'What the Hell is a Radio Documentary?'

It's a familiar question. Now here are some answers.

By Stephen Smith

I was interviewing a man in Tennessee this year, a well-educated professional in his 60's and a devoted listener to public radio. I introduced myself by explaining that I'm based at Minnesota Public Radio and make documentaries for National Public Radio (NPR). He cocked his head and eyed me funny. "What the hell is a radio documentary?" he said. I get that question all the time.

Unlike television and film viewers, most radio listeners don't identify an investigative story or intimate human portrait they just heard on public radio as a documentary. To them it's just a program, a piece, a story, a write-up, or even an "article."

Yet an increasing flow of documentaries is pouring out of American radio speakers. They come almost exclusively from public radio stations but also, occasionally, from commercial news stations. Some are an hour long, others 10 to 20 minutes. The best can often be heard within NPR news magazines such as "All Things Considered" and "Weekend Edition"—producer Joe Richman's chronicle of the lives of prison inmates through their audio diaries—or David Isay's portrait of a New York City flophouse, or the work of the Kitchen Sisters in their "Lost and Found Sound" series. There are also documentaries heard on our rival network, Public Radio International (PRI), in programs like "Marketplace," "The World," and "This American Life."

American RadioWorks (ARW) makes documentaries that air within the major NPR news magazines, but we've also made a priority of producing hour-long special reports distributed directly to public radio stations nationwide. These specials air in virtually all the major American cities.

Neither length nor audience define radio documentaries. Ideally, a documentary possesses a depth of research or proximity to its subject that distinguishes it from a long feature or enterprise story. Length is not the defining quality; a documentary can last hours or five minutes. Documentaries convey a rich sense of character and detail—or a substantial body of original investigative material—that simply aren't heard in the majority of public radio news reports.

At the heart of the documentary style are moments recorded on tape in which the story unfolds in front of the listener. These scenes function like a photo essay or a film documentary, where events play out in real time. For example, there is a scene in an American RadioWorks documentary on child poverty, "The Forgotten 14 Million," in which the mother of a family in Kentucky, Janet, lectures her son Jim about the perils of getting married too young.

Jim: "You're allowed to get married when you're 21."

Janet: "Yeah, you're allowed to get married when you're 21, but where you gonna take her to?"

Jim: "I don't know."

Janet: "Without the money and without a home, you gotta have the money and you gotta have a home to take her to!"

Jim: "Yeah, but I'm gonna get me a home first."

Janet: "There ain't no way you can get married at the age of 18 and think that you can go through college, get a job, and support a family, and get your own home and everything else. You can't do that. That's what Mommy and Daddy's been a-trying to tell youn's. You get your education and everything, then you can get you a woman. Other than that, if you don't go through all of that, then you ain't gonna have nothin. And you know it."

In a stunning piece of historical documentary, producers Christina Egloff and Jay Allison of the "Lost and Found Sound" project used audiotapes made by a soldier named Mike, who died in Vietnam, to tell his story: "I have the recorder here, and I'm going to try to keep it elevated off the ground and away from everything here. I'm going to try to keep it up in the air because everything I touch here eats through my skin or bites me, or rots, something. This is, this is something else. The grass will cut you. The mud will rot your skin. This is something else."

Time spent in the field is often what distinguishes a radio documentary from a feature or enterprise report. The piece feels lush, more active. At American RadioWorks, we encourage producers to revisit their subjects time and again, to document the story over months, if not years. These kind of character-driven stories are a powerful way of exploring larger social themes. Some producers pride themselves on never quoting experts in their documentaries because conventional news reports tend to rely heavily on academics and government officials as on-mike sources. At American RadioWorks, we try to weave the larger social context into a compelling, character-rich story. When we get it right, the flow of an engaging narrative helps carry the weight of figures and facts. The trick is choosing the right subject. ARW covers a mix of domestic and international subjects, from global public health to war crimes, from the American prison industry to the history of segregation.

Narrative documentaries are far more common in public radio than investigative projects, in part because investigative reporting devours time and money. Most radio news organizations simply can't afford it. But in February, American RadioWorks broke the

story of how Serbian security forces serving the regime of Slobodan Milosevic burned hundreds of bodies of slaughtered Kosovo Albanians in an industrial furnace to cover up potential war crimes evidence. This story was the result of nearly two years' work researching war crimes in Kosovo.

Do listeners want these documentaries? If you ask many program directors—the gatekeepers to local airtime on more than 600 stations nationwide—the response is mixed. Some insist that long-form work is at the heart of public radio's mission and distinguish it from all the brainless chatter elsewhere on the dial. Others say documentaries are a ratings killer. They point out that the average commercial radio listener tunes in for only 15 minutes or so and that longer stories won't help lure these listeners to our side. On the other hand, time spent listening to public radio is more like an hour per occasion, and documentaries recently aired within NPR's "All Things Considered" have been among the most popular pieces that program has aired.

Although documentaries are alive in public radio, it's hard to argue that the genre is healthy, at least in terms of employment opportunities. Only a handful of radio producers in the United States actually make a living from documentary work, and they don't earn much money. Most producers also work as journalists for local stations, or hold down editorial posts at NPR or PRI, or toil at an unrelated day job. American RadioWorks, the largest documentary production unit in public radio, has nine people on staff.

Still, the near future seems promising for documentary radio. An excellent radio program can be made for a fraction of what a quality independent film costs: As a rough estimate, radio documentaries can cost anywhere from $20-80,000 or more per hour, compared to a documentary film, in which the budget might start at $100,000 and soar past one million dollars. Foundation and government funding for radio documentaries, while not simple to obtain, does exist. And when a piece airs on an NPR newsmagazine it reaches a large, influential audience. For example, more than 10 million people listen to "All Things Considered." That's a far bigger crowd than watch most film documentaries and a healthy figure when compared to the four million people a week tuning in to the prestigious PBS TV documentary program "Frontline."

I like to think that the future is promising for audio (not just radio) documentaries. The Internet has already created new venues for audio work, though the audience is uncertain and work suffers from the squishy sound of Web audio. There might be other ways to distribute audio documentaries in the multi-media future. Some day, we might get our radio signals from satellites instead of towers and be able to chose the "all documentary" channel while driving to work. We might even be able to chose programs on demand, á la cable television. This could mean a bigger market for audio docs.

In the meantime, keep an ear open for the radio documentaries already beaming through the atmosphere. ■

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Radio Diarists Document Their Lives

These 'reporters' capture moments journalists never could.

By Joe Richman

What made Josh Cutler a great radio diarist was that I never knew what he was going to say. Sometimes he didn't, either. Josh has Tourette's syndrome, a neurological disorder that causes involuntary verbal and physical tics. I first met him in 1995 when he was in the 10th grade. I had just received a grant to produce a series called "Teenage Diaries" on National Public Radio [NPR]. The idea was to give tape recorders and microphones to a group of teens around the country and help them report about their own lives.

Josh recorded for more than a year. [See Josh's description of his work for "Teenage Diaries" on page 8.] He brought the tape recorder to school (reluctantly at first), kept an audio journal, and recorded all the sounds of his daily life. Josh documented his tics, he taped himself doing everything from preparing breakfast to making prank phone calls, and he recorded one amazingly intense and honest conversation with his mother that became the centerpiece of his audio diary. All together, he collected more than 40 hours of tape, which was edited into a 15-minute radio documentary for NPR's "All Things Considered."

The fact that Josh could not always control what came out of his mouth is a kind of metaphor for this type of documentary journalism. The process of going through hours and hours of raw audio diary tapes is like mining for gold. Ninety percent is junk, but then every so often there are little magical moments that are completely unexpected. Things emerge about people that, in an interview, I would never have known to even look for.

With all the diarists there comes a point, maybe after the first month of recording, when they get bored with the process. That's what I'm waiting

A Tape Recorder Becomes a Connecting Thread

By Joshua Cutler

I went to a small high school where everyone had some vague notion that I had a disease called Tourette's syndrome. But very few students really knew what that meant and even fewer seemed to care enough to find out. That was until I brought the tape recorder to school with me.

