

Corey Creekmur: Hi, my name is Corey Creekmur and I teach Film Studies in the Department of Cinematic Arts at the University of Iowa.

I'm here today at the 2016 SCMS Conference in Atlanta with Rick Altman, who will be presented later today with the society's Distinguished Career Achievement Award, the society's most prestigious honor.

Rick is emeritus professor of Film Studies at the University of Iowa, and he is best known for a series of genuinely groundbreaking books, including the American Film Musical from 1987, Film Genre from 1999, which won the SCMS Katherine Kovács Award for best book that year, Silent Film Sound from 2004, which also earned numerous awards, and A Theory of Narrative from 2008, a synthesis of his thoughts on that fundamental topic across media.

He also edited or co-edited the influential volumes Genre: The Musical, 1982, Sound Theory, Sound Practice, 1992, and The Sounds of Early Cinema, 2001. In addition to a number of influential special issues of journals.

As we will discuss, Rick has also served as the director for a significant number of dissertation projects, many now published, that bear his ongoing influence.

I thought we would start, and I hope this doesn't sound like a psychoanalytic session, but with your childhood. And I realize, I don't know much about this aspect of you. Could you say something about your interest in movies? Your experience as a kid, or a young person going to films? And particularly if that influenced your later career, the later work you did? Drew in some ways on your experience as a film goer?

Rick Altman: I would have to say that I was born at an early age of poor, but honest parents.

My first real memories of going to the movies were, of all things, in France, on a NATO base outside of Paris between 1957 and '59. And I remember the face, hair, and legs of Kim Novak. I remember a number of important 50s films.

But after that, it pretty much died down. I was really interested in narrative. Narrative, for me, included medieval epic and romance. Included the novel and short stories, and the obvious types of narrative. But less likely to be divined were my interest in comic books, not because I was interested in comic books, but because I was interested in ways of telling stories. So I spent time with comic books, I spent time with narrative art, whenever I would go to a museum, I would look for the paintings that were in some way narrative.

So it wasn't really until the years ... of the whole year, when my wife and I were writing our dissertations in Paris, and we virtually camped out at the Cinémathèque Française. By that time, I was already in my 20s, a graduate student at Yale. Suddenly film was on the horizon. I didn't really know a whole lot about what to do with film. I was just a buff. But before long, things changed.

Corey Creekmur: What were you seeing in Paris? What do you recall seeing?

Rick Altman: Actually, what I recall, perhaps most saliently, was a Greek film with Turkish subtitles.

We saw just about everything. We would always make sure there were two films in a row that we wanted to see. Sometimes three, sometimes four. The films, they varied between almost nobody there to twice as many people as there were seats. In fact, I particularly remember one time trying to get a seat for a popular film, a recent French film, when I realized that everybody was shoulder to shoulder, but their shoulder were wider than their hips and their legs, so I could crawl underneath and get up to the front of the line. Which I did, but on my way back I almost fainted. There was no air down there.

Corey Creekmur: Were you aware at the time of what was going on around Cahiers du Cinéma, new wave figures and all of that? Some of whom, I'm guessing, were in the audience with you.

Rick Altman: I'm sure they were. But I was total unaware of that. I did not know that there was such a thing as a film studies discipline. I had not been reading anything, because I came at this in a way, the same way I came to comic books and narrative painting. I didn't do a whole lot of reading about comic books, frankly there wasn't much out there to read. Likewise, narrative painting, I actually did little by little find my way to some very interesting writing about narrative sculpture in the Romanesque period.

Film was, for a long time, just an add-on. And an excuse to do something more in terms of narrative.

Corey Creekmur: One thing you've mentioned, but obviously part of the big picture soon, you must've had music training. You must have had an interest in music early on.

Rick Altman: Yeah. My mother made me take piano lessons in the sixth and seventh grade. All right full disclosure, here it comes. When we went to France for basically my eighth and ninth grade years, my mother wanted me to continue, and I thought, "Great," because she gave me the money to pay the teacher. Well, the teacher was often unavailable, but I didn't bother to inform my mother that that money was being used for something else.

Where I really got into music, and it's interesting because I've discovered in thinking about my career, how important it has always been for me to have an audience. I'm not good without a sense that there's somebody listening to me, or somebody participating with me.

