

Larry Massett's Topic



Larry Massett and his mother. From the Savvy Traveller Program, "Travels With Mom."
Photo by Barrett Golding

About Larry Massett

Larry Massett is a senior (i.e. ancient, hideously experienced) independent radio producer. His documentaries on a wide range of topics - the oil industry in Louisiana, deforestation in Nepal, retirement communities in Florida, the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, elephant trainers in Arkansas, virtual reality in Los Alamos - have appeared on *All Things Considered* and other vehicles.

His documentary about the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research Laboratory, *On the Edge of Reason*, won the 1993 AAAS-Westinghouse science journalism award. His 13-part CPB/Annenberg series on the modernization of China and Japan won an Armstrong Award. He produced several of Dupont-award-winning DNA Files programs.

His work has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Ford Foundation, the Town Creek Foundation, the United Nations Development Programme, UNICEF, and others. He was, with Jay Allison and Bill Siemering, one of the founders, and for many years the host, of the award-winning documentary series *Soundprint*.

Intro by Jay Allison **December 20, 2001**

Whenever I suspect I might be getting too sanctimonious or preacherly, as is my wont, I'll think about what Larry Massett would say. If I were to ask him outright, he'd drag on his Raleigh, and without any change in expression, nod, "uh-huh."

Larry and I got into radio at the same time in DC in the mid-70s. He did the music for a Brecht play I directed in a storefront theatre. I was living in his basement, by the furnace. His dog slept on the floor next to me. Ruined my rug. One night a friend of Larry's, Keith Talbot, came over and told us about this new thing in town: National Public Radio. Keith loaned us tape recorders - Sony 800B open-reel portables (same as Nixon's, by the way). We stole supplies from NPR and went through a lot of tape. We spliced our masters.

Twenty-five years later, here we are – still in public radio. Larry and I founded SOUNDPRINT together a long time ago, and Larry became its host. Right now, he's Senior Producer for Hearing Voices. Over the years, he has made a singular assortment of strange and remarkable pieces, many still referenced today, usually with the introduction: "Why don't we do anything like *that* anymore?"

Larry's work has had a strong influence on those who've sought it out. He was an early encourager and producer of some of public radio's most distinctive voices – Scott Carrier, Joe Frank, Barrett Golding, Andrei Codrescu. Larry encouraged Transom too, when it began, dropping by to pitch into our conversations and see if he could hear something *new*. Sometimes, he's been gratified. Other times, he's exhaled smoke.

In his unpretentious way, Larry Massett has helped keep alive the very idea of a **Fringe** in public radio when the trend has been steadily toward an emphatically finished seam.

Please welcome him. Find out what he's been listening to lately.

In Search of Aliens

Larry Massett
December 22, 2001

As a small child I used to watch my grandfather listen to the radio. His favorite broadcasts- indeed the only ones he followed- were the local election returns. He'd pull up his rocker and stare mesmerized at a wooden floor radio roughly the size of a medieval cathedral, while a ghostly voice crackled: "Smith 4, 501 votes, Jones 3,480 votes...bla bla bla....Smith 4,601 votes, Jones 3,589 votes....bla bla bla...Smith 4,721 votes bla bla ..." on into the night.

This was incredibly boring. His other hobby was squirrel-hunting, which in the dense Georgia woods meant the two of us standing around peering at moss-tangled treetops intently, for hours, as if waiting for local election returns. The advantage to hunting was that now and then –BLAM!- for no particular reason -BLAM!- you could let loose -BLAM!- with your shotgun ("All right, son, now that's enough") while with radio you were just plain stuck.

I still listen to the radio only when stuck. Researchers claim most of the public radio audience is stuck: stuck in traffic jams, stuck washing the dishes, stuck in the middle of Wyoming a hundred miles from the nearest Blockbuster. In these circumstances radio does seem like a reasonable alternative to masturbation, once in a while anyway. Yet people grow maniacally attached to it.

At a dinner the other evening I wound up seated next to an NPR maniac. Far from being stuck, he was an advertising photographer who spent half his life jetting off to shoots around the globe. Nonetheless he had committed to memory the names of every single NPR staffer, including the ones mentioned in a rush at the end of a show, the way dead fish are jettisoned when a trawler docks. He wanted to hear all about them. How old is X? Is Y funny in real life?

The polite thing to do in a conversation like this is to lie. Nothing to it if you've had a few glasses of wine. X is no longer with us- yet fortunately, while on death row, managed to record all the words in Webster's dictionary, which the editors now combine as needed. In real life, Y sobs incessantly. And so on. But for some reason I answered his questions soberly, as best I could.....until he got to (insert commentator's name here.)

"Why do you care about (commentator)?" I asked. "Isn't (commentator) completely predictable?"

"Sure, " said the aficionado. " (Commentator) hasn't said a word in twenty years I couldn't guess ahead of time."

"Well then...."

"But that's why we like it, don't you see? Don't you get it?"

Oh all right, I get it. For a lot of people radio is a family thing, a communal experience. I happen to feel this way about movies. You haven't seen a film till you and your popcorn-munching buds pile into some megaplex on opening night for twelve bucks a pop. Community is swell. And people who come into public radio after growing up with it naturally want to reproduce what they've loved; in this way the memes of ATC and Garrison Keillor and Dave Isay and Ira Glass spread across the airwaves. This ensures continuity and... oh all right, community. So let's call producers of this ilk the Communists.

Then there are the Anarchists. These are producers who backed into radio from hearing tapes. At least this is how it worked for me and a couple other producers who've popped up on Transom: a friend plays you a tape or a DAT or whatever, and it's a weird fish that's not music, not

journalism, not (so far as you know) anything that's got a name. Yet it's done with spectacular care for sound and time and nuance, and it seems true. So you make one of these oddities yourself. You share it with friends. Somebody somewhere calls it a "documentary" and sticks it on the radio, but that's trivial to Anarchists. They mainly listen to tape. Or the Net.