At first, I was absolutely mortified at the idea of actually interviewing anyone. I was in 10th grade and, back then, I used to dread going to school every day. I was already enough of a social outcast because of my condition, which causes me to sometimes move or speak involuntarily. I was terrified that shoving a huge microphone in somebody's face would cause me to be the victim of further scorn. I was wrong.

When I took out the tape recorder and explained what I was doing, there was a huge commotion. Soon, I had at least a dozen students waiting to be interviewed. During this lunch period, I became closer to my classmates than I had in the several previous years.

Recording these diaries made me realize something important: I'd never really talked to anyone at school about Tourette's. Talking in this way now showed me that people were interested and did care. After my story aired, even complete strangers from around the country went out of their way to drop me a note. My well-wishers ranged from ordinary people, to a man in prison in Texas, to a young lady named Emily, who also has Tourette's, and with whom I still correspond.

The lesson I learned from documenting my experience is that in some ways the cold, cruel world is not as cold and cruel as I used to think it was. ■

Joshua Cutler. *Photo by Kate Burton.*

"People are always taught to think before they speak. Everybody has deep dark things that they don't want people to know they're thinking about. The bottom line is sometimes I actually have to teach myself not to care. I can't care because most of the time I can't control what comes out of my mouth. I control what comes out of my ass better than I control what comes out of my mouth. But the last thing I want people to think is, 'Oh, poor Josh.' It's not like I'm in a wheelchair or I have snot dribbling down my chin. I really just don't want anyone to be feeling sorry for me. This is not a Sally Struthers commercial."—From the "Teenage Diaries" series.

Joshua Cutler graduated in June 2001 from Vassar College. When he was in high school, he reported two stories about his life and struggle with Tourette's syndrome.

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for. They're no longer trying to sound like Tom Brokaw. They're not performing, so they're less self-conscious. They relax and become themselves. It takes a lot of practice to be natural.

Of course, the key to all documentary journalism is time; spending enough time for people to trust you with their stories, hanging out enough so that you're there when things happen. By turning the tape recorder into a constant companion, the diarists take this process a step further. It's like bringing the microphone backstage, to a place where truth and understanding are found not just in words but between words—in the pauses, accents, in the sighs and silences.

Teenagers make good diarists because they have an abundance of time. It's also an age where people are just beginning to discover themselves and their world. And unlike many adults teenagers simply have an inherent belief that whatever they say is important and people should be listening. When I ask a teenager to carry a tape recorder around for six months, they don't think I'm crazy.

Radio is the perfect medium for these diary-style documentaries. The equipment is relatively inexpensive and easy to use. A microphone is less intrusive than a video camera so people can be more natural, more themselves. Most importantly, radio is intimate. Great radio sounds as though it's being whispered right into your ear.

For these reasons, I believe some of the best first-person documentary work is found on the radio. David Isay's "Ghetto Life 101," in which two young boys in a Chicago housing project were given tape recorders, and Jay Allison's on-going "Life Stories" series were both direct inspirations for our "Teenage Diary" series. And during the past five years the public radio show, "This American Life," has reinvented and reinvigorated the form.

"Radio Diaries" is a small, nonprofit company—me and associate producer, Wendy Dorr. Since Josh's story aired in 1996, we have produced more than 20 diary-style documentaries for NPR. The "Teenage Diaries" series has included diaries from a teen mom, the daughter of an evangelical minister, a gay teenager, an illegal immigrant, and the running back for an Alabama high-school football team. Other projects have included a 30-minute diary-style documentary from residents of a retirement home and, more recently, we produced "Prison Diaries," a series of stories from inmates, correctional officers, and a judge.

Diarists have to play two roles, both subject and reporter, and negotiating

the two can be tricky. So the rules—my rules, anyway—are different from traditional documentaries. I give each diarist final editorial control over their story. I also pay most of the diarists a small stipend for their work. In this way, the relationship is closer to the model at NPR and other news organizations: The diarist is the reporter and I am the producer—although by the time a diary airs on the radio, my job feels more like that of a midwife.

The "Prison Diaries" series, which aired on NPR in January 2001, was certainly the most difficult project among the diaries that we have undertaken. After spending more than four months trying to gain access to prisons, we found two institutions willing to participate. One was an adult prison in North Carolina for 18-22-year-old inmates. The other was a juvenile facility in Rhode Island. We gave tape recorders to five inmates, four correctional officers, and a juvenile court judge. For six months, the diarists kept audio journals and recorded the sounds and scenes of their lives. At the end of six months, we had 250 hours of tape. Eight or 10 months after that, we had four half-hour documentaries for NPR's "All Things Considered."

Along with the radio broadcasts, we also teamed up with an innovative online documentary project about the criminal justice system. Called 360degrees.org, it allows visitors on their Web site to enter and move around the diarists' environments while they listen to their audio diaries. [See story about 360degrees.org on page 10.]

"Prison Diaries" was the first time inmates have been given tape recorders to document their lives in this way. The series tested the limits of what this form does well but also exemplified how it can fall short. When a topic is so emotional and complicated, the absence of an "official" narrator poses a difficult problem. In choosing inmates, it was important to find diarists who could own up to their crimes and their lives, who could somehow address the skepticism and questions of credibility that listeners would naturally bring to the stories. I also grappled with the issue of empathy, wondering whether our listeners could invest emotionally in the story if they didn't like the diarist. On the other hand, so much of what happens in prison is normally out of our reach, and this method allowed listeners unprecedented access. We wanted to document a side of prison life that people rarely hear—including the quiet, intimate sounds, and not just the traditional slamming of cell doors.

"Prison Diaries" was also challenging for the diarists. One thing correctional officers and inmates share is they have to always maintain their game face. Honest, vulnerable moments are

'It was just me and the recorder.'

By Cristel

Cristel and daughter Rayonna. *Photo by Sue Johnson.*

I had been incarcerated at the Rhode Island Training School for three years when I met Joe [Richman]. He asked if I wanted to carry a tape recorder around the training school for a few months and record my life. I told him yes. But at the same time I was wondering why in the world would people be interested in someone that's not famous at all. I mean, what's the point?

That was 1999. Three years earlier, when I was 15, I cut a girl many times on her face with a razor. The judge had locked me up for six years. I didn't think anybody would want to hear from a criminal's point of view. I figured people would hate me for what I did, or at least they wouldn't be interested.

At first it was strange to carry the tape recorder around, but it also made me feel special. There were times when I had no one to speak to. The recorder became my friend and social worker. It was like I was keeping a verbal journal. I knew that one day, millions of people would hear my story. But I never pictured it like I was talking to the whole world. I felt like I was just talking and nobody's listening. It was just me and the recorder.

I remember one time I stayed up all night in my cell to watch the sunrise. I hadn't seen it in a long time, and I told the tape recorder how one day I was going to see the sunrise from a better view. And that's what happened. Soon after that night, the judge decided that I was rehabilitated and let me out three years early.

I was scared to have my story on the radio. But when I heard it, I began to understand why people might want to listen to somebody that's not famous. I guess it's so you'll know about other human beings that you may not know about, and hear their stories. ■

"Sometimes, you know, I just look out the window and I just sit here and think like something I decided in 10 minutes changed my entire life. Not even 10 minutes. I mean three years gone by, and I'm still sitting here. What would I be doing if I was out? What would my life be like? Would I have finished school? Would I have settled down? Would I have done something worse? I just look out the window, and I think about all this stuff."—From "Prison Diaries" series.

