transom.org

The Transom Review

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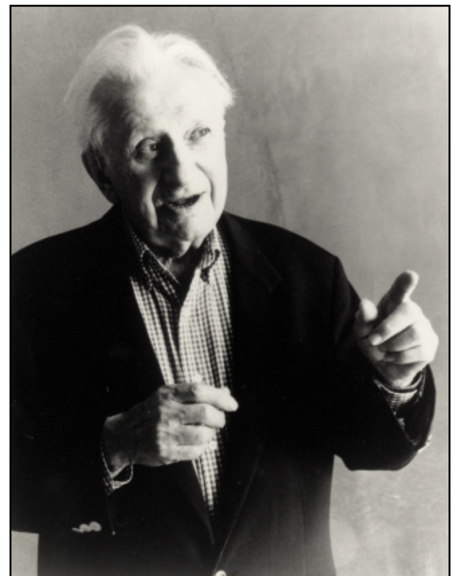
Studs Terkel's "Something Real"



About Studs Terkel

Studs Terkel, a Pulitzer prize-winner, is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a presidential National Humanities Medal recipient.

Born in 1912, Studs grew up in Chicago. After graduating Law School in 1934, Studs' career has taken a great many turns. He has been an actor in radio soap operas, a disk jockey, a sports commentator, a television master of ceremonies and a radio host. He has traveled all over the world doing on-the-spot interviews. Studs Terkel currently lives in Chicago.

Sydney Lewis - Interviewer

Sydney Lewis has worked as a waitress, bartender, office goddess, writer and oral historian. She first met Studs Terkel when she waited on him at a benefit concert for the I. W. W. in 1976. He ordered a martini.

Books by Studs Terkel:

The Spectator, Coming of Age: The Story of our Century by Those Who Lived It, American Dreams: Lost and Found Division , Street: America Giants of Jazz, The"Good War": An Oral History of World War II, The Great Divide, Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression, Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel About the American Obsession, Talking to Myself: A Memoir of My Times, Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do, Will the Circle Be Unbroken? Reflections on Death, Rebirth, and the Hunger for a faith.

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A Word From Jay Allison

Like most of us much younger than Studs Terkel, I came to him late. He’d had a life in radio and tv before I was born, and happily for us all, he’ll tell us something about it here.

I came to him through “Working” and am not unusual in having been profoundly affected by that book. Oh, wait a minute… you mean you can just talk to people with a tape recorder and learn about their lives and share that experience with EVERYONE? Sounds like a life’s work to me.

One of the ideas behind Transom.org is not just handing over the tools of public radio, but the purpose. Many of us who were around near the beginning think it’s important to keep the flame alive. We’re not regular media, or even regular journalism. We have a calling to mission and public service that exists outside the marketplace. We don’t always live up to it. But I know for a fact that many hearts still beat to the idea. And Studs Terkel reminds us of it.

He reminds us as an interviewer and producer, yes, but more importantly, as a Listener, with a capital “L”. As our Transom crowd has noted in earlier postings…

> “I was on my first book tour, and I went on Studs' show… and all of a sudden everything changed. He was truly there, not half there.” - Bill McKibben

> “…he LISTENS with an energy that's a little superhuman.” - Tony Kahn

> “What makes these interviews so compelling despite their lack of narrative or anecdotes? Every one of Studs' people (many now long dead) seems to be right in the car with you.” - Harriet Reisen

You may notice that Studs is getting a little more space for his manifesto than usual around here. You will understand why. This is a wonderful conversation (we are in great debt to our friend Sydney Lewis who conducted it). It leaps out and surprises you. It will make you happy to be involved in radio and remind you how important it can be. A radio manifesto from the King of the True Believers.

“Something Real”

Studs Terkel in conversation with Sydney Lewis
6/20/01

The Dumbest Gangster

Sydney Lewis
A lot of people know you from *Working*. That's a book that changed people's lives. But there are many people who don't know that you were on the radio for close to half a century.

Studs Terkel
My first job, really, was in radio. I'd gone to law school, and it was a bleak, horrendous experience. Under no circumstance would I ever practice law. The first job I had in radio was as part of crowd noises. And then I had a job as a gangster, a Chicago gangster, in radio soap operas.

Chicago was the home of more radio soap operas than New York and Hollywood put together - day-time radio soap operas. *Ma Perkins, A Woman in White, Guiding Light*. All the same script. *Guiding Light* was about a young minister; *A Woman in White* about a young nurse; *Ma Perkins* was about a wonderful, all-American lumber yard owner, a widow. And there was always the malevolent influence, the same one: three gangsters. The scripts were identical, almost, except for the locale and the names. And the actors were all same rotating group. I got a job as a gangster, the dumbest of the three. The one that said, "Get in there, you guys."

In any event, that was the beginning.

