorded Grace's debut album.

GRACE

I wasn't recording an album.

BAILEY

Is that so. Plenty of jazz albums were recorded on shabbier gear than that tape recorder there. Where'd you get that beauty, if I may ask?

CAROLYN

You may not.

BAILEY

Aren't you mysterious.

CAROLYN

Grace, is there a problem here?

GRACE

No.

BAILEY

There might be.

GRACE

No. There isn't.

BAILEY

How did I do wrong by you, Grace? I thought we were on the same page.

GRACE

Did you really think that? Or were you just waving fame and fortune in front of me thinking that would make up for your shortcomings?

BAILEY

What shortcomings?

GRACE

You weren't honest with me about anything, were you. You thought I was just like every other kid who wanted to be a star, and you thought I might do just about anything to make that happen. But I didn't come here thinking I was on the road to fame and fortune. And I definitely didn't come here to climb into bed with someone like you.

Bailey takes a moment to look from Grace to Carolyn.

CAROLYN

She didn't climb into bed with me either, if that's what you're thinking.

BAILEY

Crossed my mind.

Carolyn stares Bailey down until he shrugs and exits.

CAROLYN

Does that man need to be handled for you?

GRACE

"Handled"? What does that mean?

CAROLYN

Convinced to leave you alone.

GRACE

I can "handle" Mr. Bailey.

CAROLYN

I want to believe you. By the same token, I am reluctant to leave town wondering if you're up to the task. Perhaps I should have another conversation with him on my way out of town.

GRACE

I think you should probably just leave him alone.

CAROLYN

That's the question, isn't it, Grace?

(MORE)

CAROLYN (CONT'D)

Leave the man alone in his belief that his attitude toward you is justified, or educate him about the range of options that his future might include.

GRACE

How are you proposing to "educate" Mr. Bailey?

CAROLYN

Like I said... I might simply have another conversation with him.

GRACE

In that case, you might want to hurry before he gets too far.

CAROLYN

I will have no trouble finding Mr. Bailey, Grace. Please, don't spend another moment thinking about him.

GRACE

Well, that sounds easy enough when you say it like that.

CAROLYN

Good.

(pause)

Maybe someday, I'll be able to send you a copy of this recording, if you think you would like it.

GRACE

Eh... I like the idea of you having the only copy. For some reason, I find that to be...

CAROLYN

Is the word you're thinking of "romantic"?

Grace nods.

CAROLYN (CONT'D)

I was thinking that myself. Goodbye, Grace.

GRACE

Goodbye, Carolyn.

Carolyn exits.

GRACE (CONT'D)

At first, I didn't believe that I wouldn't see her again. I kept expecting that she'd turn up again, just as suddenly as she'd turned up the first time. Eventually Inga took pity on me and pulled me aside, whispered a bit of gossip to me. Some of the locals thought Carolyn was - a secret agent, I guess you'd say. A spy from East Berlin who'd crossed over to our side temporarily for some inexplicable reason. But of course that's not the kind of thing Inga or anyone else could prove.

AMANDA

So you never heard from Carolyn again?

GRACE

I never did.

AMANDA

And she didn't leave you with a copy of the tape?

GRACE

No, she did not. So imagine my surprise hearing it on the radio.

AMANDA

I am absolutely imagining that. It's awesome to think about.

GRACE

Perhaps you aren't imagining it correctly. If that recording is out there in the world - I would love to know where it came from.

AMANDA

Yes. Of course. I'm going to play something for you. It's a recording of a numbers station. Do you what that is?

GRACE

I don't.

AMANDA

Well, listen first, and then I'll explain.

We hear the numbers station recording that we heard earlier, beginning with the jazz sample that we now recognize as Grace's voice, and continuing into the actual numbers in a voice that we now recognize as Carolyn's. Carolyn's voice continues all throughout the following dialogue.

AMANDA (CONT'D)

Do you recognize that voice?

GRACE

I do. My god, I haven't heard her voice in so long, but I do recognize it. That's Carolyn.

AMANDA

(to audience)

E75 generated hundreds of hours of broadcasts, from the mid 80s through to the early 90s, almost ten years. Most of the time it's a male voice, but scattered throughout the broadcasts is Carolyn. When the male voice is about to begin broadcasting, a brief snippet of a military march plays first. But when Carolyn is about to begin broadcasting, a brief snippet of Grace singing her untitled love song plays first. The rest of the recording of Grace, if it exists, is not to be found in the wild. And eventually, Carolyn stopped broadcasting, and E75 went dark. Grace and I listened to every documented hour of Carolyn's broadcasts, but nothing in her voice ever hinted at anything more than what you're hearing now: an indecipherable message to a secret agent out in the field somewhere in Europe, prefaced by Grace's own lyrics reflecting back at her. I asked Grace how her daughter recognized her voice from the sample that Melanie played for me in the studio.