Cristel was released in early 2000 after being incarcerated for three and a half years. Now 20 years old, she lives with her boyfriend and two daughters and still carries her tape recorder with her.

hard to come by. Yet what many of the diarists appreciated about the project was the opportunity to let their guard down. One inmate later said he had never in his life talked to anyone the way he talked to the tape recorder. Buried in those 250 hours of tape from prison are many intimate and magical moments. On one cassette, Cristel, an 18-year-old girl incarcerated at the Rhode Island Training School [See Cristel's description of her work for "Prison Diaries" on page 9.] was recording late one night when she heard a faint knock from the wall of the cell next door. It was a 13-year-old girl who had just recently been locked up. Neither of the girls could sleep, so for 10 minutes they sent each other syncopated rhythms back and forth between the cell walls. After a while the knocking stopped. Then Cristel picked up the tape recorder, walked over to her window and brought the microphone close to her mouth.

To hear Cristel speaking quietly into a tape recorder late at night, it's almost possible to enter into her world, to imagine ourselves there behind the microphone. What radio diaries can do well is to give us all glimpses into a different reality and to document the moments of lives that can't be told except by those who live them. ■

Joe Richman is the producer of the "Radio Diaries" series on National Public Radio. He is also an adjunct professor at the Columbia University Graduae School of Journalism. Radio Diaries Inc., a nonprofit production company in New York City, recently published a guide to making radio diaries, the Teen Reporter Handbook, available for sale and on their Web site: www.radiodiaries.org.

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Using the Web for an Interactive Documentary Project

At 360degrees.org, the U.S. criminal justice system is examined from many perspectives.

"My name is John Mills. I'm 21, a black male…in prison. I wanted to be a police officer, you know what I'm saying? When I was smaller, I used to think about that all the time. All the sirens and loud noises and blue lights. It was just something I always wanted to be. But now I hate the police. I know my life just took a big turn somewhere. I just don't know where. My mom always predicted my life: 'You're going to be just like your daddy.' He went to prison. I think he pulled like five years in prison. 'Just like your dad.' She'd say that all the time."

John Mills is serving seven to nine years at Polk Youth Facility. From the documentary, 360degrees.org. *Photo by Sue Johnson/Picture Projects.*

By Sue Johnson

John Mills is one of 1,100 young men ages 19-21 who are incarcerated at Polk Youth Facility in North Carolina. His story is part of an ongoing series called "360degrees: Perspectives on the U.S. Criminal Justice System." This Web-based documentary attempts to put the recent growth in the prison population into historical perspective and examine the impact it has had on individuals, families and communities. Each story, and there will be eight by the end of 2002, addresses a new theme—the juvenile justice system, prison towns, children of incarcerated parents—and is told through first-person stories, data that can be examined in different ways, an interactive timeline, and online and offline discussion.

We launched 360degrees.org in January 2001 in conjunction with Joe Richman's "Prison Diaries" series on National Public Radio. [See story by Joe Richman on page 7.] We spent several months doing interviews together. While Joe focused exclusively on John's story for a 30-minute broadcast, we interviewed two correctional

A panoramic photograph of the intake process. On the Web site, 360degrees.org, the visitor can pan around this photograph by moving the cursor while hearing stories from the correctional officers who work in intake. ***Photo by Sue Johnson/Picture Projects.***

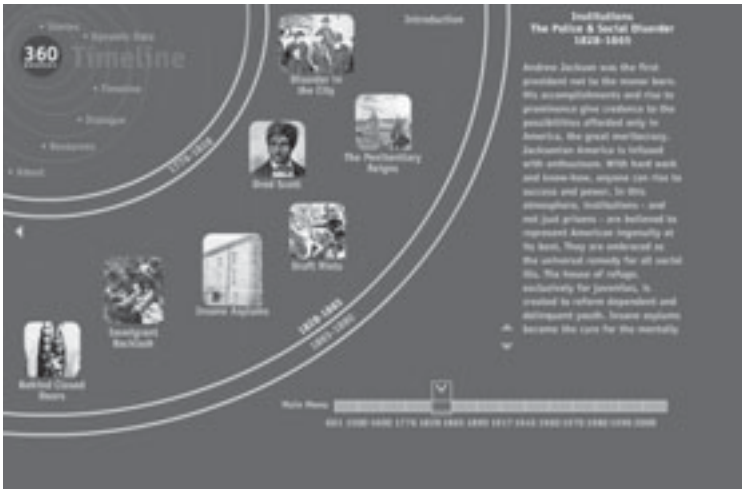
officers, the warden, and John's mother and stepfather. We edited these interviews, along with John's, into short audio clips for 360degrees. The site uses streaming audio and navigable 360 degree photographs to create a "sensurround" simulation of each person's environment. While listening to each person's story, visitors to the site can pan up, down and around the storyteller's space—prison cells, recreation yards, living rooms, and judges' chambers.

From this story section, visitors can go to an interactive timeline that shows the evolution of the criminal justice system from 601 AD to the present. Beginning with the Code of Etherlbert, which placed a monetary value on each body part, the timeline conveys the cyclical nature of the system by highlighting theories and practices that have gone in and out of fashion throughout the years. The dialogue area is a place for open discussion, e-debates between invited guests, and small closed discussion circles.

The dynamic data area is a place where we have experimented with visualizing and animating statistics, charts and graphs. This work has been conceptually difficult and the programming very intensive. Each interactive exercise requires a significant amount of data, often more than what is available, in order to generate accurate comparisons or calculate risks and odds. To develop this, we've worked with a number of criminologists and researchers at the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Currently, the site offers two quizzes: "Are You a Criminal?" and "What's Your Theory?" In time, we'll offer interactive maps of neighboring communities showing the number of people going into and coming out of prison and money spent by the criminal justice system in each neighborhood, and we'll launch three new dynamic data scenarios by the end of the year.

The idea for the project originated in 1998 when my partner, Alison Cornyn, and I read "The Real War on Crime," a report from the National Criminal Justice Commission that detailed the ineffectiveness of tough-on-crime measures through a combination of anecdotes and statistics. It challenged us to think about how we could illustrate—using interactivity and multimedia—the rapid growth in America's prison population since the 1980's and its impact on our daily lives. By this time, our multimedia documentary group, Picture Projects, had already collaborated with several photojournalists, filmmakers and cultural institutions to create interactive documentaries including "akaKURDISTAN" with Susan Meiselas, "Farewell to Bosnia" with Gilles Peress, and "Re: Vietnam: Stories Since the War" for PBS online.

360degrees.org, as we envisioned it, was larger in scale than any of these projects. It would require a significant team of advisors, producers and programmers and, of course, a much larger budget. As with our past online projects, our goal was to capitalize on the assets of the medium: its capacity for quick computation, motion graphics, and the integration of audio and video, as well as the opportunity to cross over geographic boundaries. We wanted to reach new audiences, primarily high school and college students, that have had little exposure to the criminal justice system or to those who had come into contact with the system but wanted to know



Screenshot from the online documentary, "360degrees: Perspectives on the U.S. Criminal Justice System," by Picture Projects.

A panoramic photograph of John Mills' cell. At 360degrees.org, the visitor can explore Mills' surroundings while his audio story plays. ***Photo by Sue Johnson/Picture Projects.***

how their experiences fit into a broader picture. (We knew we were headed in the right direction when The New York Times reported that criminal justice was the fastest growing major on U.S. college campuses.) More importantly, we wanted to tell a compelling story, one that fully engages the audience through their actions on the site, and one that ultimately gets people thinking about the efficacy of our current policies and alternative approaches to crime control and incarceration.

We refer to 360degrees.org as an interactive documentary. When people hear this, they want to know how long it is. Of course, its length is determined by how the user travels through the site. The combination of high-end graphic design, storytelling, interactivity and the nature of the subject matter positions 360degrees.org somewhere between art, documentary and activism. The site has been featured at documentary film festivals, galleries and at new media trade shows. It has also been nominated for journalism awards. The blurring of the lines has made it difficult for us to get funding, yet a handful of foundations including the New York State Council on the Arts, Creative Capital, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting came on board while the project was in its nascent stages. The budget for the site resembles that of a low-budget documentary film with half of the resources going toward our production team of database programmers, Flash animators, audio editors, photography researchers, and writers. The other half goes toward the cost of outreach and marketing.