I went to camp when I was in high school. And the same group as I was, there was a guy who had been the rehearsal pianist for his high school's production of Oklahoma. He would sit down and start playing tunes from Oklahoma, and

immediately there was a bunch of people who would form around and who would sing with him. And to me, that was the most wonderful thing I could imagine.

And so that year, my senior year in high school, I took jazz. And I learned something about soul-fetching, and all kinds of analytical procedures that before that I had no notion of. It was only really after that point that I began to think of the piano as a way to bring people together. So when I was at Duke as an undergraduate, I lived in the Presbyterian center, and spent most of my time at the Baptist Student Center, where there was a piano. And every night, somewhere in the middle of the evening, we would all stop studying and gather round the piano and play a while.

I counted poorly, the rhythm was terrible, I didn't hit all the notes. But that didn't matter. People were there around me, and they wanted to sing and it was always, "Let's do another one," or "Do you have The Sound of Music?"

Corey Creekmur: I was gonna say, it sounds like you weren't playing hymns.

Rick Altman: No. I was not playing hymns. I did play some hymns after my freshman year in college, I taught sailing and swimming at a camp on Cape Cod, and during that time, I had the pleasure of being required, even though it was not part of my contract, to play hymns for the weekly services. So I did get my fair share of hymns in. And when I went back to Duke, I took a harmony course. I did a whole lot of analyzing, playing, and even writing of corral.

Corey Creekmur: Well you've alluded to this, but let me fill this in. Typical of your generation of film scholars, you were not trained in film studies. But your leap is, to me, a bigger one than others. A lot of people were trained in English. They studied, often drama, or the American novel. And the jump from that to film didn't seem so odd, for some of those people. When the academy started to say, we need to offer film studies, I think there was a sense of looking at, "Well this person teaches, novels have stories and characters, that's kind of like film. Or drama, certainly ..."

Tell us about your background, and how that got you to film.

Rick Altman: Once I came back from the experience at the Cinémathèque Française, all of a sudden, when I would read a newspaper I was looking at what films were being offered. So the summer when I finished my dissertation, for example, I was back in New Haven, and Yale had a series of films. We sat in rooms that had separate chairs with the fold down desk, and only maybe 30 or 40 of us could fit in the room. It was not fancy, and they were 16 millimeter prints, there was nothing like 35 millimeter.

That piqued my interest. And so, pretty soon I started thinking, "Okay, well how can I get films that I can look at again?" Because one of the real problems at the

time was that you couldn't see the film again unless you sat in a theater for the whole day, watching it three or four times. It was a situation where you really needed videotape, but videotape hadn't yet been invented, or at least it had not been widely disseminated.

Corey Creekmur: Right.

Rick Altman: So I started looking around for sources of films. And of all things, given my subsequent experience, it was in Iowa that I found a source of films. Black Hawk Films, down in Port Iowa, had quite a collection of Super 8 films. And I bought Super 8 films. And I showed them to my wife and myself, to friends at times. And when I got my first full-time job at Bryn Mawr College, I used them for my courses there.

It meant that I actually could take a film apart, watch it several times. And that's what led to my sitting down one day and writing an essay about "The Lonely Villa." And it is heavily marked by my background in semiotics. It is heavily marked by the fact that the short films of D.W. Griffith were among the only ones that were available at the time. Tannhauser, none of that. Porter, almost none of that. It was Griffith films, his short films, that were really of great importance.

I had no idea who would read anything that I would write. I wrote because, well, it just seemed interesting to do so.

My wife and I got jobs together at the University of Iowa in 1974. And in '74-75, I had a fellowship at the Cornell Society for the Humanities. And one of the times I came back to see my wife in Iowa City, I met this guy named Richard Abel. And I didn't know much about who he was. But little by little, I found out. One of the things he was, was that year's chair for the Midwest Modern Language Association's film session. And he somehow wheeled out of me the fact that I had written something on "The Lonely Villa", and he said, "Well, you've got to present that."

And so all of the sudden, I was a scholar, presenting material on cinema, which even today seems strange to me because it was so utterly fortunate that I should fall into the hands of Richard Abel at a time when he was casting about looking for people to-

Corey Creekmur: He was at Drake, in Des Moines?

Rick Altman: That's correct.

Corey Creekmur: Let's talk about-, so you've arrived at Iowa now. How did you begin teaching film regularly at Iowa? I trust you were not hired to teach film?

Rick Altman:

I was not only not hired to teach film, I was hired in the French department, but with an understanding that I would soon also be teaching comparative literature.