Then an advertising guy who somehow became my friend put me on the radio as a disc jockey, a word that wasn't used in those days. I played records and I recorded. If Louis Armstrong was in town, I'd play a jazz record; if Callas was in town I'd play an opera or a Callas aria. That sort of thing.
Then during the Roosevelt Administration, the third term - '44, when he last ran, he died in '45 - all the announcers, all the commentators were anti-Roosevelt. So this New Deal ad man put me on as a commentator. I was the only pro-Roosevelt commentator in town, once a week.

The Cool Medium

Then came television. So a new life began. But that's a long story involving blacklisting, McCarthy days, and I was out. But I heard this FM radio station, WFMT, a classical music station, appealing for funds. They were playing a Woody Guthrie record. Well, during my radio program I had played it all - it was an eclectic program: Callas and Armstrong and Woody Guthrie, too. No one played Woody except me. So I called up Rita Jacobs, the wife of the owner - she and Bernie Jacobs founded the station - and I said, "I'd like to work with you." They knew my name by that time because of the television program and stuff.

"We'd love to have you, but we're flat broke. That's why I'm on the air."

I said, "Well, I'm broke too." So we started from scratch. And had forty-five years.

During those forty-five years, all that I had felt about radio deep, deep down became concrete: that radio, far, far more than television, appeals to the imagination of the listeners. This is one moment where Marshall McLuhan was dead wrong. McLuhan was brilliant about the medium being the message. But he spoke of TV as the cool medium. He couldn't have been more wrong. Cool - the phrase he used - is a jazz reference. Cool jazz - say Miles Davis - being more cerebral than swing, or the early jazz of Armstrong. Whereas the opposite is the case with radio. It's radio that appeals to the imagination.
The word couch potato has never been used for radio. It's for TV, which is fed to you, whole. Good example: *Under Milkwood*, by Dylan Thomas. You hear it, you hear the voice of Thomas as the narrator, or Richard Burton as the narrator. But then you envision that Welsh village in the morning. You envision what Polly Garter looks like, or what blind Captain Cat looks like. You have the set in your head. You don't know what these people look like, but in your mind you do. Well, I saw it on TV, with an excellent cast, by the way - a good production. But it wasn't at all my *Milkwood*, do you see? Because it was all laid out for me.

Therefore radio is the cool medium. McLuhan is dead wrong. It appeals to something within a person that is so obvious and clear - the sound of the human voice.

Who Shed Those Other Tears

One of the dangers of technology today - I'm very inept, as you know, in these things, very primitive when it comes to technology. I'm using a tape recorder now, don't I? I'm very inept, as you know, in all these things, and very, very primitive when it comes to this. But the fact is, what with the exponential leap in technology, the human voice, the voice itself we hear less and less. We hear the robotic imitation of it. So the sound of the human voice suddenly does something. [snaps fingers] Vox humana to me is what it's all about.

And what do we have on commercial radio? We have the processed voice. We have the robotic voices. We have the same banal conversation. You know very well that a person's not moved when he hears the couple, the laughing boy and laughing girl, talking each morning. Thoughout the day. It's processed. We have processed food, as against the rich organic food.

Well, then, public radio's organic. Organic is a key word used by Frank Lloyd Wright. It's something that is connected to the human being. Let me just stick with the Wright analogy for a moment:

Wright believed that all his architecture - that all of life - must be organic. For example, these fingers on my hands are connected to the palm of my hand. The limbs of a tree connect to the trunk of the tree, the trunk of the tree is connected to that soil. When he built the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo... the horrendous Tokyo earthquake of 1923 - all of us school kids contributed money for the horrible earthquake. One of the few buildings remaining was Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel, because he built it organically. He knew what the Japanese landscape was, what the soil was, and he gave it enough of a flexibility that it withstood the earthquake where others did not.

Public radio has to be organic and unprocessed. When you hear somebody talking, that's actual. You hear the voice down the block, and you think, "That's like *me* talking! He's saying what I wanted to say and never got around to saying." Or you hear an actual conversation, as though you're eavesdropping, and suddenly you feel less alone. But more than that, you feel pretty excited. There's something in that community. By the way, I'm talking now about a local thing, but it could apply to the world itself. I mean, you know the old phrase, "Act locally, think globally." Well, it's a cliche', but it's true.

Not that public radio shouldn't cover international affairs. Of course it should, but in that same way. Organically. Get who it is at the bottom of that pile there when the rubble occurs. Never mind the official talking about it. There are many things that we suffer from; one is the official voice, the official source. Very often during the Vietnam War the high-ranking official source turned out to be Henry Kissinger.

So that's what it's about. Let's be political for a moment - you can't avoid it. We think of Bertolt Brecht, collaborating with Kurt Weill and writing plays. But he was a poet. In one poem he asks, "Who built the

Seven Gates of Thebes?" He says, you know, who did it? Was it kings, queens? If I were to ask people who built the pyramids the immediate reaction would be well, the pharaohs did. The pharaohs didn't lift a finger. Mr. Pharaoh's hands were as immaculately manicured as Elizabeth Taylor's in *Cleopatra*.