GRACE

Oh, I've been singing that song as a lullaby to Tess ever since she was a baby.

(MORE)

GRACE (CONT'D)

It's really the only one of my old songs I still remember. I know I told Carolyn I'd never sing it again, but all I really meant was I wouldn't perform it for an audience again. Just wouldn't feel right without Carolyn there to hear it.

AMANDA

Actually Grace - I think you *should* sing it for an audience again. A very specific audience.

Lights out on Grace.

AMANDA (CONT'D)

Turns out Grace's voice on the numbers station recording, combined with the testimony of her daughter, who knew the song's full lyrics by heart, was sufficient to convince an arbitrator that Grace was owed royalties on the song "Ricochet" for the uncleared sample of her voice. In the US, an artist owns an implicit copyright over her work without having to register with the copyright office, and Grace presented a compelling case that she was the songwriter. Turns out further that Nebula Rising was in breach of its contract with Melanie Wheeler for failing to clear all samples used in their production of Melanie's album, even though they perhaps rightfully believed numbers station broadcasts should be considered public domain. Nevertheless, that left Melanie's lawyers with a tiny but exploitable opening with which to crack Jason Nebula's hold over Melanie's career and settle out of court for Melanie's freedom.

(MORE)

AMANDA (CONT'D)

Although Jason very likely could have won an actual court case against Grace, the optics of stealing an elderly woman's lullaby for her daughter and then denying her a songwriting credit would not have helped anyone's career. And that story is the reason why, six months later, Melanie Wheeler and Grace Ridley agreed to meet me in Chicago to record an interview for Signal Loss, just as "Ricochet" was climbing up the charts.

Lights up on the WBEZ studio. Melanie and Grace are set up to perform. Amanda and Ellie sit nearby. The red "ON AIR" light goes on.

MELANIE

So the last time I was here, I played a version of this song, and it led to a whole sort of magical series of events in my life, which included meeting Grace Ridley, who is here with me today.

GRACE

Hello.

MELANIE

And so we're going to sing a version of a song that we co-wrote together, without realizing it at first. But then we got together and came up with a new arrangement. It's kind of a remix, I guess. This is the "USO Remix" of "Ricochet".

Melanie and Grace perform a mash-up of "Ricochet" that weaves the two songs together, focusing on bringing the two voices into harmony and counter-harmony whenever possible.

AMANDA

Thank you both so much. Grace, are you thinking about a career in music now?

GRACE

Might be a little too late.

MELANIE

Never too late.

GRACE

Easy for you to say.

MELANIE

Wanda Jackson's in her 70s and she's still touring.

GRACE

Is she touring because she loves it or because she needs the money?

MELANIE

Well, everybody needs the money, right?

AMANDA

Do you two plan to release the "USO Remix" of "Ricochet"?

MELANIE

Yes, we're going to put out a special vinyl seven inch.

GRACE

Figure I might as well send my own little broadcast out into the world in case Carolyn is out there listening somewhere.

AMANDA

Melanie, you recently became your own manager. What's that like?

MELANIE

I'm still getting used to it. It'd be so easy to surround myself with the wrong people, because - they're everywhere. But I'm figuring things out.

GRACE

You got plenty of time.

The "ON AIR" light goes off.

AMANDA

Thanks for letting us crash your studio, Ellie.

ELLIE

My pleasure. I'm so glad I got to be here for this!

David enters.

DAVID

Hey just checking in - we're going to need this studio in about forty-five minutes, will you guys be clear?

AMANDA

We'll be clear.

MELANIE

And we're not "guys" in case you hadn't noticed.

DAVID

Uh - okay.

David exits.

MELANIE

What's up with that dude?

AMANDA

He crossed a line with me last time I was in town. Wouldn't let me out of his car for a second.

ELLIE

I'm so sorry.

GRACE

Don't apologize for him.

ELLIE

I just, I should have said something to you.

AMANDA

Like you should have said you expected him to do something like that?

ELLIE

Well not exactly, but - I mean, I wasn't sure what to expect exactly.

AMANDA

Ellie, come on. Has he been a problem before?

ELLIE

He's not a real problem. He's not like Bill O'Reilly or whatever.

AMANDA

Then you should talk to him so he doesn't *become* that bad, you know? You can't just let that go anymore. You have to speak up.

ELLIE

Are you really lecturing me about how to be a better feminist?