We developed the site independent of an online distributor so we'd be free to experiment with the technology, the narrative structure and, most importantly, the content. This, of course, put the task of audience building in our hands, which has been costly, but the result has been a series of enterprising partnerships and collaborations. The site averages about 5,000 hits a day and closer to 10,000 during the related NPR broadcasts. Adrienne FitzGerald, a former social worker with a degree in new media, has been working with us to bring 360degrees into high schools and universities. She created a pilot program called the Social Action Network, where students talk with ex-offenders, judges and lawyers in a guided, four-week program that takes place both online and offline. We are seeking funding to make this a national program in partnership with several educational organizations, including a criminal justice textbook publisher.

360degrees.org is in many ways an experiment in how far we can push the medium (and our resources) and how much an audience is willing to engage with a story. In this non-linear Web environment there is less narrative control. Visitors to the site will listen to characters in a different order, in different environments, and in different ways. So it is vital for us to create a "stickiness" between the stories, keeping visitors curious enough to continue exploring the site. Our goal has been to construct the overall narrative by collecting many—sometimes hundreds—of first-person stories. One of the advantages of working in this medium is the ability to change the site in response to viewer feedback. The downside is living with the feeling that the project is never complete. Built into the architecture of our sites is the space to play with different methods for storytelling.

These large-scale projects can only be accomplished through collaboration; they can be costly and incredibly time consuming. We have been encouraged by the growing community of filmmakers, writers, photographers and journalists willing to pool their experience and resources. It is a critical time, as the Web becomes increasingly commercialized, to carve out a space online for experimentation with these new forms of documentary. ■

Sue Johnson is a documentary photographer and cofounder of Picture Projects, a new media production company specializing in Web-based documentaries. Picture Projects' work can be found at www.picture-projects.com.

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Radio Documentaries Take Listeners Into Dark Corners

David Isay is the founder of Sound Portraits Productions. Its radio documentaries profile the lives of men, women and children living in communities often neglected or misunderstood. During the past 13 years, Isay's work has won nearly every award in broadcasting, including three Peabody Awards, two Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards, and two Livingston Awards for Young Journalists. He was recently awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. Included among Sound Portraits' documentary work is "Ghetto Life 101," "Witness to an Execution," "The Jewish Giant," "The Sunshine Hotel," and "The Executive Tapes." Isay was interviewed by Nieman Reports editor, Melissa Ludtke.

Melissa Ludtke: Can you describe why you chose the radio documentary as a way to tell the stories and reflect on social issues?

David Isay: Well, I didn't choose it. It was a series of strange circumstances and twists of fate that kind of led me into making radio documentaries when I was 22 years old and headed to medical school. It totally kind of exploded my life and sent me in a whole new direction. So I wasn't drawn to the radio documentary; it just kind of happened…. I wasn't a journalist.

I'd never taken a journalism class. I never listened to public radio. I mean, I knew nothing. And I certainly could have ended up going in different directions in radio, or leaving radio and going to some other form of storytelling…. And it just so happens that it was the medium that was perfect for telling the kind of stories that I care about. Radio is a wonderful medium to tell emotional stories. That interests me. It's a great medium for getting into dark corners of this country and telling stories that can't be told on film.

ML: Why is it a great medium for telling the kind of stories you want to tell?

Isay: Well, it's cheap. And a lot of the stories that interest me are about people who are living on the margins. Our mission is to tell stories of people who are outside of the mainstream. A lot of times people don't want photographs, don't want their faces shown. Many times they communicate best through talking.

ML: You've spoken about finding a place where the concentric circles of what you do well come together. Could you share what you feel are the ingredients of those intersecting circles?

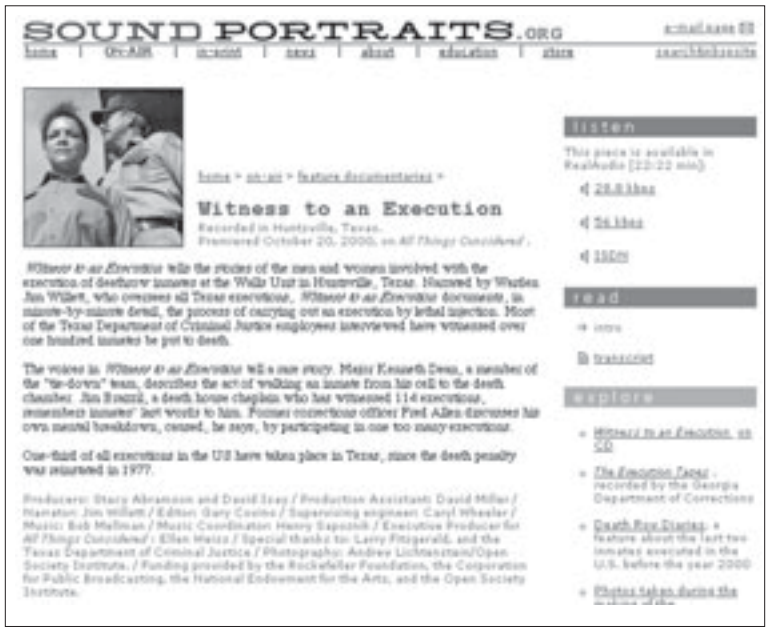
Isay: It's everything from technically—it is not rocket science to use audio equipment, and technically I enjoyed doing it. It was just the right amount of technical stuff so that it didn't distract me. I like asking questions. And I love editing. I love hearing tapes. I mean, making these programs is all about finding tape that's on fire and stringing it together in a cohesive way. So that was great. And doing the interviews when you're talking about the kind of stories that I'm drawn to, it's kind of a cross between, I don't know what it is. I'm uncomfortable kind of labeling. But, it's sort of part journalism, part like social work. When you're doing an interview, it can be this very intense sort of verbal exchange. I come from a family of therapists. And that's enjoyable to me.

ML: What's the part of it that you *think* relates to journalism?

Isay: That it tells the truth. The kind of radio stuff that I do is close to narrative journalism. It's about a kind of total immersion in a topic and bringing you into a place. If you look at something like the Sunshine Hotel, it's a matter of going into a dark place and doing a lot of recording and then creating this space through audio where people can step into this other world.

ML: A journalist who goes into the Sunshine Hotel and does interviews might ask the same questions you do, or might not. Might get similar answers to what you get. But, if that person was doing this as part of a news story on radio, then there'd be other components and responsibilities. To the best of their ability, they would have to check out the story that they were told, to see what was true and what might not be true.

Isay: And that's sort of a fallacy about the work. Of course we do that, the kind of research that goes into doing a story like this, even though there's never



On soundportraits.org, visitors can learn about David Isay's work.

been an expert in a piece that we've done in nine years. When we do a story, we've got cubic inches of information. Every expert that could be talked to has been talked to. I mean, it's like jazz in the sense that you can't improvise until you've got the basics down. So when we go in we do the basic journalistic work, the research, the background, the digging, talking to people, getting to know them, and checking their stories as best we can.

ML: But that's not transparent in the work you do.

Isay: Absolutely. But, hopefully, when people hear the work they'll hear a solidity to it. And if it's on public radio, they'll understand that it's not done lightly. If this had been done as a straight reported news piece, the research that would have gone into it, on any of these pieces, is much less than what we end up doing. We spend a long, long time doing these pieces. And that involves checking it backwards and forwards and upside down. I think it's very similar to the long-form New Yorker sort of journalism or any other sort of immersion journalism. It's just that the narration is usually in the hands of someone who is in the place that we're working. That's what makes it different. And that's part of what differentiates radio from print.

ML: Your work often airs without a narrator's voice per se.

Isay: It always has a narrator, because it's impossible to tell a story without a narrator. And that's great if you didn't realize that someone was narrating. There's always a narrator. But the narrator is not us. The narrator is someone who is from the place where this documentary is taking place. In the documentary about the executions in Texas, the narrator is the warden. In "The Sunshine Hotel," the narrator is the guy who runs the flophouse.

ML: He's also a character in it in some ways, too, isn't he?