The dean at the time didn't think too much of appointments in multiple departments for people who didn't yet have tenure, so the idea was as soon as I would get tenure, I would be teaching comparative literature.

But there was no question of cinema, and the reason why there was no question of cinema is I didn't know there was such a thing as cinema. For me, there were movies, but there was no discipline surrounding the movies. None whatsoever. I remember that my bible in those days was Gerald Mast's History of Cinema. It's, today we would say, very slim volume. Not everything was right in it. But it was a beginning. It helped me along, so that I was actually learning a little something.

And then one day, a couple of people knocked at my door. There was this woman named Jane Fewer who said, "I hear you like musicals." And I said, "Yeah, I love musicals. I love to sing, and I can play a little bit of it." She said, "Would you direct my dissertation?" It happened virtually that quickly.

Tom Shots was working with Dudley Andrew. Tom was interested in American genre films. I was interested in American genre films. Dudley was not particularly interested in American genre films, so it was a fit between Tom Shots and Dudley Andrew was not a particularly good fit. But the fit between Tom Shots and me was a perfect fit. So Tom wrote his dissertation basically with Dudley as titular director and me as shadow director. But when Tom was done, he said, "Rick really should have co-direction credit on this." It was the first time I had actually thought of this as part of the work that I do at the university. For me, it had always been outside the university.

At the same time, Jim Collins from comparative literature said, "I want to work with you." And he wanted to work with me in part because we had narrative theory interests in common. But also, because we were interested in similar kinds of films, and similar ways of thinking about films.

Corey Creekmur:

So they were drawn to you because they found out somehow about your interests. Had you taught courses? Had they been in courses with you?

Rick Altman:

At first, no. In fact, the first year that I was at Iowa, I wasn't at Iowa. I was at the Cornell Society for the Humanities in '74-75. I came back regularly so that I could see my wife. But it was little by little that people discovered that I had this interest. And to tell you the honest truth, it was little by little that I realized that I really do have this interest. I was hired to be the 17th century scholar in the French department. I did a little of that, but it wasn't really where my heart was. I was really more interested in 19th century novels, and in cinema, and all the theory that surrounds cinema.

Corey Creekmur: What's the first work you read in film theory? Or that at least made an impression?

Rick Altman: Oh my gosh.

Corey Creekmur: You mentioned Gerald Mast as a kind of text and film history.

Rick Altman: You know, I'm drawing a blank. What would I have-

Corey Creekmur: I'm trying to think what was available at the time, first. Rudolf Arnheim, perhaps. Munsterburg. If people had rediscovered it at that point.

Rick Altman: It was more though, since I was in French, it was people writing in French. I read some Roland Barthes. I read Christian Metz. I read Thierry Kuntzel. I read Raymond Bellour. Communication 23 was one of my bibles, in part because Dudley encouraged me, and actually included a review that I wrote on psychoanalysis and cinema, working basically with these French texts.

A really important moment in my life was when one year, I realized you don't know enough about this to be teaching. You've got to learn more. And I started a campaign to give myself the necessary background in film. And so I read virtually everything that was available on American cinema over the course of a year, and wrote an essay that "Cinema Journal" picked up that was used for a summer NEH experience with Jack Ellis.

It was pushing myself to get to a level where I felt something other than a fraud, was going on at that point in my life.

Corey Creekmur: I want to ask more about, I keep encountering students who, graduate students now, who cannot imagine how anyone studied film before video. And I'm interested in-, maybe now less the study than the pedagogy. Can you say something about the difficulties of teaching film before you had easy access to a wide range of films on video?

Rick Altman: Well, you're absolutely right. It was a challenge. But people were so excited about the idea of studying film seriously, and bringing relatively sophisticated analytical techniques to film, that they were willing to put up with that.

I'll give you two different periods. The first period, when there was absolutely nothing in the way of video, we had an analyzer projector. And the analyzer projector permitted us to slow things down, to go back and play things again. And at the time, virtually all the interesting articles were about no more than one film, because it took so long to get to know one film, and in any case, you hadn't bought dozens of them. You bought only a couple of them. So you analyzed those films, you wrote about those films, and there are famous examples of, Thierry Kuntzel writing about King Kong and others, Raymond

Bellour writing about Hitchcock and so forth. There are just all kinds of possibilities out there for analyzing a single film.