"When the Chinese Wall was built, where did the masons go for lunch?

When Caesar conquered Gaul, there was not even one cook in the army?"

And the big one is when the Spanish Armada sank. I remember the year 1588 as well as I do 1492 and 1776. 'Cause I was told that's when Sir Francis Drake conquered the Spanish Armada. He did? By himself? And so Brecht writes, "When the Armada sank, we read that King Philip of Spain, King Philip wept." Here's the big one: "Were there no other tears?"

Now to me, public radio as well as history should be about those who shed those other tears. And about who makes the wheels go round.

What Is Unsaid But Felt

But hearing the human voice - let's come back to that again. I say we're losing it. Not that technology is bad. I'm not a Luddite. I do believe in refrigerators, because I always say, "Where can I freeze my martini glass?" But I do think that there's been an exponential leap, astronomical in effect, and I think it's effecting our speech. A number of teachers have told me that even some of their kids' speech has a certain disconnected, non-organic quality.

So I see radio - public radio specifically, of course - as saying that which is unsaid but felt. And for the listener, hearing it, there's no question - [snap] there's a leap. I'll give you an example from the work I do interviewing different people, the ordinary, so called, which is a phrase I dislike because it's patronizing. Ordinary. They're capable of extraordinary things. But there's the example of this woman I use all the time:

This was the first book, *Division Street: America*. It was about a public housing project which was integrated but all poor. And I can't remember if she was white or black. She was pretty, skinny, and had about four little kids running around. The tape recorder was not the ubiquitous tool it is today, not a household object. It was new, and she'd never been interviewed before. The kids were hollering, "I want to hear Mama."

So I say, "Just a minute." And I play it back.

She hears her voice. She puts her hand to her mouth and says, "Oh my god."

I say, "Well, what is it?"

And she says, "I never knew I felt that way before." Bingo! It was fantastic. To her as well as to me.

That's what I'm talking about. 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.

Listening With My Father

My first connection to radio was the crystal set. Before there were tubes, and huge ugly boxes with names like Super Heterodyne and Atwater Kent, there was the crystal set. I never could figure out how the little thing worked.

My father had been ailing most of his life. He was a good, gallant man. He wanted to work, but he was ill and bedridden most of the time, in the rooming house my mother ran. I shared a bed with him. I also had two older brothers.

We'd listen to this new invention called radio. I don't know where we got it. It was a little wispy piece of silver you rotated around a piece of mineral or metal, until you found a station.

The big station was KYW Chicago. Sam Kaney was the announcer. He had that rich, fruity voice, that plum voice. And they had Wendell Hall, The Red-Headed Music Maker, playing the ukulele. *"It ain't gonna rain no more, no more./It ain't gonna rain no more./How in heck are you gonna wash your neck/If it ain't gonna rain no more?"* Oh it was fantastic, hearing that voice.

And then, would you believe it, in 1925 we heard part of the Scopes Monkey Trial, in Dayton Tennessee. The big debate, Darrow against Bryan. Bryan was the Fundamentalist who said, "We'll not discuss the age of rocks, but rather the Rock of Ages." Darrow practically destroyed him. I think we heard their voices.

The trial was announced by Hal Totten, the famous voice of WGN, the Tribune station. I think the very first baseball announcer ever, by the way, was Hal Totten.

I remember listening to an early four hundred mile Indianapolis Speedway race. All day you heard it. To me the great moment in the early days of radio was hearing the Democratic Convention in the Summer of 1924. I was at a resort in Michigan called South Haven. I was a sickly kid, but getting better. The kids were out playing - you know, going to the pool, going to the lake, dipping in the sand. And I was inside listening to radio, to this huge Super Heterodyne set in the dining room. People all around me at the resort, and I'm the only one there.

Al Smith was running for the Democratic nomination. The convention was in New York. It was sweltering hot there - they described it. I remember the voice of the Alabama candidate, the Alabama nominator, every day for one hundred and two ballots. It went on and on. It was a dead heat between Al Smith, the first Catholic candidate, and William Gibson Macadoo, who was the son-in-law of Woodrow Wilson. They deadlocked, and finally chose John W. Davis, a Wall Street lawyer. He lost to Calvin Coolidge, of course, in the election.

But that convention! That first voice, I can hear it even now: "Alabama, twenty-four votes for Underwood." Their favorite son. And this went on and on.

The Bard of Radio

So I listened to the radio. I was enamored of radio. All the programs, the early ones, like *Ernie Jones* and *Billy Hare, the Interwoven Pair*. One of the richest voices of all was Norman Brokenshire of CBS. You heard those voices. Orson Welles, of course, who was *The Shadow*, too. But before that there was Jessica Dragonette, and what was the name of that watch company? I forget. Oh, it's horrible to forget the sponsor's name. And then, of course, there was Tony Wons, who was a poet.