Isay: Yeah, he is.

ML: Where there is another overlap with the role that the journalist plays in reporting a story is in the fact that you're making obvious editing decisions about what voices to include, what sounds to make prominent, and the order in which the story will be told.

Isay: Sure, absolutely. The bottom line is that hopefully I can look the people with whom I've worked in the eye and not feel embarrassed about what we've done together.... I like to think that these are places that are important for people who don't live in [them] to experience. And for people to meet people living these lives that are different than theirs. Because the eight million listeners to public radio are typically middle class, upper middle class, you know, people driving to or from work. I mean, that's who you're playing to. My goal always is to kind of sneak up behind people and almost like quietly lift them up into this story. And I try to carry them for 22 minutes without them even knowing it. Not give them the chance to turn off the radio, if it's successful. And then 22 minutes later quietly put them down and walk away. That's sort of the image in my head of what I'm trying to do.

ML: You want to have left them at that point with an emotional experience primarily, or with an experience that could be defined as one that increases their knowledge?

Isay: It's an experience where they've gone some place they wouldn't otherwise have gone. And if it's emotional for them, that's great; if it's not, that's fine. Whatever that experience is. But it's a matter of leading them into a world that they would not otherwise know of or experience, and letting them meet people who they otherwise wouldn't have met.

ML: And is there a purpose in your mind beyond the transporting of someone to a different place?

Isay: Yeah, because I like all the people that I do stories about, and it's about seeing the humanity in others. Again, it's hard because it's so easy to get kind of clichéd. But, that's what it is. The guys who do the executions in Texas, you know, they're decent people. The kids who live in the ghetto or the guys in the flophouse—whatever. I do stories about people that I like, who are for the most part probably either ignored or misunderstood or not thought about. It's just about humanity. It's just about introducing people to people. And again it's corny, but just seeing that everybody is sort of the same.

ML: I'd like to go to your experiences, particularly looking on death row, where you've spent a lot of time, whether it was in the jails of Louisiana or more recently bringing to light the tapes from the death chamber in Georgia. There's been a lot of reporting examining the death penalty from a lot of different angles, whether it's the racial fairness angle or the question of whether there should be a death penalty. What do you think your work illuminates that isn't part of the traditional or mainstream journalistic coverage of the death penalty story?

Isay: Again, I'm not consciously thinking like "What story can I tell that nobody else has told?" or "How can I do something different?" I was in a situation in which I was doing a story, and it just kind of occurred to me, "What is it like for these guys who do these executions?" And I didn't know if it was going to turn into a five-minute piece or a no piece. And it just kind of opened up. It was just being curious and then following the path and seeing where it leads. And these guys who we interviewed, for the most part, had never been asked these questions before. The warden hadn't. None of the people who worked in the prison had been asked what's it like to do these executions.... Again, it's as much as possible trying to be the vehicle through which people can tell their stories. That's what we're trying to do, trying to be the translator to the larger world of some kind of insular group or whatever, some group of people, and to

help them use this medium to tell their story in a way that they feel is true.... I'm in a really fortunate circumstance of getting independent funding, and being able to do whatever I feel passionate about, and then slamming it onto the air whichever way I can...it's about not letting stories be watered down.

ML: Your work, like any work, is a product of its time. The way that you approach your subjects, and the way you approach the telling of stories has something to do with the times in which we are in, with the progression or change of style in terms of how the documentary is used. In the past, there seemed to be a particular sort of style and purpose to the documentary that might have changed over time in terms of the way that we, as Americans, or we, as an audience, take information in. You may be a product of a different era in terms of how you go about presenting stories. If you were doing "Harvest of Shame" today what you might do is have the migrant workers be the only voice, as opposed to literally be standing in the field, were you Edward R. Murrow. It's just a different style.

Isay: Absolutely. But there were always people doing oral histories. I do think that doing the kind of hard hitting journalistic stuff, I mean, certainly the investigative stuff is a little bit apples and oranges with this kind of documentary work, because usually these pieces are about kind of talking to people who haven't been talked to before to reveal the humanity that's there, as opposed to uncovering hard news. It does uncover injustice, but in a more roundabout way. I mean, as opposed to investigating some actual single wrong that has been done. And with the execution tapes, that was more similar because it's uncovering documents that have been withheld or getting into a place that's been routinely kept from the American public. So that would be more in that tradition.

ML: National Public Radio [NPR] declined to broadcasting those tapes from the Georgia execution chamber that you so much wanted to bring out and use as documents. Instead, you brought this consortium of stations together to air this, which you thought was very important for people to hear.

Isay: I still do. I think it's the only document we'll ever have of modern-day American executions.

ML: And why do you think it's important for Americans to hear?

Isay: Because this is an act that's being done in the name of American citizens. And I think people have a right to know what's going on....

ML: In terms of building this new consortium of public radio stations, do you think that experience will lead to any new ways in which documentary radio producers can have their stories aired? Or was this sort of a one-time situation?

Isay: I think that the radio documentary is vastly underutilized. A lot of people should be making a lot of documentaries. And there should be a lot of ways to get them out there. With NPR, it's kind of a complicated story the way this happened with the decision not to broadcast the Georgia execution tapes. But I think that as much good stuff should be able to get out there in any way that it possibly can. All I really care about is that good stuff gets on the air and gets heard by as many people as possible. And whatever way that needs to be done is good with me. I think it's more an issue of making more people understand what a great medium radio is to tell stories in and getting more great stories, as opposed to there being all these great stories that are somehow being kept from the public. I see more that there aren't enough. And there are a lot of reasons. Because it's hard to make a living. But you know, that's changing, because I think we have entered this little renaissance for radio documentaries.

ML: Why do you say this?

Isay: I think a lot has to do with "This American Life." Letting people see what radio could be, can be. And maybe some of the work we've done. But it's totally changed. The New York Times is reviewing radio documentaries. They regularly review radio now. We couldn't get an intern six years ago, and now we have the best and the brightest coming out of the best Ivy League schools, lining up to do this stuff. People are seeing what a powerful medium this is. It's a very exciting time technologically, too, because anyone can take a $700 i-Mac computer and have an incredibly powerful editing system. You can download free software, and you can be at a console which is a thousand times more powerful than the fanciest studio was six years ago. And you can buy a mini-disk player for $197, and a microphone for $100 bucks, and you are a walking, 35mm film production studio. I mean, you can't do better than that. The potential is limitless. So the dream is a lot of people start picking up tape recorders and interviewing people and playing around and adding music, and doing all kinds of cool stuff. That would be the dream.... I think there's nothing wrong with having a lot of great radio journalism documentary stuff happening. I think that would be the best thing that could ever happen.

ML: Because we are living in an era where, at least, when one talks to media specialists they say, "Short is better. People's attention spans aren't there." Yet this advice runs counter to what you are saying.

Isay: I think you can have a half-hour piece that seems like one minute and a two-minute piece that seems like seven hours. It's about doing good work. And certainly if the stuff can sustain, then people will listen and appreciate it. It's all about doing good stuff. ■

Radio Storytelling Builds Community On-Air and Off

'The journalist must be facilitator, fact-checker, ethicist, but not puppet-master. . . .'

By Jay Allison

What separates radio documentary from any documentary? And what separates public radio journalism from any journalism?

Radio gets inside us. Lacking earlids, we are defenseless, vulnerable to ambush. Sounds and voices surprise us from within. As radio documentary makers, we have this tactical advantage over our colleagues in print, film, television and photography. Our tool is aural story, the most primitive and powerful. Invisibility is our friend. Prejudice is suspended while the listener is blind, only listening.

Perhaps this distinguishing trait lies quietly near the heart of public radio journalism, close to the utopian ideal that we use these airwaves to share our stories as we try to understand each other better, to not be afraid of each other, to come a little closer together.

We're not regular media, after all, or even regular journalism. We have a calling to mission and public service that exists outside the marketplace and squarely in the civic realm. We can serve that mission through traditional reporting and documentary, but we also help citizens speak for themselves, to one another, directly.