We had a couple of problems, which is that every time we wanted to get an image to illustrate one of our articles, well, how did you get that image? We didn't have anything digital that would permit us to get that image, and so the first thing we did was we went to places like the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and bought images until we realized, wait a minute. Those were taken by a camera on the set. Those are not images from the film.

I will never forget. I bought a lens that permitted me to take frame enlargements, and because there was always hot spot, I bought a plastic lamp, and I cut the plastic into pieces, and I shared them with friends. So I had mine over the lens, Maryann Done had one from the same lamp, Phil Rosen had one from this same lamp. And we figured out how to do frame enlargements.

And in some cases, we would do frame enlargements of a whole series. So for example, in writing my book on American film musical, I went to the University of Illinois, which had a good print of Rouben Mamoulian's "Applause." And I took the shots necessary to do a sequence analysis, and not just a mise-en-scène analysis of a single frame.

So that's the first period when it was tough. It was tough, but it was oh so exciting. And the adrenaline was flowing, and we would watch together and talk to each other over the movie.

And then, suddenly, there was something called U-matic. 3/4 inch videotape. You could get a whole hour on one of these tapes. And the image was not too bad.

Well at the time, I was directing Jane Feuer's dissertation, and the local public broadcasting network station was showing just an extraordinary series, first of MGM, then of Fox, then of Warner's musicals. And we wrangled not one, but two U-Matic players and recorders, so that either Jane or I could go in on Wednesday night when they were showing these things. We had a room that's no bigger than you and me here. We recorded every week, faithfully, a musical that we would then be able to go back to. Now of course, the changeover from the first reel to the second reel was always a problem. So we always hoped that it wouldn't be right in the middle of an important number.

That led to a new moment. Not just in terms of what kind of analysis we could do, but what kind of space we needed. We needed a number of these rather expensive and extremely bulky recorder players for the 3/4 inch U-Matic. We needed a space where they could be viewed, not just by one person sitting in front of them like a movieola. But we had to rethink entirely what kind of space we needed. So in many cases, we had to make it up.

Corey Creekmur: You've led me to exactly where I want to go. I want to talk about two things. You were best known for work on genre, specifically on the musical, but on the concept of genre. And then on sound. So I want to talk about how you came to both of those, how both of those emerged as key projects for you.

But backing up a little bit, you set a project up for yourself, as you said, that had to leap from dealing with a single film in detail to dealing with many films, which is what genre compels you to do. Can you tell me something about how genre became such a focus of what you wanted to do?

Rick Altman: Well, as I suggested, I discovered how important interactivity is in my production. Here I had Jane Feuer, head over heels in love with the musical, and knowing much more than I did about the musical. And Tom Shots wanting to write on a whole variety of genre films.

If you think about my career, you'll notice that in many cases, I've written books on the same topic, and in the same vein as my students. A lot of people will say, "Oh, the musical. There's Altman and there's Feuer." They don't necessarily recognize that there's any connection between Altman and Feuer. One's A in the alphabet, the other one's F in the alphabet. They don't see that as well, she was my student.

Tom Shot's book on genre, well it's very different from my book, *Film Genre*. But in some ways, it's a similar corpus that's being dealt with.

Or Jim Lastra. I remember reading the preface to his dissertation, in which he thanks me profusely, and says, "I only hope that I get my book out before he gets his out." And it is true that they're two, we were working on similar projects. There are many other cases where I've published articles that I was sort of pushed to by my graduate students.

But let's distinguish, however, between genre and sound. The film genre question was already started by the time I got there. There had been writing about genres in literature for, not decades, but centuries. So I was sent back to my old familiar readings. I was reading Aristotle. I was reading the Renaissance Aristotelians. I was reading "La princesse de Crève" and the quarrels around "La princesse de Crève" in the 17th century. So I had a background that touched on genre, and so I didn't feel at sea. I didn't feel lost. I felt that there was something in my training at Duke and at Yale that actually could contribute to what I could offer to my students.

Then on top of that, there was this total love for the musical. Many people, to this day, wonder why the hell does he work on the musical? Isn't there something more sophisticated? Well, no, ladies and gentlemen. There are few things in life that are more sophisticated than Hollywood musicals. And it took me a while to realize that.

