



# *The Transom Review*

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## Scott Carrier's Topic

### About Scott Carrier

Scott Carrier is an independent radio producer and writer who lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. His radio stories have been broadcast on *All Things Considered*, *This American Life*, and *The Savvy Traveler*. His print stories have been published in *Harper's*, *Esquire*, and *Rolling Stone*. A collection of his stories, *Running After Antelope*, will be published in March of 2001 by Counterpoint.

### A Word From Jay Allison

Scott Carrier is our first Special Guest. There isn't anyone else quite like Scott, but there are a lot of people who want to be. He's a restless character, always looking for something. Not sure what. Sometimes we get to go along. If you haven't heard his work, and his mesmerizing, big-sky, flat-prairie voice, you should. Probably the best place is online at <http://www.hearingvoices.com> or do a search on his name at the "This American Life" site, <http://www.thislife.org>. We also have an older piece of his in our Inspiration page.

Scott should be along here in just a minute to get things going. Please welcome him when he shows up.

# Scott Carrier's Manifesto

## Special Guest Scott Carrier 02.12.01

Jay asked me to write a manifesto. I got so hot and bothered writing it that I haven't checked the spelling or anything, and don't want to.

My work in radio production has a history that can be traced to one particular moment when I was 21 years old, in college, sitting in an auditorium watching the Richard Leacock film "Primary." I have not seen the film since then, so my recollection of what happened and why is somewhat blurry, but there is a shot, I think about half-way through the film, where Jackie Kennedy walks across a large hotel room. The lighting is dark, natural, and since this is 1960 the film is black and white and grainy. There are maybe 10 other people in the room, one of which is Jack Kennedy, and Bobby Kennedy, and they are waiting on the results of the Wisconsin Primary. Leacock is sitting in a chair with the camera on his lap, and in the shot Jackie walks across the frame with a drink in her hand and then turns and says something to someone you can't see. You can't hear what she says, but you can see that she is flirting. The entire shot is not more than a few seconds, and Jackie's turn is only that—a turn, a flirt, and she walks out of the frame. But in that one turn I understood why everyone goes nuts over her. Everything I'd ever seen of her up to that shot had been a frozen pose or a still photograph. I'd never seen her act naturally, and seeing her act naturally completely captivated my imagination. I had the experience of actually being there in the room with her. This experience is what put me on a path that eventually led to my working in radio.

After seeing "Primary" I knew that I wanted to make documentaries that gave the audience the feeling of actually "being there." I realized that there are documentaries that only present the facts, and then there are documentaries where the audience suspends its disbelief, just as in a dramatic story, and enters into the world that is being presented. I also knew that the door to this world, in documentaries, was through the tape, the film, the record of the actual event, and that, in documentaries, the quality of the event depended upon natural behavior. First I studied documentary film, and then I went to a documentary film school, and then I realized that I would never have enough money to make my first documentary film. This was 1983, when digital video was not even imagined. And yet I did have a portable cassette recorder and an Electrovoice RE-50 microphone, and All Things Considered was playing stories produced by the Kitchen Sisters which were very much like cinema verite films in that they had no narration but sought to cover an event by the voices of those who were participating in it. I heard a couple of their stories and I had the same reaction I'd had with "Primary." So I thought, that's it, I can do radio instead of film.

For my first story I hitchhiked to Washington D.C., interviewing the people who gave me rides. On the trip I was able to get some good tape because people tend to spill their guts on long drives and because I'd practiced enough to know that I had to forget about the equipment if I expected the other person to forget about the equipment. I knew that I needed to listen and pay attention and ask questions that I really wanted to be answered. Luckily, I found that the interviewee is usually only self-conscious right at

the beginning, and that the microphone can actually force people to forget "themselves" in order to organize their thoughts and speak clearly. And I found that (like Larry Massett says) after 15 minutes everyone sounds crazy.

I arrived in Washington with maybe eight or ten good interviews, and my plan was to edit them together without narration, like a cinema verite. But Alex Chadwick, who was kind enough to listen to my tape, said that I would have to write some narration. "This is your story," he said, "and you have to tell it. Can you write?" I thought this was an affront to me artistic integrity. I took umbrage—for maybe 30 seconds before realizing that I had never produced anything and therefore was not an artist and therefore had no artistic integrity that could be compromised. Plus, Alex had a good argument, which was basically that in order for the audience to listen to my actualities they had to be given a context, they had to be placed within a story, otherwise there would be no meaning. The short end of this argument is that reality does not happen in story form, it needs to be constructed. Even in "Primary," though there was no narration, there was a tight story form to it, provided by the primary election. I wanted the audience to listen to a string of interviews as if it was a random cross section of America, almost like a photo-essay book, and Alex wanted "Blue Highways," where the narrator becomes the main character.