I got into public radio because someone at NPR loaned me a tape recorder and microphone. It was the mid-70's and NPR was just inventing itself, always a good time to join an enterprise. I used the recorder as a passport into every part of life that seemed interesting. I could find out about anything I wanted. Amazing. At the beginning, I was simply a citizen, suddenly armed with the tools of production and a means of distribution, an independent journalist being born. By apprenticing at the news shows, reading everything I could get my hands on, and prodding my elders with questions, I learned the trade on the fly and in the next 25 years made hundreds of radio features, documentaries and series. For much of that time, I've also been loaning out tape recorders and tools to others, encouraging citizen voices on the air, repaying and replaying my own start.

In an age of corporate consolidation of the press on one hand and cheap bogus Internet journalism on the other, it is more important than ever to bring a range of voices to the air in a sane and respectful way. The public radio journalist can assume a shepherding role.

Life Stories
www.atlantic.org

My first batch of tape recorders went out beginning in the 1980's with the series "Life Stories," which sought out stories that seemed best told from the source. (A six-hour collection aired on NPR stations this summer.) It's hard to say how I found the storytellers, but once I declared I was interested, they seemed to cross my path. I equipped them, instructed them in the use of the gear, and worked with them editorially, often bringing them to mix in my home recording studio.

The grown son of concentration camp survivors accompanies his parents on their visit to the Holocaust Museum; he hopes they'll talk to him about their experience for the first time in his life. He asks for a recorder. A young woman wants to revisit the scenes and characters of her hospitalization and near-death from anorexia 10 years before. She needs the passport of the recorder to enter her own past. These sorts of stories cannot be told best from outside. They are better lived and narrated by the principals, the main characters in the stories of their lives.

Radio is well suited to the "diary" form. It's inherently intimate, confidential, lends itself to scribbled notes, fragments and whispered entries at night. The technical inexperience of the diarist doesn't show as clearly as it does in video, or even in print, and therefore doesn't get in the way. As the eventual producer/editor, you are there, but you disappear. The journalist must be facilitator, fact-checker, ethicist, but not puppet-master, allowing the listener an authentic, direct, empathetic encounter with the teller.

Lost & Found Sound
www.lostandfoundsound.com

Our series "Lost & Found Sound" (produced with the Kitchen Sisters, Nikki Silva and Davia Nelson for NPR's "All Things Considered") offered another tool to the citizen storyteller—voice mail. We asked listeners to call and tell us about precious audio artifacts they'd saved. In my role as "curator" I poured through hundreds of these messages, and in virtually every case the phone message itself became the spine of the piece. In the message was the story, the link between the caller and the sound.

The callers, in telling of their treasures, seemed to be in the presence of the past. The voices they described were in the air around them, true ghosts, filled with breath, as real as a lock of hair. Some of the recordings were intensely personal—the lullaby of an immigrant grandparent, the answering machine message from a child given up for adoption. Others fell at the intersection between the individual and history—a family's recording of an ancestor's eyewitness account of the Gettysburg Address; reels of tape made in the fighting holes of Vietnam, brought to us by the platoon mate of the 19-year-old Marine who recorded them and died there.

In every case, the direct connection of the living citizen to the sounds of the past was the key. We called it "the universal ancestor effect." A grandfather's voice, enhanced by the love of the grandchild who tells us about it, then shared on the radio, is somehow transformed to become everyone's grandfather. In the absence of a concrete and distancing visual image, an invisible human link is made and, for that instant, nationalities and races are joined through voice and memory. All the dead are one. Your mother is mine. Only radio, and only public radio at that, has the uncanny means and the actual calling to make that happen.

WCAI & WNAN
www.cainan.org

We have brand new public radio stations here on Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket in Massachusetts, the newest in America. We wanted them to sound like here, not just anywhere. A place defines itself by its stories, and we have chosen to broadcast our citizens' stories on and off all day, unexpectedly—portraits, oral histories, poems, anecdotes, memories, fragments of life overheard. They pop up during every national show around the clock, short bursts of life as experienced or remembered by all of us who live here. They are the thread in the fabric of our broadcast day.

The effect is startling, unexpected. You are listening to news of the world and then, during a pause, an unheralded speaker—a local elder or high-school kid or sandwich maker or scientist—pops in. The voices of our neighbors, surprising us, are given equal weight with events on the world stage.

The concept has become wonderfully popular here. Learning from "Lost & Found Sound," we've also installed voice mail where people can tell us about something that happened years ago, or that morning. Learning from "Life Stories," we buy old cassette recorders from eBAY to loan to whomever promises to use them.

Listeners have said that these little breaks not only contribute to community, they actually *build* it. We live in a place that is geographically fragmented (islands, after all) and each region feels itself to be more "special" than the others. Yet the radio signal extends across them all, disrespecting the boundaries. We have feuds and jealousies, political division, parochial ignorance (Is it so different from anywhere else?), but these stories tend, almost miraculously, to break those down. When a story begins, we don't know where the teller is from, so we listen, without judgment. We like what we hear. But then, when we discover the teller is not from our island, we must decide how to incorporate the contradiction that may lead us, helplessly, to acceptance. "Well, I guess they're not *all* bad over there," we think. And, eventually, we may even come to think of *their* stories as *our* stories.

Transom.org
www.transom.org

Finally, the Internet. If there's democracy in storytelling, it's here. If there's an openly accessible way to pass on what we've done before in public radio and to try to make things better, it's here. Our current attempt is Transom.org (a project of Atlantic Public Media). We call it a showcase and workshop for new public radio, and we premiered the Web site in February. It's a combination library, master class, and audition stage.

The site showcases new work from first-time producers and unheard work from established producers. As I write this, the featured piece is a 40-year-old, and utterly contemporary, documentary from Studs Terkel, which never received a national broadcast. Last month, it was a documentary from a first-time producer in Seattle using his mini-disc recorder, and skills he picked up at Transom, to craft a remarkable story about his friend's suicide.

Transom holds or links to virtually all the tools—technical, editorial, philosophical—people would need to tell their own radio stories. Encouragingly, quite a few high-school and college students are frequenting the site and their work has been featured there.

Each month a new special guest writes a "manifesto" and hangs around the site, critiquing new work and making conversation. Recent guests: Tony Kahn, Scott Carrier, Paul Tough, The Kitchen Sisters, Sarah Vowell, Studs Terkel [See accompaning excerpts from the Web site on page 18.] Editors, producers and managers throughout the public radio system read and listen to this work and participate in these conversations, but they are also there for *anyone* to read, listen to and join.

Producers and citizens gather at Transom.org to talk about radio documentary and to try their hands at it. Subjects of documentaries talk with those who made them and to listeners about editorial and stylistic choices. The site encourages an interactive, self-correcting, open-eared, civic journalism made possible by the Internet and extended to public radio.

The site represents virtual street-level access to national air, as most Transom stories end up adopted by a national program. An on-air mention of Transom.org drives listeners back to the Web, making a creative circle between the traditional media and the new. At Transom.org, we have a voice mail line to collect stories, we loan out tape recorders, and we broadcast Transom pieces locally on WCAI and WNAN.

So, everything ends up tied together.

Journalists help citizens reach the air, to tell of their lives. Public radio carries the voices out and back, across a borderless country populated by the living and the dead. Citizen stories are shared out loud, journalists mediating the exchange, partners in the mission. Somewhere between the din of the Internet and the drone of corporate media is a place for these voices, testifying on their own behalf. ■

Jay Allison is an independent broadcast journalist living in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. He is founder and executive producer of WCAI/WNAN and Atlantic Public Media. His radio documentaries air often on NPR and his solo-crew video documentaries on ABC News "Nightline."

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Listening to Radio Talk

At Transom.org, the conversation is about documentaries and public radio.