The great moment of radio writing came with Norman Corwin, in the late '30s, the '40s, and the early '50s. Norman Corwin elevated the word. He did scores of programs, one better than the other. But he wrote for the ear. And he was the master of it; I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Corwin as the bard of radio.

He had a tremendous influence on my own work. The way he used words, the way they sounded. I think of that last prayer he wrote in *A Note of Triumph*. But everything he did had that quality. It was made for the ear, and because of the ear you see it, which sounds paradoxical. But it was also organic, because in this case radio fit the moment; the War, the Post-War, and to some extent the Depression.

Fireside Chats

You remember the sound of things on the radio that you forget on TV.

Even though I lived in Chicago, I grew up in New York. I remember the voice of Fiorello LaGuardia during the newspaper strike. He was for the strikers, of course, but he didn't want the kids to be deprived of their Sunday comics. So you have Fiorello LaGuardia on his knees reading the comic strips on Sundays on WNYC. There's a recording of it. He gets excited like the kids get excited: "And so Orphan Annie, here's what she did. She went...And then Daddy Warbucks, he went....And Orphan Annie..." It's the Mayor talking. That's why he's so great. That's radio. That could never be done on TV. You hear the sound of his voice.

And we haven't talked about the master of radio - Franklin D. Roosevelt. Alec Wilder, the composer, said, "You know, Roosevelt's voice, the fire, the word fireside chat - it's not accidental. It's something intimate." When Roosevelt spoke, he wasn't speaking to millions, he was speaking to one person. To the old couple losing their farm. To the young kid in a big city, all by himself. To the city worker who just lost his job. To the family, to three, to two, to one person. It was intimate, but Alec Wilder described Roosevelt's voice as not the voice of the man on the street - it was the voice of the Dutch patroon. It was. But something about it was magical. Because of their desperate plight, people thought, "Even though he has that different voice, he's on our side." You felt you could lean on him.

FDR was a great actor. He found his medium. Very few of us were aware of his handicaps, of his being crippled by polio and having pounds and pounds of iron braces on his feet, with his son there supporting him. There he was. But that voice! See, I think we come back again to the vox humana. Certain voices stick out, like Roosevelt. And like Wendell Hall, The Red-Headed Music Maker.

Morning In The Streets

Sydney Lewis
We watched a documentary the other day which you described as poetry, and you said that this was a big thing for you.

Studs Terkel
We saw a TV documentary done on the BBC, that won the Prix Italia. It was by Dennis Mitchell, who's been a tremendous influence in my life, and it was called *Morning In The Streets*. It was beautiful. It was morning in the streets of a working class neighborhood in Manchester a few years after the Blitz. The war is over and the kids are playing in the streets and the old people are there. It's poetic and it's beautiful. But he was originally a radio man, and he worked from sound. He used radio; those voices were originally radio voices.

But then he got to do the film, and he integrated them. But it was *radio* that was the essence of it. You hear that fat woman talking, and just in the middle of it an old guy saying, "We need stately minds more than stately mansions. Yes, there's a working class, I'm part of that, but it's the upper working class that reads..." And he's there in the library with his thick glasses and cap, reading. Then we cut to the fat woman talking about a budgie, about how she took the bird into the pet store: "Why this bird is dead, this budgie." And then she's laughing. It's hilarious.

Born To Live

Sydney Lewis
There was no narrator in *Morning In The Streets*. Did this influence you when you made Born to Live?

Studs Terkel
With *Born To Live* I had the help - more than the help, the collaboration - of Jim Unrath, who was an announcer at the station. He and I worked together on all the documentaries, and all on his own time. As I told you earlier, I'm inept mechanically. Jimmy gathered all the stuff. He knew the way I was thinking. *Born to Live* is a collage montage of voices.

How to explain this? There was a contest called the Prix Italia. It's the equivalent of the Nobel Prize, you might say, for radio and TV documentaries and features. And Dennis Mitchell had won it for *Morning In The Streets*. So Rita Jacobs said, "Let's submit something." Well, very few American stations ever win. It's won by BBC or Stockholm or wherever.

So I thought of all the interviews that I had, and there's this one that was sponsored by UNESCO as a special interview. It was 1961, I think, that we started doing it. The Cold War was going on pretty hot. And UNESCO says, "Can't there be one program of East/West values to lower the temperature of heated discussion?"

What came into my mind when we decided to enter the contest - with the odds about a thousand to one - was interviewing a hibakisha, one of the Hiroshima maidens, they were called, who survived the August 9th atomic bombing. She was talking through an interpreter. She'd been brought by the wife of a Quaker who ran that ship The Golden Rule, challenging the nuclear stuff. As she talked, I thought, "I'm going to open with that."

And then I thought of other tapes I'd done. One of a street worker talking to a kid, a tough kid who's got a tattoo that says "Born To Die". There are tattoos on his fingers: die, death, D-E-A-T-H. The street worker says, "What about the time between you're born and the time you die? What about that?"
"I don't know. What is it?"

And then I say, "Time to live." See? And then snip. [snaps]

Little thoughts. And music. Pete Seeger doodling on a banjo, but he's doodling the chorale from Beethoven's Ninth. Then it cuts to someone else - two couples in a suburb talking about their kids: "And so she says to me, 'Well, might as well live today, tomorrow you're gonna die. I don't know how long I'll live.'" "How old is she?" "Nine." And in between and interspersed are children's songs, American children's songs and Japanese children's songs. And then finally I say, "Born to live. What about the time between you're born and the time you die?" Then all the voices start. Some dealing with humor and laughter and some dealing with myth and legend, and the voice of Jimmy Baldwin and the voice of Miriam Makeba, the voice of Einstein. And John Ciardi says, "Sometimes you can tell the difference between a large decision and a small decision. Sometimes it's the sound of it. When I was a kid I used to hear Caruso records. I heard them in these Italian households in Providence, Rhode Island, I'd hear these Caruso records. And you think, 'That's as far as a human voice can go.' And there he'd go one step further." Then I slip in the voice of Caruso singing "Oh, paradisio," as he goes one step higher. And then Charlie saying, "...tell the difference between a small decision and a giant decision." Then it cuts to the voice of Sean O'Casey, and Einstein, and Bertrand Russell. And then it cuts to the voice of a child.
In any event, it had everything. But I was influenced by Dennis Mitchell as well as by Norman Corwin. Sounds need not have a narrator. I got that from Mitchell. Just let the ideas flow from one to the other.

Happy Happy Happy

By the way, a side story.

I mentioned the voice of a little baby. Well, it happened by accident. Vreni Naess, who worked for our station, is from Switzerland. She brought over an old, old woman who'd never left her village before, and I was going to interview her. It didn't work out real well, we couldn't connect. But Vreni had the little boy in her lap. He was about two years or a year-and-a-half old. And he was going, "Happy, happy, happy." He really meant "hat".

So then I end *Born To Live* with Beethoven's Ninth, Toscanini conducting, the chorale fading out, and this child's voice saying, "Happy, happy, happy." The voice, the kid, who'd been interrupting our interview.

So guess what? We played it every New Year's morning for thirty years. And each time, that kid would call. When he was three years old, four years old, five. When I finally stopped doing it he was thirty-five or forty. He was working for a union, doing some stuff, some office work. He was a forester. His name was Mark Naess.

The show went on the air in Chicago at ten-to-eleven in the morning every NewYear's Day, and he'd call about 11:02, and I'd hear his voice.

I'd say, "Mark, how old are you now?"

"I'm a year older."

Putting It Together

Sydney Lewis
When you started doing your radio program, was it like anything else on the air? You had a particular style of putting it all together.

Studs Terkel
I don't know. The only way I can comment is by a story.

I started as a disc jockey And then, occasionally, I'd interview a musician. Bud Freeman, old tenor sax man from Chicago, was one of the greatest. He's of the Austin High School Gang. I knew him for years and years and years. His brother and I were actors together. So I interviewed him about jazz and early Chicago. I knew Pete Seeger, and interviewed him, casually. Mostly folk singers, folk artists. Marais Miranda, of South Africa. Richard Dyer Bennett.

Then I started interviewing, just as a matter of course, people who came through. If someone wrote a book, I did that.

One day I got a call from a listener. She said, "You should do more of those."

"More of what?"

"More of what you're doing - interviewing people."

"But I'm a disc jockey."

"Yes, but you see your interviews are different from others."

"In what way?"

"Well, it's as though I'm actually hearing a conversation, as though I'm eavesdropping on a conversation, and it's intimate. You see, all the others are....." She meant processed, or cut and dried. "But this is actual."

So that's what's different. I read the book. As you know, writers get a kick out of being on my show because they see my book is all marked up, page after page, with hieroglyphics that even I can hardly understand. Or I know the music of the person I'm with. Or I've watched the paintings, gone through the galleries and seen.

The Art Of Improvisation

Sydney Lewis
As an observer watching you do some of those programs, it involved a lot of muttering to yourself. And diving into the record library.

Studs Terkel
Yeah. Suddenly it'd occur to me that a piece of music would fit, and I'd go find a record. Jacob Lawrence, the African American artist, is speaking about his days with the WPA, and he's describing his well-known Harriet Tubman panels...the captain of the undergound railway escaping slavery. I find a spiritual; *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?* or *Move On Up a Little Higher*. That's easy.

Or Harrison Salisbury is talking about his book *Nine Hundred Days*, describing the incredible Siege of Leningrad. For three years they survived. How? They survived through music. And the one voice they heard from all the telephone poles was from this radio station. In the midst of eating horse meat, grass, whatever you could find on the street, they'd hear these Pushkin poems. They'd hear Beethoven, Mozart, Mussorgsky. And so I'd slip that in as he's talking. That's easy.