This problem, which presented itself within the first hour that I was in the NPR building, is still the basic issue I struggle with in producing radio stories. If the essential goal was to produce a sense of "being there" in the audience, then there was something to be said for the argument that some narration is necessary in order to describe the things that are not present in the actual tape—the other things that people need to know in order to set the context. In radio, time is the critical constraint, and so the narration needs to do a lot with only a little, which for me meant that radio narration should emulate haiku poetry. I think this was and still is a solid approach, but, unfortunately for me and my objective, the audience often liked my narration better than the actual tape it was meant to set up. I found that I could produce a suspension of disbelief without any real tape at all. Even more unfortunately, this type of story worked well in print, which pays much better than radio, and as a result I don't feel like I've produced a real radio story in years.

The good side to this long slide is that I and a group of compatriot independent producers have been given a large grant from the CPB to produce basically whatever we want, or I should say, to produce the best stories we can. I don't mean to sound flip about this. The CPB did just what it should do—give money to good producers to make the kind of stories they are good at, with as few restrictions and constraints as possible. I plan to go back to my roots, unless perhaps I am spoiled beyond use. I want to start a story by trying to get good tape, like the shot of Jackie, and then trying to figure out what happened and how to tell it. Enough of Scott Carrier.

# Highlights From Transom Discussion Board

## **Narration, Images, and Documentary Film**

**Brent Runyon 02.13.01**

Scott, it's so interesting that you, one of the best narrators in the country, would hate narrating. It brings up bunch of questions. Do you still feel your art is confined or compromised by narration? Have you ever thought of going back to documentary film now that Digital video and editing software is so much cheaper than it used to be? Do images translate the inexpressible better than audio or words?

## **Scott Carrier 2.14.01**

When I said that I took offense at Alex saying I had to write narration I was trying to make a joke about how I was pretentious and assuming. The point that maybe I didn't make so well was that I had to realize, quickly, that if I wanted to get the story finished and on the air it would require the cooperation of a lot of people, none of whom I wanted to piss off right away. And, you know, all the decisions were my decisions. I could have walked away at any time. Also, I came to realize that Alex's suggestions were all good. He helped make the story a lot better.

Now, and probably ever after that moment, I don't think of what I do as art. I just try to get the story finished and on the air, and then I forget about it, because basically I need to think about what I'm doing next. I'd like to produce one story that's so good I could live on it for the rest of my life and never have to do another, but that hasn't happened yet. So, to answer your question, no I don't feel like my art is compromised by narration because I don't consider it my art. It's more that what I'd like to produce is a story that tells itself, where I don't have to say anything.

As for the new digital video technology, I'm waiting for a way to make some money at it. If I produce a video story where will I sell it?

Do images translate the inexpressible better than audio or words? Is that a zen koan? I think it's at least a trick question.

Oh, I see, you're asking which is better--video, audio, or print. But that's like asking which is more powerful--paper, scissors, or rock. That's almost a zen koan.

## **How Does A Story Tell Itself?**

**Viki Merrick 02.14.01**

Speaking of Zen, how does a story tell itself? At first I wanted to say a story must be told and that IS your goal, your art. On second thought, keep reaching and we'll wait for more.

One last thing. I tended bar for an event at the Kennedy Compound in Hyannis 100 years ago - it was noisy - I was busy pouring 'em and watching secret service with their backs to the party and all of a sudden I had this feeling of silk brush over my face and I looked up but nothing looked or sounded different. A few clumps of people away from the bar was Jackie, turned to the side, talking quietly, head

bent in. She left as quickly as she arrived. I never forgot that moment and I have never experienced it again until you described that shot in "Primary".

## **Scott Carrier 02.15.01**

You go somewhere and something happens and then you want to try to report on what happened to an audience that wasn't there and may not care. If you took pictures or recorded sound then you have this actual stuff from the event, but you don't just show everything. Who would pay attention? Maybe if the photos or the tape is really captivating then you could show everything, only even then it wouldn't be everything, only what you recorded.

So we make up the story. What else can be done? I was probably being pretentious again by saying that I wanted a story that told itself.

### **Too Much Information**

#### **Brent Runyon 02.15.01**

Did anybody else see that movie "Time Code" by Mike Figgis? It's a fiction film, not a documentary, but I think it's relevant. He takes four digital video cameras and follows a bunch of different characters around the city. He shows all four images the whole time, with absolutely no edits, although he does mix the sound so we can follow different parts of the narrative. Although at any time you can look at something else. It becomes an exercise in too much information, sure you can see whatever you want and nothing's left out but what's interesting about that?

### **The Attractive Illusion of the Documentary**

#### **Larry Massett 02.15.01**

I once looked up the history of the word "documentary" in, I guess, the OED. It seems that 19th-century historians (or 18th-century, who cares) had come to distrust the "narrative" histories people were writing; it was all too clear that the author was just making a story and selecting a few facts and dates to buttress his point. So, the idea was, let's eliminate the narrative and just publish the documents themselves: the treaties, the declarations and speeches, the bank records and so on. The pure raw material, undistorted. These were known as "documentary" histories, or "documentaries." Trouble was, no one knew what a "document" like, say, the Declaration of Independence meant. If you read it you begin wondering what they said this or put that or left something out, and so on. Historians began to deal with these questions in the footnotes. As time went by, the footnotes became longer and longer, eventually swamping the documents. And, of course, the "narrative" reappeared inside the footnotes, sort of the way it does in Nabokov's "Pale Fire." In this way 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.