Transom.org, an online project of Atlantic Public Media in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, provides tools for public radio production and features original work from first-time producers. It also hosts forums for the general discussion of public radio journalism and storytelling. What follows are a few excerpts from the Transom discussion boards. Some exchanges are sequential. Most are not. The following comments were selected from recent conversations on the general themes of radio documentary and the role of public radio. Transom is frequented by seasoned journalists, beginners and listeners. The happy equalizing effect of online conversation is that it matters less who you are than what you have to say.—Jay Allison

"It was slowly discovered that there can be no such thing as an objective documentary. However, it's such an attractive illusion that documentarians are always finding new ways to fake it. That's our job."—Larry Massett (independent radio producer)

"I'd say that what's left out is at least as important as what's put in. This is where the tension comes from. And if the overall tension of a story is just right, then it stands on its own, like a tensegrity structure—tension and compression, strings and rods. If there is too much or too little of one or the other, the thing falls apart."—Scott Carrier (writer, independent radio producer)

"Reality is just a bunch of raw data."—Carol Wasserman ("All Things Considered" commentator)

"For newcomers struggling to edit their tape down to manageable size, the best technique would be the old one of recording everything on reel-to-reel analog tape. This has one great advantage (assuming, of course, you were not silly enough to make a backup dub): at some point in the editing you will lose the tape.... It will vanish; or you'll step on it by mistake and crush it. Then, fate having made these decisions for you, you just work with what's left."—Larry Massett

"We work in documentary because we don't have enough money to hire good actors."—Scott Carrier

"It's one thing to write a piece of fiction and say, at the end, well, okay, that sure didn't turn out exactly as I imagined it would, and quite another to sit down to write about, say, grandma, and have grandma come out looking like nothing so much as a wet cardboard box filled with old issues of Reader's Digest, a sewing machine, and a pot of boiling cabbage."—Paul Maliszewski (writer)

"Sometimes I feel like I'm so much more manipulative on the radio. I know how to use my voice to make you feel a certain way. And that's not writing—that's acting. I get tired of acting sometimes. Which is why it's nice to be able to go back to the cold old page. Also, real time is an unforgiving medium."—Sarah Vowell (writer, editor, "This American Life")

"Think of comedic timing, where a pause after the punch line allows the audience to process the joke. Then think of some nervous humor-impaired friend who can't tolerate that tiny silence and jumps his own joke with premature explanation."—Carol Wasserman

"Reading most long sentences is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall."—David Clark (writer)

"Nailing Jell-O to the wall isn't as hard as you'd think. Getting your mother to appreciate it is much harder."—Andy Knight (listener, critic)

"Radio is like food. You spend days and months and hours gathering the ingredients, cutting, mixing, making it cook. The minute it hits air/the table, it's gone—but it's transformed. The memory of it lingers, almost like a dream."—The Kitchen Sisters (Nikki Silva and Davia Nelson, independent radio producers)

"Throw out all the good tape. Keep only the great tape. Invent some artifice to string the disparate pieces of great tape together into something that sounds like a story. Invent many excuses to tell NPR why this works so well and not even a second can be changed. When NPR tells you to cut it to half the length, throw away all the great tape and keep only the absolutely stellar tape, then repeat above steps."—Barrett Golding (independent radio producer)

"We are committed to never altering the spirit or intent of what someone says, but we do cut the hell out of them."—The Kitchen Sisters

"I strongly believe that everyone has a story to tell. I also believe some are unwilling and others are unable to tell their story."—Andy Knight

"Look for the people in the funny hats. With some people, it's apparent that they have stories they want to tell. With others, you have to find out where they keep their hats."—Jay Allison

"People tend to spill their guts on long drives."—Scott Carrier

"It's hard to find unprocessed voices that are coherent and honest and clear."—Paul Tough (story editor, The New York Times magazine)

"Listening to the radio every day for an entire year was a prison sentence. It was the most depressing, annoying, debilitating project I have ever undertaken, and I have a master's degree in art history."—Sarah Vowell

"Public radio has always felt like the lecture hall of the world's greatest free university. You still need to get yourself dressed and down to the library to do the reading, but you can show up for the talks in your jammies. Which is a great convenience."—Carol Wasserman

"I still maintain excellence shows up more often in public radio because no one owns public radio, except the public."—Ian Brown (radio host, "This Morning")

"The BBC is like a beacon, it can turn a cool beam of light on a story anywhere in the world and people see what's going on. American public radio is more like a campfire, where we like to swap personal stories and feel like we're sharing the experience and the understanding."—Tony Kahn (radio host, "The World")

"You hear stuff you haven't heard before, from a stranger or from someone you know, and you think, 'Yeah, I am connected.' I think that's the goal, the responsibility, the challenge of public radio."—Studs Terkel (writer, oral historian, radio host)

"What would your ideal radio day be?"—Sydney Lewis (oral historian)

"I'd want the human voice expressing grievances, or delight, or whatever it might be. But something real"—Studs Terkel

"I still believe in public radio's potential. Because it's the one mass medium that's still crafted almost entirely by true believers."—Sarah Vowell ■

First-Person Narratives on Radio Document Historic Memory

While emotionally powerful, their production presents journalistic challenges.

By Sandy Tolan

Some stories are so good you just want to get out of their way. Or so it seemed with "The Lemon Tree," a documentary that captured, with two deeply personal stories, a slice of the last 50 years of Middle East history.

In July 1948, at the height of the Arab-Israeli War, Bashir Al-Khayri, six years old, fled with his family from their stone home in old Palestine. The family made its way on foot from Ramle to the tent-covered hills of Ramallah in the West Bank. They were among the 700,000 Palestinian refugees in a growing Middle East Diaspora; they lived in shelters and crowded into relatives' living rooms, determined one day soon to return to the family's home.

Three months later, Dalia Ashkenazi, six months old, embarked on a journey to the new state of Israel. The family, Bulgarian Jews who'd escaped the Holocaust, arrived in Ramle, now an Israeli city. Dalia would later be told that she was the only one on the boat who didn't get sick. Israeli resettlement authorities gave the family a stone home in the center of town.

For 19 years, Bashir's family lived as refugees in the West Bank, always dreaming of the future, when they'd return. Dalia's went about forging a new society, always haunted by the past, which they'd barely survived.

In the summer of 1967, just after the Six Day War, Bashir decided to try to visit his house—for which his father, now blind, still had the key and the deed. Bashir made his way to Ramle and to the front step of the family's home.

Bashir rang the bell.

Dalia answered.

Thus begins "The Lemon Tree," a 43-minute radio documentary broadcast on "Fresh Air" for the 50th anniversary of Israel's birth and the 1948 war. The story chronicles a slice of Middle East history through a difficult friendship, which began when Dalia invited Bashir in with the words, "This is your home."

This was precisely the kind of story my Homelands Productions colleagues and I were seeking when we embarked on "World Views," a series of first-person documentary narratives for public radio. Frustrated with the rise of corporate infotainment, my colleagues and I were looking for a way to cut through the stream of information and dehumanizing images absent of meaning, understanding or deeper context. Most absent, it seemed—and what radio was best at providing—was voice: stories told by ordinary people from

the depths of their experience.

We started thinking about a series of stories to be told directly by the people in the midst of the news. These would be perspective-based narratives getting beneath the surface of daily events, telling the story from a deeper place than conventional reporting could. At this point (1993) there were a few examples of this emerging in public radio—Jay Allison's "Life Stories" series, Dave Isay's "Ghetto Life 101," along with public television's "P.O.V." and the BBC's "Video Diaries"—but our idea was to get reports from the ground, throughout the world, as stories unfolded and historical events were recalled.

We imagined, for example, a Cuban narrating her story from a raft bound for the United States. Or an African American traveling to the old slave house on Senegal's Goree Island, reversing the journey of his ancestors. Or a Moscow investigative reporter, one of the first to write publicly about the KGB, telling a personal history of the dissident movement in the former Soviet Union. Or a Ukrainian nuclear physicist recording an audio journal of day-to-day life in the aftermath of Chernobyl. Or a New Delhi poet and an "untouchable" rickshaw driver describing their chance encounter across vast barriers of caste, culture and life experience. (Some of these ideas were inspired by experiences of my 1993 Nieman colleagues.)