Or I'm interviewing Gary Wills. He did a piece with the New York Review of Books on capital punishment. A history of the barbarous stages it went through, until the ultimate barbarism, lethal injection. So when he's talking about drawing and quartering, or the guillotine, or tar and feather, and everything else, I'd slip in some music. *Symphonie Phantastique* of Berlioz, with which Gary Wills is very well acquainted, with its gallows humor, for the guillotine period. Or Verdi's *Don Carlo*, which speaks of torture. For the witch hunt in Salem, Massachusetts, an old song from a folklore album. So that's how I worked.

Sydney Lewis
It's like jazz.

Studs Terkel
Improvisation plays a big role. By all means, preparation, preparation, preparation. But once you're

prepared, you improvise. And that's it. It's not done chronologically. It's in my head by that time. Or I've got those notes, those crazy notes in the book to look through.

So what happens then is that it gets kind of exciting to my guest.

If it's a poet, sometimes I read the poems alternately with the author, say Galway Kinnell. Then Galway says, "Gee, come on stage with me tomorrow. I've got this thing to do." And stuff of that sort. Or a self-serving comment: Stephen Spender said, "You read British poetry better than any American I've ever known." I don't know if that's good or bad, but I read it as conversation. And at the same time try not to lose the lyric quality of it.

As a kid when I'd fall asleep I'd be remembering that verse from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; "O Sleep! Thou art a gentle thing from Heaven, Beloved from pole to pole! To Mary Queen the praise be given! She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven, That slid into my soul." I didn't know who the hell Mary Queen was till later on the Catholic kids told me, "That's MARY!"

Billie

My wife Ida used to do a take-off on Billie Holiday. It was beautiful. Billie with the flower in her hair, and her eyes half shut.

I remember I was interviewing Billie on a disc jockey show - I've lost the tape, unfortunately. She was talking about the rotten guys she met, and said, "But this one fella was a good man."

I remembered something I'd read by a guy named Frank Hayes, so I said, "Frank Hayes?"

And she half-closed her eyes and snapped her fingers like that. [snap] Meaning, "That's it." No words. [snap snap] I'll never forget that.

And then she talked about a guy, a bartender. She told him, "Baby, can I have a little, just a little, a little more gin there. A little - never mind the lemon peel, just a little more gin there."

I'd like to see public radio have that again. The natural. The nat. The voice au natural. Non-processed. It's exciting to the listener as well as the participants.

Martin Luther King

Sydney Lewis
You are known as a master interviewer, and I know a lot of people ask you, "How do I become a good interviewer?" What do you say?

Note: *Public radio station WNAN, Nantucket, Massachusetts, went on the air March 15, 2000. Its founder, Jay Allison, spoke the first word that day: "Listen."*

Studs Terkel
As someone used in this press release I got from a station: listen. The first word is listen. You listen. You hear that person.

For example, you're talking to an African American person, and quite often - not among Caucasians, but among African Americans - quite often you will find a laugh or a chuckle when that person is recounting a moment of humiliation, a moment of hurt.

Big Bill Broonzy was my good friend. He was the greatest of all country blues singers. And too little known. People think it began with Muddy Waters, but Muddy was a disciple of Bill's, not even in Bill's shadow.

Well, you know many black men of a certain age were artisans, they were jacks of all trades. They could do carpentry, they were stone masons, they were mechanics, they could do anything. Big Bill could do many things. He was a welder, and he's teaching this young white kid how to weld. He says, "Soon as I taught that white boy how to weld, they fired me." And as he says that he chuckles a bit. Now, why did he chuckle at that moment of humiliation? He chuckled because maybe that's a safety valve. There's a lyric in a blues song: "Laughing to keep from crying." Or maybe today it says to keep from raging. Laughing to keep from raging, to keep from crying. Safety valves.

I once asked Martin Luther King about it. It was an interview that happened accidentally.

I worked with Mahalia Jackson very closely through the years. We were good friends. And so one day she called me: "Martin's in town. He insists on seeing you."

Martin never heard of me. Martin Luther King, of course. Mahalia was his favorite singer. And he was visiting her house because Mahalia could make great gumbo. She was fantastic. She was from New Orleans, and Duke Ellington used to go see her, and Count Basie'd go there. And King was there. And she says, "Martin wants..." So, of course, she had told him that.

No. He did hear of me - I'm sorry. I introduced him at a big rally in Chicago a year or so before that. *He* didn't want to see me, he was busy. But she insisted. So I came to see him. And I asked him this question about the laughter. I recounted the story of Big Bill. He said, "Well, of course. It's laughter through the adversity that helps us. The laughter is tremendous." So you listen. Why's this guy laughing, you see? Why'd that woman suddenly stop in the middle of a sentence [snap] and go on to something else? Well, let it ride, but then come back to it later on. Maybe she'll say why.

