Answer possible in white noise?

Film spurs interest in electronic voice phenomena
WEEKEND: GHOST TRACKERS
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MISHAWAKA -- It's called white noise.

The snow on a television set. The hum in between radio stations.

Hisses and pops, cracks and echoes are common in this media dead zone.

Sometimes whispers rise from beneath this static storm.

"Hello."

"I'm Frank."

"I will see you no more."

A growing number of people believe these are voices of the dead.

"When you are in a quiet room and you suddenly get a loud one, it can scare you," says Kurt Richardson, a member of the South Bend Chapter of Indiana Ghost Trackers.

Electronic Voice Phenomena, or EVP, an anomaly where mysterious voices appear on modern electronic devices, is the real-life peculiarity at the center of the paranormal thriller "White Noise."

"There's too much out there for it to be nothing," says Richardson, who will explain the history and evolution of EVP at 11 a.m. Saturday at Borders Book Store in Mishawaka.

The movie, which stars Michael Keaton as a grieving spouse trying to communicate with his dead wife, is clearly Hollywood fantasy. But what about the science behind the story?

Those who've researched EVPs -- scientists at well-respected universities, radio engineers and ghost-chasing amateurs -- have captured unusual sounds on radios, tape recorders, answering machines and televisions.

While most EVP research considers the phenomenon a paranormal occurrence, many scientific explanations are more earthly in origin.

Skeptics contend that EVPs are anything from bursts of local taxicab chatter to stray signals from the other side of the world. Still others in the field haven't heard anything at all.

"I've had some gremlins in machines before," says Joe Haase, an audiovisual consultant for Indiana University South Bend. "Things work one minute and stop the next. But when I saw the previews for this movie, I thought, 'I've never even heard of that.' In 20 years I've never heard anything."

If you go The Indiana Ghost Trackers present “White Noise: The Truth Behind EVP,” at 11 a.m. Saturday at Borders Book Store, 4230 Grape Road, Mishawaka. Learn about the history of Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP), the techniques and methods of capturing EVPs and how to analyze ghost voices on your own with Kurt Richardson of the South Bend Chapter of Indiana Ghost Trackers. For information, call Richardson at (574) 255-7033.

Those who have heard it most often attribute the phenomenon to stray radio waves bouncing off shifting curtains of light -- known as the aurora. Such waves can sound distorted, even unnerving when picked up on an unreliable tape recorder.

Such explanations, however, may not account for all EVPs.

"When we get answers to specific questions, I find it hard to believe that we're just picking up radio waves," Richardson says. "If it's just radio waves, that would be quite a coincidence."

Unlike the film, which relied on television and videocassettes, Richardson says a more common technique is to ask a question using a tape recorder. He keeps it running for five to 10 minutes, then plays it back to see of there's an answer.

"One of the biggest misconceptions is that you will get an EVP the first time out," Richardson says. "You have to stick with it, and you have a lot of patience."

Psychologists believe there's still another explanation for EVPs. Combining random sounds into words may be another example of the brain's penchant for making sense of the senseless. In the same search for order that turns cloud shapes into animals and burnt toast into the face of the Virgin Mary, the brain finds patterns -- sometimes at the price of rationality.

"If you stare at white noise long enough, I'm sure you will see something," says Ted Mandell, who teaches in the Department of Film, Television and Theatre at the University of Notre Dame. "If you stare at clouds long enough, you'll see a face. It's what your mind makes up."

Richardson has heard it all before.

Still, it hasn't stopped him from looking at every explanation. Thousands just like him keep recording and posting their findings for all to hear, and debate, on various Web sites.

"One of the main rules of physics says that energy can't be destroyed, it just changes," Richardson says. "So where does that energy go? We don't know for sure, but that's what we're trying to find out."