I do remember when "Genre: The Musical" came out, Anthony Burgess wrote a review of it, on the front page of the Times Literary Supplement. And I was devastated. He was so nasty. It was, "What in the world are these people thinking of? They're going to wreck cinema by analyzing musicals. After all, that's not what cinema is about. It's just about the experience, and we don't write about these things." I thought I was dead in the water. When my editor, Ed Buscombe, at the BFI, said, "Are you kidding? You have no idea. This is a total breakthrough. This is the first time we've ever had any attention to a BFI publication in TLS, and on the front page, and by Anthony Burgess. This is mecca. This is nirvana."

Corey Creekmur: No such thing as bad publicity, I guess.

Rick Altman: That's exactly what he told me. All publicity is good publicity.

The genres, they sort of spread in my interest, as students forced me into thinking about other genres. It wasn't just the musical. It was gangster films, it was science fiction, it was the western.

It continued to grow until "Film Genre," which is actually for me a relatively recent piece of work, only about 15 years old. And I discovered new ways of thinking about genre, and it was increasingly problematic for me to work in the genre area without going back to the things I had written before, and in some cases, changing my mind and rewriting those things.

But the sound question, that's a different one. There had not been much written about sound when I got into sound. I really, I didn't know enough to be interested in sound. I've done this several times in my career, where I just don't have the training for something. And I said, "Eh what the hell? Work at it anyhow, you'll get better." So I spend a year reading the criticism on American cinema. Or so I spend a long time trying to figure out how genres work.

The sound thing was very different. When I recognized that there was a discipline around me, this was in the mid 70s when I was now teaching full time at the University of Iowa. I, being a recent graduate with a PhD from Yale wrote to the people at Yale French Studies and said, "How about letting me edit an issue of Yale French Studies on film?" They wrote back, "We think highly of you, we'd love to have you do this, but not a general issue. You've got to have a shtick. You've got to have something more than just the general topic of film." And I thought, so what I can do? Why in the world I thought I had enough knowledge to oversee an issue on film sound, I don't know.

But I contacted lots of people. I was beginning through the various meetings at Indiana University, at Purdue University, at University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, MMLA meetings, Midwest Modern Language Association meetings, and so forth. I was beginning to meet people, and some of these people I thought, well maybe I can challenge them to write something on sound.

So I got into it by backing in. It was so unexpected that I, or anybody else at that time, would write anything serious about film sound. But as it happened, the issue sold like hotcakes. It was one of their best selling copies, or issues of Yale French Studies ever. And everybody who had even a vague interest in sound jumped on that issue, and instead of being alone in the field, there were a whole bunch of people around me. And those people were pointing at me and saying, "Yeah, he's the leader of this field." And I'm thinking, "I'm the leader? Are you kidding me? I don't know what the hell I'm doing."

So that's the funny way that-

Corey Creekmur: So you jump in the deep end.

Rick Altman: Yes, you jump in the deep end, absolutely.

Corey Creekmur: You also, at some point, clearly realized you needed some technical knowledge.

Rick Altman: Thank you for that segue. That is absolutely perfect.

I started by doing what I had learned to do as a literary researcher. You go to the library, and look at the card catalog, remember when there were card catalogs, and you try to discover whether there are things that have been written on topics that you're interested in.

What great, good fortune I had. The University of Iowa library is a real fount of knowledge related to sound. Why? Well, in part because many of the people who worked in testing, and psychology, and sociology, and all kinds of areas, had seen to it that the University of Iowa libraries would buy everything related to film in those days. I remember being the first person ever to check out several of the Bell Lab's technical journals from the physics library. The physics library? What were you doing in the physics library? Well, that's where the research had taken me.

I read enormously in the period, roughly from 1923 to 1933, and started feeling like I actually know something. It was really important to have a sense that I could explain the technology to people.

As I was doing this, I ended up writing about a variety of types of sound. Some of this stuff I wrote in French, some of it I wrote in English, depending on where I was invited to present. And each thing that I would write opened new vistas for me. I would think, gee, why can't I put this in there? I would get to the point where my articles required being published in two successive issues of "Iris," for example. Or there's that famous 70-plus page article on the silence of silent cinema.

I found so many riches. I spent so much time with microfilm in the University of Iowa libraries. We have full runs of so many of the journals that now are being

put online, little by little. But as I warn my students, be careful. You may be reading only a portion of the run. You need to check to make sure that you're getting the whole thing.