But what we didn't anticipate was how much the series—indeed the entire genre of first-person narrative—would present significant challenges not to be found in the standard news documentary. In the traditional form, the reporter (and/or producer) interviews, records sound, writes and narrates, balancing the story with competing perspectives. From Edward R. Murrow forward, this has been the style of choice for many an aspiring radio journalist. The style itself need not be dry, especially when accompanied by compelling interviews, vivid writing, a strong sense of place (Murrow's London rooftops come to mind), and evocative use of sound. Our Homelands documentaries had taken this more standard approach, be it with street kids in Rio, an Amazon chief in Bolivia, farmers in India, or while "interviewing" penguins in Antarctica.

With a first-person story, especially controversial ones or those narrated by someone with a strong point of view, issues of balance, representation and context emerge. What about the other side of the story? What is being left out that would ordinarily be filled in by a reporter/ narrator, and how can we put that context back into the piece? What happens when someone wants input, or even editorial control, in the telling of his own story? (For example, in adapting a writer's work for broadcast.) And how, ultimately, do you find a story that is both particular and metaphorical of a larger reality?

For "The Lemon Tree," balance was not an issue. In their own ways, Dalia and Bashir represented the fears and aspirations of their peoples. Far more complicated—for an assignment to identify a story that was somehow representative of the 50-year struggle between Israelis and Palestinians—was in determining this was *the* story among many to tell.

For the first two weeks, on the ground in Israel, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, I did no recording. Instead, I read and listened to history, including Israeli military accounts, Palestinian oral histories, Israel's "new" historians (who challenge the traditional Zionist accounts), the heroes of what the Israelis call their War of Independence and the sons and daughters of what the Palestinians call their Naqba, or catastrophe. Soon I began recording similar accounts, considering the chasm between them that had scarcely narrowed in the last 50 years. But still I searched for *the* story and characters that would connect the narratives and tell the larger truth. I felt as much like a casting director as a journalist.

Earlier my wife, Lamis Andoni, a Palestinian journalist who covered the Gulf War for The Christian Science Monitor and the Financial Times (and was a 1993 Nieman Fellow), had described the outlines of Dalia and Bashir's story. In 1987, at the beginning of the Intifada, Dalia had written an open letter to Bashir in the Jerusalem Post on the eve of his deportation from Ramallah. (Bashir was suspected of being an organizer of the Intifada and deported to Lebanon.) Dalia had urged the Israelis not to uproot Bashir a second time, while also urging Bashir to moderate his political views. From exile, Bashir had written a response, published in Arabic and eventually in Hebrew. Lamis knew Bashir and thought he'd be willing to talk to me.

One night, over dinner in Jerusalem, an Israeli filmmaker told me the story again. It was a powerful story, she agreed, but she didn't think Dalia would agree to talk. Dalia, she said, felt used by people trying to frame her history to suit their political purposes.

The next day Lamis and I ran into Bashir on the street. Sure, he said, he'd be happy to sit for some interviews. And though he hadn't seen Dalia in years, he thought she would be, too.

Bashir was right, and over the course of the next three weeks I shuttled from Ramallah to Jerusalem and back, recording five sessions with each, perhaps 15 hours of tape in all. I envisioned simply intercutting the stories: Bashir's invitation to Dalia to visit his family in Ramallah (nearly unprecedented in 1967); Bashir's father's subsequent visit to the house in Ramle and the tears streaming down the blind man's face as he touched the family's old lemon tree; Dalia's shock at Bashir's imprisonment in Israel on charges he had helped plan a supermarket bombing in Jerusalem; Bashir's revelation that his own fingers had been blown off as a child, picking up a booby-trapped mine in a field in Gaza. (Bashir had managed to hide this from Dalia for years, his left hand always in his pocket.)

In the end we decided that these stories, powerful as they were, could not be sustained for 43 minutes. I obtained archival tape (early radio accounts from the 1948 war; a CBC broadcast in the wake of the supermarket bombing) and approached a pianist to

compose music to use at key moments. This gave breathing space between the words, varying the aural images and allowing time for the words to sink in. To add historical context and move the piece through time, and at the urging of Danny Miller, executive producer of "Fresh Air," I added snippets of narration at several points in the story.

But what made the narrative work were the voices that mined the history: Dalia's, in evocative English, and Bashir's, read by a native Arabic speaker, Walid Haddad, so as not, literally, to lose anything in translation.

These voices speak to the potential of first-person narratives for radio. Though they can be fraught with complication, and the producers must often struggle with issues of balance, historical context, and the ethics of who gets to tell the story, first-person narratives can cut through the sludge of endless information to the truth as it's felt on the ground. In this way they hold promise to be a democratizing force in media.

Of course it also helps when you have a narrative vehicle as powerfully simple as the one I encountered in "The Lemon Tree"—a stone home of shared memory. This is the house that Dalia, after the death of her parents, declared should be dedicated to the common history of the Ashkenazis and the Al-Khayris. Today the place is called Open House. During the day, it's a kindergarten for Arab children in Israel. In the evenings, it serves as a house of encounter for Arab and Jew: a place to discuss history and to look for a way forward. ■

Sandy Tolan, a 1993 Nieman Fellow, is co-executive producer of Homelands Productions, based in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Among other awards, "The Lemon Tree" won the 1998 Overseas Press Club Award for best radio news or interpretation of foreign affairs. Tolan is currently working on "Border Stories," a series of documentaries for public radio about the U.S.-Mexico border.

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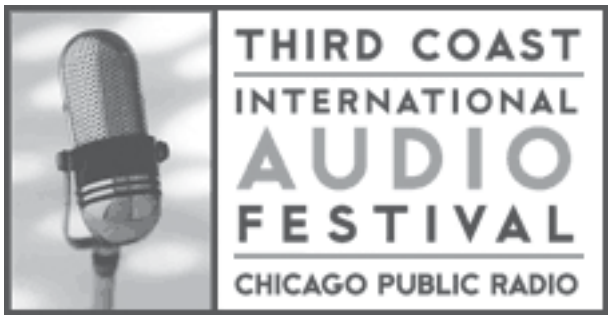
A Festival to Celebrate Radio Documentaries

Organized by Chicago Public Radio, it happens in October.

By Johanna Zorn

Imagine a Sundance Festival for radio and you start to get the idea of what the Third Coast International Audio Festival is all about. This festival is designed to honor and enrich the world of documentary audio and create new opportunities for extraordinary work to reach audiences. It's a competition with monetary support going to the winners. It's a weekend conference, October 26-27, in Chicago. It's a program to be hosted by Ira Glass and featuring the award-winning works. It will be produced and distributed by Chicago Public Radio. And it's a Web site (www.thirdcoastfestival.org).



Chicago Public Radio created this festival because there is a bounty of engaging work being produced today on radio and the Internet. Documentary programs are emerging from the networks (National Public Radio and Public Radio International) and also from stations (Chicago's "This American Life," WBUR's "Inside Out"), from independent radio producers and increasingly from people who never thought of themselves as "producers." Writers, artists and others in the last group share a fondness for radio and often have a powerful story to tell.

I suppose we should not have been so surprised when, instead of receiving 150 entries, our final tally is more than 300 from a dozen different countries. There is a renaissance of interest in the documentary form in print, film and in radio. Ira Glass, host and producer of "This American Life," recently explained it this way: "At this odd cultural moment, when we're inundated with stories all day long, it's still remarkable how few TV shows, movies, songs and magazines actually capture what our lives are really like. We hunger for something that puts our lives in perspective. That's what documentary is for."

The Third Coast festival is a new opportunity to celebrate the audio documentary form, revealing the power of radio and the Internet to document our world.■

Johanna Zorn has worked as a producer/director at Chicago Public Radio for 20 years. For the past 10 years she has produced the nationally acclaimed series, "Chicago Matters." As part of this series, Zorn has had the opportunity to work with many of the nation's top documentary producers.

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