**After Albert Maysles**  
**Ben S. 2.17.01**

When Albert Maysles, one of the pioneering documentary filmmakers (who was one of the shooters of Primary) talks about documentary, he talks about it more in the sense of "documents" kind of like the OED--he talks about his kind of work being "unmediated, raw reality." That was what that generation of filmmakers felt they were doing. Since then, being good post-modernists, we think of documentary as highly mediated, and I suppose that thinking influences our work.

**Interviewing the Mentally Ill**  
**m2 2.19.01**

Heard your story about interviewing schizophrenics and it hit me hard. I interview the mentally ill for my job, and am taken aback by their words - how can you tell their stories and not take advantage of them? I feel for them so much, and when I tell people quotes from what I hear they freeze too. It's like no one knows how to listen anymore, and the mentally ill make us hear.

**Leaving Yourself Out**  
**Bryn 02.20.01**

I'm interested in hearing how you all figure out how you decide to tell a story, once you've got good tape.

Most of the shows on this site are of the producer telling their own story. But what about trying to tell someone else's story, and trying to leave yourself out of it as much as possible? Any tips on working with the tape to leave yourself out? Any good examples of this come to mind?

**Re: Leaving Yourself Out**  
**Jay Allison 02.20.01**

For good examples on the web, check Dave Isay's work at his site: <http://www.soundports.org> or various pieces at: <http://www.hearingvoices.com> and <http://radiodiaries.org> and <http://www.lostandfoundsound.com>

There's more that others can suggest, I'm sure.

**Albert Maysles and Unmediated Raw Reality**  
**Larry Massett 02.20.01**

Reminds me that after Margaret Meade was lambasted for, basically, inventing the Samoan culture, she began to preach the doctrine of anthropological film. If you couldn't trust the anthropologist to take unbiased notes, surely you could trust the camera, no? Well - a friend of mine once spent two years working on a M. Meade-type project in Nepal. The idea was simply to film a child-birth. But which woman should you pick, how would you earn her trust? When there were ten people in the room, who

should you be filming? And then, so that people wouldn't "act" for the camera, you pretty much have to film all the time, night and day. Then you come home with hundreds and hundreds of hours of footage which no one- not even an anthropologist- is going to sit through. You have to edit it. So you begin to start making.... certain...choices.... uh-oh.... Ever see "Man of Aran?" Looks real, doesn't it?

## **Scott Carrier 02.23.01**

I was stressing over truth and reality and then a friend told me to go to nakednews.com, and I feel much better now. It pretty much answers all the questions.

As to whether I took advantage of some schizophrenics in Utah ...? I didn't use any names, but I suppose one could be guilty of taking advantage of a group, or the idea of a group, like for instance by selling defective wheelchairs, but I don't think I did this. If anything I took advantage of the guy who hired me. On how to produce a story about something other than yourself...I think the main thing is stick to the tape, meaning figure out how to get into it and out of it. The standard procedure, as far as I know, is to cut the tape, finding a beginning and an ending, then write narration into it and out of it. If the tape is good enough you might not have to write at all.

## **Scott's Book Running After Antelope Barrett Golding 03.13.01**

Just spent the day reading Scott's book, *Running After Antelope*. Many of the stories are adaptations of his radio pieces. The book gives us the first opportunity to view Scott's work as a whole. His theme, "The wilderness is unfolding in front of me", has run through so much of Scott's radio and written stories. Placed together they make an even bigger story.

*I am, let's say, overly familiar with Scott's stuff.* He's probably my favorite producer, and I'd heard or read about half this book before as separate pieces, in *Harper's* and *Esquire*, on *This American Life* and *All Things Considered*. But I got chills at the beginning when I saw how he was gonna string together all his stories, starting from when he was a kid, into this eerie true-life tale about primal human and primal nature. It's the writings, not of an environmentalist, but of a bent naturalist, a perverse Thoreau. Except Scott kicks Henry David's ass and steals his beans. In Paul Tough's topic they're talking about converting print into radio. This book is an excellent example of the opposite: turning great radio into just-as-great print.

# About Transom



## What We're Trying To Do

Here's the short form: Transom.org is an experiment in channeling new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and for discussing that work, and encouraging more. We've designed Transom.org as a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to create a worthy Internet site and make public radio better.

Submissions can be stories, essays, home recordings, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere -- by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We contract with Special Guests to come write about work here. We like this idea, because it 1) keeps the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) lets us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) fosters a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing.

Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over. Occasionally, we award a Transom.org t-shirt to especially helpful users, and/or invite them to become Special Guests.

## Staff

**Producer/Editor** - Jay Allison

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**Web Developers** - Josef Verbanac, Barrett Golding

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# ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA

Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM is also the founding group for *WCAI & WNAN*, a new public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket under the management of *WGBH*-Boston.

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ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA