



The Transom Review

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ALEX CHADWICK'S FAMOUS FIFTY-CENT INTERVIEWS



Tony Kahn 05.15.01

How do you get people who are not accomplished story tellers to find their own true story? What are the clues/criteria to go hunting for as a producer when you find someone who might be a likely subject? So much of what we hear on the air, it seems to me, are the kinds of stories that - for lack of a better phrase - "know where they're going." The story teller, whether it's the producer or the subject, seem to be firmly at the helm, steering the story to shore. I have no objection to that - story telling is an art, and being in control of your materials gives you wonderful opportunities to make the trip - and the view along the way - stunning. But how many stories do we hear that are acts of a deeper kind of discovery, where the story teller is also in the process of trying to find out where the story is going, what the real story is? Do people who are less experienced story tellers give us, as producers, more of an opportunity to explore the kinds of stories that people are, in a sense, telling for the very first time? I suppose you could say successful therapy does a similar thing. You "break through" to an understanding of the real story you never told before - to yourself and to someone else - about yourself.

Does everyone out there have a story to tell? To make better sense of the question for myself, I'm thinking of doing a little experiment.

Here's what I propose. The first chance I get, say a nice weekend afternoon, I'm going to set up a little table (the way NPR's Alex Chadwick did a long time ago) in a public place (probably near my home) and invite people to tell their story. I'll provide a few questions/props to help focus the discussion perhaps (more on that, later), see who shows up and what they have to say. Call it a procedural dry-run. (And not the only one, I'm guessing). If I get any tape worth discussing, I'll do a rough edit, see if some of it can be uploaded here without too much trouble, and invite some responses/further edits/general discussion. What do you think?

Jay Allison 05.15.01

Good idea. Alex still does this, mostly for TV. His sign on the table says "Interviews, 50 cents." There's a microphone. People sit down across from him and they ask, "Who does the interview and who pays?" He says, "Let's just see how it goes."

And he wears a straw hat while he does it.

Which reminds me of the real and metaphorical advice Neal Conan used to give in collecting vox pop: "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.

I'll see if I can get him over here.

Alex Chadwick 05.15.01

Yes, we still do it and in fact are in talks now about a regular feature on a new PBS show that's in development. It grew out of my own frustration and disappointment in getting great tape that I couldn't use because it wasn't about the story topic. But I thought the tape was usually better than the story topic...more insightful, more interesting, more spontaneous, more real. How to get to use it? And Interviews 50 Cents sprang into my head one day, with a picture of Lucy sitting at her little 'psychiatrist, 5 cents' booth. I shot the original with ATC director Bob Boilen on hi 8, and have since graduated to real TV and a real TV partner, Ray Farkas (Bob still works on these, too). You can see them now at the journalists' site, <http://www.journale.com>. It's TV that feels like Transom in some ways - most ways, I think.

Joe Richman 05.22.01

I went out as Alex's producer one time, back in my days at NPR - a story about the Library of Congress, I think - and I was shocked by the way he uses silence in interviews. I mean, he would just sit there after a response and wait. And wait. Sometimes it felt like minutes before he would ask another question. It freaked me out. I kept wanting to jump in. Once I thought maybe Alex had fallen asleep.

But, of course, it worked. The interviewee felt the need to fill the silence and Alex got the kind of uncanned spontaneous tape he was looking for.

Sometimes it helps to make people feel comfortable and relaxed in interviews. And I guess sometimes it works to freak them out a bit.

Tony Kahn 05.23.01

I hear, Joe, it's also a technique used effectively in interrogations. In "Darkness at Noon" torture was only one of the techniques the state police used to get prisoners to confess. They'd also give the prisoners something to feel guilty and conscience-stricken about (and who doesn't feel a little of that at one time or other?), leave them to stew in silence about it, and get them to admit to crimes they didn't even commit!

You can hear some of Alex's unique interviews, as he goes from Arkansas to San Francisco and back to DC, putting up his little table and soliciting insights and opinions for the NPR/PBS “Time to Choose - Election 2000” broadcast:

<http://www.npr.org/news/national/election2000/choose/audiobvideo.html>.



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.

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Editors - *Viki Merrick, Carol Wasserman, Paul Tough, Jeff Towne*

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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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