We had lots of French and British and other nationalities of journals on microfilm. I went nearly crazy with the bad light, and the sometimes imperfect focus of microfilm. But it was, to me, very important, and meant that I could regularly deal with primary materials. When you start dealing with primary materials, you realize that some of the people before you didn't bother to look at the primary materials. You really are doing a great service to the field by sort of updating the knowledge. While I don't think of myself as exactly an updater, certainly, that's one of the things that took place during this project.

Corey Creekmur: One of my lessons to graduate students tends to be, and your work is exemplary for this, is that a lot of the action is in the notes. Go to the notes.

Rick Altman: I want to talk about notes a little bit.

Corey Creekmur: Extensive notes, let's call them.

Rick Altman: People wouldn't notice it, but I have had a tendency to write something historical that is loaded with notes.

Corey Creekmur: Right.

Rick Altman: And then to write something that has virtually no notes. The really excessive case is "Silent Film Sound," has thousands of notes, literally. And "A Theory of Narrative" has none.

Corey Creekmur: You mentioned "Silent Film Sound," so let's talk about what led you to, I'll put it in a silly way. What led you to talk about sound for films that supposedly had no sound?

Rick Altman: How do you get into silent film sound?

Corey Creekmur: Which, for many people at first, is simply an oxymoron.

Rick Altman: And of course, that's part of the fun. You attract people that way.

As I was working, I ran into a number of cases where something was taken for granted by the writers. I would find it didn't, wasn't born out by the historical record. And so from the few of these where I would say, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. I can't write a chapter based on secondary sources on silent film sound." Because I had thought, well, I'll write this one volume history of sound. I was gonna start with the short chapter on what everybody agreed about on silent film sound.

Well, as it turned out, what everybody agreed on was, in many cases, dead wrong. And so once I had entered into this rabbit hole, I found that there were beautiful things on the other side. So I kept digging. I kept digging. And it kept paying off. So the more it paid off, the more I would dig, and the more it would pay off. And thank the Lord, at some point I stopped digging, because as it is, I'm fond of saying "Silent Film Sound," it's a book that is mainly useful in case you've broken a leg on your sofa. It will help you prop up that corner of the sofa. It's a heavy affair, even in its paperback version.

It's something that was really driven by the materials that I was consulting. Again, I wouldn't have been able to do that had I not had a base at the University of Iowa where there was so much available from that early period.

Corey Creekmur: Let's add a, I know some of this story, but people will want to hear. At a crucial point, you discovered illustrated song slides.

Rick Altman: Yeah. It took me a long time to get the illustrated song slides. I had run into comments about illustrated songs, and I was fascinated because illustrated song slides always have, as a final slide, the lyrics of the chorus, so that you can get the audience to sing along. And sing along is what I loved. It took me back to my years of working on the musical.

That made me interested, but I couldn't find any resources. I finally found two articles in the Library of Congress journal, by some guy in Topeka, Kansas. So I got on the phone, this was before the internet, alas. I got on the phone and tried to track him down. And every time I tried to track him down, I came up short. Until one time, I finally found out exactly who he was, and where he was. And that he had the slides, and that the slides might be visible, and ... he died. And suddenly, I was without the contact I thought I was going to make to find something out about illustrated song slides.

It's not a if this was something I absolutely had to do, it's just something that I was really curious about.

Poor John Ripley, before he died, decided to sell his collection of song slides. He sold it to somebody on the west coast who quickly realized that he did not have the wherewithal to deal with over 20,000 glass slides. And he sold it back to John Ripley's assistant, Margaret Berg. And Margaret and Nancy Berg of Minneapolis, Minnesota, had, have the most extraordinary collection of these materials. Nancy's passed away since then, but Margaret and Nancy were just exemplary in helping me, and then, me and Richard Abel, discover these materials.

I had the good fortune of having colleagues who were ready for anything. Would you like to have some sound effects to go along with your film? Just ask my colleague, Corey Creekmur, he will make those sound effects. Would you

like to have somebody schmoozing while projecting? Yes, Lauren Rabinovitz would schmooze with the best of them while we were presenting these slides.

And of all things, my very own niece turned out to be an absolutely wonderful singer. She really did understand how to put these songs across, and how to make their lyrics understandable. It was just what was needed. For the record, I should say that twice, once at Duke and once at Melbourne, in Australia, I tried to do a presentation with a local singer, who was always chosen for her operatic voice. I swear, you couldn't understand any of the words she was singing. So it turned out to be a less than successful experiment. Since then, I discovered, whenever I could get my niece, I'd get my niece. And if my niece wasn't available, yours truly did a poor imitation of singing. And the good news is that most of the time I would get people to sing with me, and so mine was not the only voice being heard.

Corey Creekmur: I don't think either of us have named this project, called The Living Nickelodeon. That I will say, for my part, I may have misunderstood early on. I thought this was going to be a one or two time event, and very local. We were gonna do this in Iowa City, see how it worked, have a lot of fun.

But I always appreciated, there was a research component, there was a scholarly component to this performance. But this became a worldwide event.

Rick Altman: We did start in the basement of the First National Bank in Iowa City. It was fun. It was hardly a research activity. In fact, in subsequent years, we often did shows for one retirement community or another, and it was often just your local entertainment.

But we had this idea of taking it to the Domitor meeting in Washington DC, at the Library of Congress. And the people there just went wild about the show. I had just published a long article, which, Tom Gunning, bless his heart, thought people ought to read. So he had copies made of it, and distributed them. 70 plus pages.

We, that is Corey Creekmur on sound effects, Lauren Rabinovitz on projection and schmoozing, Anne Lamonde singing, and Rick Altman playing the piano and lecturing, in the Library of Congress with all the people interested in silent film gathered around.

And many of those people invited us to continue the life of Living Nickelodeon. So we went to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and presented there. We went to the Montreal Cinémathèque, and I remember that was the most killer presentation ever, because there was room for only about 80 people in the room, and there were 150 who wanted to see it. So we did two shows. That was utterly crazy.

Corey Creekmur: And that show was bilingual.

Rick Altman: And that show was definitely bilingual. It was fun as can be.

After that, it was sort of a snowball. People who had participated in the show in one place would go back home and say, "Let's bring these people here." So we went to many universities in this country. Went to the Detroit Institute of Arts, to the Chicago Art Institute.

Corey Creekmur: William and Mary.

Rick Altman: Oh yeah, William and Mary.

Corey Creekmur: Bologna.

Rick Altman: The whole group went to the festival in Bologna, Italy.

And then it became clear that flying four people around the world is very expensive. And people in Bologna were absolutely wonderful. They not only put us up, they fed us, and they even paid us for our work. But it became clear that we needed a simpler version. So I rewrote things, figured out how, as a one man show, I could do the singing, the schmoozing, the lecturing, and put the whole thing together.

So I took it to the Louvre in Paris, I took it to University of Melbourne. I, since then, have taken it all over Germany. I've taken it to the Brussels Cinémathèque. Taken it to NYU. To the Buffalo Festival. To Rochester. Just lots and lots of places. And I still am contacted, a couple of times every year, to do another show. The University of Pittsburgh has been exemplary. They actually invited me back, so I've done different versions of the show twice at the University of Pittsburgh.

Corey Creekmur: You downplay a little bit the research component, but I have to say, I always found an amazing part of it giving me, but people in the audience, a sense of this is how this worked. This is ... with modern equipment, we always knew it wasn't quite the same experience, but still. I thought this gave you some sense of what a Nickelodeon might be like.

Rick Altman: That was really the justification for doing this. It really drove me.

When I discovered that these places that everybody referred to as film theaters, Nickelodeons, that these places were not just film theaters. That there were a lot of other things going on. We know that there's small time vaudeville, which often would have films as well as vaudeville acts. Not a lot of attention has been paid to that, but no attention at all had been paid to the important role of illustrated song slides.

So I started just looking at pictures of the facades of these so-called film theaters. I discovered holes in the wall that clearly were set up so that you could

broadcast music out onto the street from the projection booth. But beyond that, I also discovered lots of text that would suggest that there wasn't necessarily music being played. And I found lots of period evidence of that.

But in the meantime, since then, I've been contacted by a number of people who said, "In the X theater, my grandmother always told me that..." and there've been all kinds of testimonials about the pianist having the time off while the film was on, because the pianist was really there to accompany the illustrated song. And I thought, "How am I gonna convince people of this?"

Well, there's no better convincer than having people actually live the experience themselves. And so from the very beginning, the idea has been to exemplify a variety of modes of accompanying cinema. And eventually, that led to my book on silent film sound.