And sometimes there are personal things you don't pry into.

Nobody's Business But Their Own

By the way, you notice none of my stuff is intimate. That is, it's nobody's business but their own. So I never have that stuff. There's no need for that, you see. That's the prurient stuff. Or the phony, sentimental stuff. I'm not Barbara Wawa, you know. I don't make as much dough as she does.

People who are called celebrities - I rarely do that. I interview someone who is known for their artistry, whatever it is.

Of course, I interviewed Carol Channing. She was something. But of course, she was brilliant as Lorelie Lee. Her Lorelie Lee's not a dumb blonde at all, but someone very, very shrewd: knowing the market, knowing the frailty of these phonies who are sugar daddies. Her interpretation was brilliant. That's different. It's about the artistry.

I interviewed Diana Barrymore, the daughter of John Barrymore, and she was in the news. She was in the news a lot, because of all the scandal sheets like *Confidential*, and others. Men and booze and drunkenness and promiscuity. All these. And she was in the headlines. However, I saw her in a Tennessee Williams play, *Suddenly Last Summer*, as the girl, and she was fantastic. So I interviewed her about her role, and asked a bit about her father. Memories, perhaps. Not the prurient stuff.

So we have a talk about the girl in the play - she also did Maggie in *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, very well - and she's talking about Tennessee Williams' heroines. And a whimsical story about her father, not the rowdy stuff when he was humiliated too. Near the end of the interview you could see she was quite moved. I was too. And she says, "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"Well, I've forgotten a lot of things. What?"

"You didn't ask me about my, ah....."

"About your what?"

"What about my troubles. All the papers?"

"That's none of my damn business. Your art, what you do, tells me who you are. What you did as that girl, or what you did as Maggie in *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* tells me all I need to know about you. That you're marvelous in certain roles."

And then she starts crying. And the next day I get a box of cigars. I was smoking a cigar at the time, I'm sorry. But I get a box of cigars, and a note that says, "Thank you, Diana." That was all.

So that's what I mean. That was what I wanted to know about her, not the other. And that is another aspect of interviewing, I think.

The Uses of Ineptitude

Sydney Lewis
You talk often about how, because you are inept mechanically, you put people at ease.

Studs Terkel
Now here's something. People think I'm deliberately doing this. I happen to not be good mechanically, as you know.

Sydney Lewis
I bear witness.

Studs Terkel
I can't drive a car. I goof up on tape recorders, I press the wrong button. And I must tell you, I lost Martha Graham.

Sydney Lewis
I didn't know that.

Studs Terkel
I lost Michael Redgrave. I lost half of Peter Hall, the British director. And I almost lost Bertrand Russell. I almost put my head in the oven then. This was in a cottage in North Wales, during the Cuban Missile Crisis in '62. Pressing the wrong buttons.

Now I do this sometimes. When it was reel-to-reel, before the cassette, the person interviewing me, who had never seen the tape recorder before, sees that something's wrong. I don't see it. They say, "Pardon me, sir, but that reel, that thing is not moving."

"Oh, I pressed the wrong - I'm sorry."

Well, at that moment, that person feels pretty good. Because they see that I am not from Mount Olympus. From a TV studio, and so on. I'm not that. On the contrary, I'm someone who kind of goofs up, not unlike themselves. And so I correct my mistake, and the person feels they helped me. They suddenly realize that I needed him or her. The sine qua non of being a human being is to feel needed. So my mechanical ineptitude is sometimes an asset to me. And Mike Royko, who I knew very well, Mike would say, "You, you, dirty lying, thieving... You deliberately do that. You deliberately!"
"I don't. No."

"No, it's, it's *deliberate* on your part." [laughs]

Hows It Going?

Sydney Lewis
You talk about 'the woman on the block'. And how when you meet people in the community, or when you're just going downtown on the bus, you sit with people. I was reading Anna Deveare Smith's book the other day, and she talks about learning, in her performance work, to be more *with* the audience than *for* the audience. Which made me think of you.

Studs Terkel
Anne Deveare Smith, you know, does a take-off on me. I must say it's very funny.

But about being with a person: there we are. And we're talking. As a matter of course.

We talk about race, for example. Race, ok, black-white. Walking down the street. And there's this woman, and she's middle-aged, older black woman. There are fewer and fewer doing housework - more European and Asiatic now - because the mothers want their daughters to do something else. But she's about sixty, and she's tired and frowning and toting two bags. Worked in someone's kitchen and parlor. And so I just talk to her as a matter of course. I say, "How's it going?" And she hears that voice.

She says, "Fine. And you? How are you?" See, her presence was recognized. Instead of silence.

Or a better case would be three kids, three teenage black kids, and they're having that stroll. They've got that strut, called "doin' the Iggy". It's a certain strut. I say, "Well, how's it going?" And the guy in the middle will say, "Well, fine, and you?"

My original title for *Race*, by the way, was *...And You?*

Why We Need A Soapbox

I always ask people this: who was the American President who said, "The air belongs to the public"? The radio air does not belong to private industry, does not belong to advertisers. It belongs to the public. Who was the President who said it? Herbert Hoover. We think of Herbert Hoover the engineer, the President of the Depression. He was all that. But he said it. And it's a rule that's been honored more in the breech than in the observance.

That's the thing, you see. It belongs to the public. Therefore why not have a program called "Soapbox". I spoke of this for TV, but why not radio? I'm talking about network, soapbox, like they did in the old days with Bughouse Square, Chicago and Union Square, New York, and still have in Hyde Park, London. And have people, maybe a committee of some sort, a committee of intellectuals and working people and community leaders, to filter it through. But everyone, no matter what point of view, is to say something. To have an airing.

Consider those kids at Columbine. Consider the shootings of fellow students by little kids. Who are these kids? You find often they were the ones who were bullied as being gay, or being nerds. And no one thinks about the bullying they took, since we've become something of a bully nation anyway.
So hear their voices, let them speak. About their grievances or whatever. Because unexpressed they finally explode.

We're talking about presence acknowledged. Acknowledged by you, and at the same time your own presence is acknowledged too.

Where Public Radio Has Been Remiss

Sydney Lewis
I know you don't listen to public radio all the time - your ears are bad, and you can't hear a lot of stuff. But in terms of what public radio's doing now, a lot of people complain that it's become very stodgy and smug, and presents news from a corporate point of view. For example, I know more about dot-commers than I could ever want to know. But I don't know very much about what's happening in labor if I listen to public radio. Do you think there's more that could be done?

Studs Terkel
Well now you're talking. You're raising a big subject, where public radio has been remiss, I'm sorry to say. It has covered some stuff on race, quite well, to some extent. They had that marvelous series with Bernice Reagon Johnson, who was wonderful - the story of music and the Freedom Movement.

But it hasn't done much about what's happening in labor. What about that strike in Decatur that was lost? How come it was? Who are those guys? What about Firestone and Ford. There was a guy who wanted to testify, I remember. A black guy. The men were on strike, for better working conditions or whatever it was. And they hired scabs. And the scabs were incompetent. And this man was saying the scabs played a role in the tires exploding. No one mentioned that at all. How about that guy's voice? I forget his name now. But it was there, it was well covered by Stephen Franklin of the *Tribune*, by the way. Very well covered. Or how about having a guy like David Moberg on? The best labor reporter in the country - having him on talking about what's going on in labor? Or so many others, to be not only the voice of the country, but its conscience as well.

Sydney Lewis
You don't hear Michael Moore on public radio. He's got Radio Network. They could be broadcasting that. And even more alternative points of view.

Studs Terkel
Yeah, of course. Michael Moore is now celebrated to some extent in certain circles. But there are others. Community people, what's happening in the community? What are the developers doing? A real study of gentrification, of what it is. What about people who are forced out? Where do they go? The whole phenomenon.

You're well aware of this. The restaurant that you worked at - we know the area was a working class area, and then bit by bit it became artsy craftsy. And this restaurant opened in the early days. Now the guy has to leave because his rent is so high.

I met this woman they called an over-aged hippie. This was when the word hippie was just beginning to be used, before Abbie Hoffman. And she was thirty-nine, forty. And she was saying, "I raise the rents, you know. People like me, we have a studio, and then another studio, and then hey, that's arty. Next thing you know, this yuppie couple moves in and they rehab things, and the next thing you know the rents go high, so now they're kicking me out." So her story would be interesting, that phenomenon. Where do these people go?

So this developer - by the way, he was a well-known patron of the arts in Chicago, oh yeah, very well-known, a collector of art, and philanthropic in several respects - I said to him, "Where do these people go when you build these new homes?"

And he indicated, he pointed casually west. "Out there."

Out there. Get them out of the way. Maybe that's it: a program called "Out There".

Something Real

Sydney Lewis
What would your ideal radio day be?

Studs Terkel
Well I like music, of course. Jazz. Good classical music.

But I think hearing the human voice. There's one spot in Morning In The Streets, that BBC documentary written by Dennis Mitchell, who was my great influence, where there's one sound - the human voice. He has people talking; there's women in the laundromat and others, and they're talking back and forth. There's the fat woman talking about the budgie bird. And the one with the laundry on her head talking about different things. And this little old tramp is going around, tramping his way. And the old boy, the old working-class boy who want to be an intellectual, who listens to the conversation and says, "Stately minds. We need stately minds."

Well I love the conversation. I used to hear it in the lobby of the Wells Grand Hotel that my father ran for awhile, and then my mother did.

I'd want the human voice expressing grievances, or delight, or whatever it might be.

But something real.

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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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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