MELANIE

Did *you* say something to him?

AMANDA

No, I was too surprised. I'm lecturing myself as much as anyone. The next morning, at the station, he acted like nothing unusual had happened the night before. Maybe for him, nothing unusual *had* happened. Or nothing *wrong* had happened. I'll talk to him.

ELLIE

No, I'll talk to him.

AMANDA

No, let me do it. I mean, god, it was nothing like how Jason Nebula treated you, Melanie...

MELANIE

You don't grade consent on a curve.

AMANDA

I'll say something to David before I leave. And then if he pulls something like that again, Ellie, you can say something to his manager.

GRACE

And why do you think his manager is going to listen? Bill O'Reilly lasted years.

ELLIE

David is not Bill O'Reilly! Jesus.

GRACE

Maybe you're just used to it.

MELANIE

I don't think you get used to it.

ELLIE

How can you not get used to it? It's pervasive. Not from David specifically... just, in the world. I'm sorry I didn't even think to mention it to you. I can't exactly post a warning sign in the break room. And I mean - Melanie's settlement with Jason Nebula means she can't even go on the record about *his* behavior.

MELANIE

I'm still taking money out of his pocket. Other producers are noticing that, trust me.

AMANDA

But he's completely getting off the hook for the actual physical abuse you had to deal with, isn't he?

MELANIE

I wasn't going to be able to prove that in court. You saw what happened to Kesha. Lost every step of her case. She put a new record out, all by herself, and Dr. Luke is still getting paid for it. If I went to court, it would have been Jason's word against mine, and he's got a dozen lawyers and I've got one, and the one I've got isn't sure he believes me. You think a court would believe me? But we got him to hand over his publishing rights for "Ricochet" to Grace, and that's a victory, isn't it?

AMANDA

I guess.

MELANIE

I would feel better if I heard more than "I guess" at the end of all this.

AMANDA

I know. I'm sorry.

GRACE

Melanie, what you did is, you won the battle he didn't see coming, you outsmarted him that way, and that does mean something. Shakes his confidence maybe. Or maybe he's too narcissistic to get the message, but his lawyers weren't.

ELLIE

The only thing his lawyers learned is to clear your damn samples - and that's a rookie message he should have learned a long time ago. So he gets better about that, and the next protege he takes under his wing, you think she's going to get so lucky?

MELANIE

You think I can't track down a phone number for the next protege he takes under his wing? I'm watching that guy.

ELLIE

Well that's very noble, but it's not exactly scalable to the entire music industry.

MELANIE

The point is, we do what we can.

AMANDA

And what I can do, apparently, is put an episode of Signal Loss together where I can't talk about what happened with David because it's not fair to call him out on national radio for his mistake, I can't talk about what happened with Jason Nebula because of your settlement agreement, and I can't talk about what happened with Mr. Bailey because we don't actually know what happened with him in the end. Sounds riveting.

ELLIE

It's almost as though the format of your show is constricting for you, Amanda.

(MORE)

ELLIE (CONT'D)

It's almost as though doing a niche little show about dead analog media isn't enough to get across the ideas you're realizing you want to spread. It's almost as though you belong in Chicago, figuring out a new show, something with a little more bite?

AMANDA

Yeah. It's almost like that.

ELLIE

That's my girl.

Lights fade on the studio. We are back to the sounds of Carolyn's voice repeating on the numbers station as Amanda finally drifts back to her own little booth back in Iowa.

AMANDA

One question stuck with me - what was Carolyn doing in West Berlin in the first place, and how did she then wind up with the equivalent of a desk job, as the voice of a numbers station. You don't get to know these answers when spycraft is involved. I like to imagine that her interaction with Grace was off script, and that this led to a further unsanctioned action with Mr. Bailey, all of which culminated in her being relieved of her field duties. The only thing I know for sure is that Carolyn very deliberately used that recording of Grace as her call sign, and her superiors must have known where she got it and what it meant. And if it was that deliberate... I wonder if her interaction with Grace wasn't off script at all. I wonder if Grace was the intended recipient of those messages in the first place. I wonder if Grace herself was a spy, and I wonder if Grace knows exactly what was in those encrypted messages. And I wonder if Grace agreeing to be on Signal Loss was her own way of finally responding to Carolyn, years later.

(MORE)

AMANDA (CONT'D)

I couldn't resist mentioning my fanciful theory to Grace. She laughed and said:

GRACE

If I could contact Carolyn again, I wouldn't use a cipher or a song to tell her how I felt.

AMANDA

I'm Amanda Bixby. You've been listening to Signal Loss. This episode was called "Sings The Hits."

END