The book's good for holding up couch legs. It is not the sort of thing that anybody's just gonna wander onto. It is a pretty book, it is the sort of thing that deserves to be on some coffee tables. But it's still a heavy read. Whereas the Living Nickelodeon, I can't tell you how many times I've had five year olds and 85 plus year olds come up after a show and tell me how much they enjoyed it. Because they participate. Because it's not just a couch potato land. It's actually getting in there, and being part of the presentation. It really does work.

I will say, I'm guilty of trying my best to set the stage by getting people in the audience to yuck it up. To talk to each other. I try to find people who speak foreign languages, so that they can sit on opposite sides of the auditorium and call out to each other in the foreign language. It really does make a difference to have an animated audience, and part of the point is to make sure people understand just how animated that audience was.

Lauren was particularly good at making sure that no wisecrack was avoided. We had lots of fun with audiences.

Sometimes it got out of hand. I have to say, the Melbourne performance was an all-time low. I encouraged people to get into an argument. And that was appropriate. But one of them, I will not mention his name, decided that the best way to express his opinion was to spit on the back of the head of the scholar sitting in front of him, whose name I will not provide either. But they got into a real tangle. It was a delight, it was-

Corey Creekmur: [inaudible 00:58:37].

Let's talk about, and you mentioned early, that a lot of your work has been conducted in relationship to the work of graduate students. In the sense that they're working on something, and you're working on something simultaneously. So you suggested the pattern is not the scholar mentor and the student who then follows exactly.

But, I'm going to say, I'm well aware you have had a remarkable number of students who have done work under your influence, done work in your wake. I'm gonna name a couple, and I'm worried about leaving some people out, so add the names you want to name.

But you mentioned Jane Feuer, James Lastra, Steve Wortzler, Jay Beck, Jennifer Fleger, more recently Michael Sloich. Who all recently published books in the past, or recently published books. In this case, almost entirely this is work on film sound.

Aside from the reasonable pride you would have in these students, how do you think about that ongoing work? How do you see their filling in gaps, extending arguments, going in new directions?

Rick Altman:

Pedagogically, one of my ideas has been to use graduate courses as a way of broadening our student's vistas. So for example, several times, I've done some variation on this process. I will assign a journal from whatever period we're working on to each of the graduate students in a course, or depending on the size of the course, maybe a pair of people will handle a particularly large, or maybe even three people.

They will write reports on what they find in those journals. We're talking a few pages. Well, a few pages, when multiplied by 15 or 20 means that people have a vision of what's available. And it really does open their minds to new things. They know where to go to look for stuff that might be of interest to them.

You do that once, and it's very useful. You do it every few years, so that each new generation has some sense of how you go about doing this research. It really does, it changes the culture.

In many cases, students would come to me with an article project or a dissertation topic that you could easily see how it had been generated out of a particular class. And in part, because of A, the participation of everybody, and B, the communication of each person's work to everybody else.

One of the things that drove me crazy, I mean crazy, when I first got to Yale as a graduate student, was I had been warned that the books for whatever course I'd be taking would not be in the library. Why would they not be in the library? Well, the reason why they would not be in the library was competition among graduate students meant that one graduate student would take books out that he thought would be useful, and not sign them out of the library, but hide them in some other portion of the library. It was well known that this took place.

In defense, people would do it. People who you would think would have nothing to do with such a trashy approach to life. And when I got to Iowa, I said to myself, "This is never gonna happen here. One of the things we're going to do, is we're going to share our knowledge with each other."

And I think that's one of the things that has really led to so much good work on sound coming out of Iowa. People really have shared their knowledge.

It was perhaps, more important before a digital age, when it's relatively easy to look things up by Googling a term. Well, it was exciting to find out that there's whole new section of books somewhere that are related to what we're interested in. You've only looked in the PN's, but there's other stuff in other places. Or, did you see? They just got this new journal in on microfilm. Can you imagine people getting excited about a new journal on microfilm?

Well, when you have a bunch of people who are sort of working together, and feeding off each other's energy, that really does happen on a regular basis. I think it's one of the things that has made Iowa so strong over the years. There really is not a sense of people doing things individually. There really is a sense of people sharing knowledge.

Corey Creekmur: I think that's right. As a beneficiary, I will say thanks to you for facilitating that for so many years.

So I think we'll wrap up. Thanks very much for spending this time talking about your career. This afternoon, we're looking forward to celebrating the Distinguished Career Achievement Award. So thanks.

Rick Altman: My pleasure.