Finally there are Aliens. Disguised as housewives, school kids, poets, convicts, bag ladies, or even stockbrokers (Aliens are endlessly inventive), these folks have something to get off their chests. They don't give a rat's ass about the art of documentary but they're dying to unload. Aliens may go so far as to learn Protocols in order to be heard, and from there...who knows?

Okay, we now have enough Arbitrary Categories to reach a conclusion: Public radio needs Communists. Listeners like them. They're good citizens. Yet because Communists tend to repeat themselves to a degree which, eventually, even the audience will notice, radio also needs Anarchists. Just a few, thanks. Anarchists are trouble and the system can only stomach a few at a time. So the great need is for Aliens- for people no one would expect to hear.

The question is how to find them.

It's worthwhile, I know, looking below the poverty line. Radio should give voice to the imprisoned, the oppressed, the marginal- to all those who live, as Andrei Codrescu puts it, "on the wrong side of the television screen." Still, as an Anarchist, I fear this has become a Communist strategy. It's downright mainstream. What self-respecting Anarchist wants to agree with the majority just because they're right?

So, another strategy is to poke around randomly. Forget washing the dishes. Take a walk in the woods. Listen. Wait. Sooner or later something unlikely may fall from the sky, likewhy, like a squirrel dropping from a Georgia treetop.

Here now are some squirrels, I mean Aliens (Commentator: sadly, the writer has lost control of his metaphors), I mean unexpected voices I've encountered in the last few months:

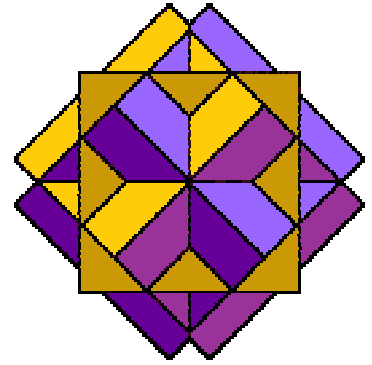
Foreign Ladies dot com:

Ned Dantes is a television producer, a manic depressive, an old friend. Recently he began sending me emails so strange I begged him to read them on tape. The story starts with him trying to **find a mail-order bride** over the net and ends with a scary bout of **electroshock therapy**. You can follow the juicy details in between at Hearing Voices if you're interested (www.HearingVoices.com)

Ned is pure Alien. He could produce his own pieces in a snap if he cared to; but he doesn't care, so I took a whack. As a game, I tried to include a whole cut from his band's CD in each episode. That's why the music goes on so long. It'll have to be redone if these things ever make it to radio broadcast.

The Theory of Everything:**(www.ctmu.com)**

Chris Langan I don't know personally, I think a friend of a friend of his brother told me about the site. Apparently the guy is a self-taught genius employed as a nightclub bouncer. In his spare time he's worked out a "Cognitive-Theoretic Model of the Universe." It explains absolutely everything, from quantum mechanics to consciousness. Does it explain why Drew Barrymore married What's-His Name? Dunno. Can't make head nor tail of the theory yet. But Langan looks suspiciously like an alien. And as a night club bouncer he should be, you know, personable. Worth checking out.

***MarkAllenCam.com*****(www.markallencam.com)**

At last count there were 476 gadjillion webcams running on the net, mainly soporific porn. This one's different. Mark Allen describes himself as a former go-go dancer and underground celebrity who retired from the stage after a bout with cancer. Though his cam never seems to be working, you can read the journals he writes now and then when he decides to get the hell out of New York and drive "to the middle of nowhere." His take on the American hinterland is like nothing you'd expect. Okay, maybe it's exactly what you'd expect from a retired go-go dancer, but still....Somebody (not me necessarily) should grab a mic and go with him on his next road trip.



Other potential Aliens crop up on the message board. Trucker John is a gay truck driver who keeps a detailed diary of his routes. From what I've read, he's very, very interested in the mechanics of truck engines. If someone with a mic rode along it might be fascinating, though. The carburetor problems could be edited out later.

By the way, Mark Allen hosts a "live radio program" from his site every Monday. Never heard it, but the image is intriguing: one person, one mic, a computer, and- voila!- a radio show. If it's this easy why don't we all have our own radio stations? Or maybe we do and I just don't know it yet?

This is about what I know on this topic at the moment. Out there in cyberspace, any thoughts? Other ideas?

A Conversation With Larry Massett

Anarchist Queries

Sydney Lewis – January 1, 2002

I know if you're not in the mood it can be boring to talk about pieces you've done in the past, but would you? Something you're still pleased with, can't now bear to hear.... or if you'd prefer, something you're working on this winter, more recent.

Mic-ing Moms

Susan Jenkins – January 2, 2002

Listened just now to the piece you did with your Mom. I have been taping conversations with MY aging Mom since last summer as an open-ended project. I was just wondering how you mic-ed her for the car travel parts, the in-the-house preparations (like when you're going through the cooler) and when you were at Aunt Grace's and they're talking about the dances.

Also, was this all taped during one trip/visit? And lastly, what was the music you used at the end, when your mom and Aunt Grace are talking about dancing at Tybee?

It is a lovely piece and I like the sense of wonder that comes through. I think the Anarchists have the Wonder arena cornered, whereas the Aliens just pull the rug out from under ya.

Barrett By His Side

larry massett – January 3, 2002

Susan, that Mom piece was recorded in one two-day visit. I used a special mic-ing technique, which was to have Barrett Golding come along to play engineer (we were traveling together on another project at the time.) This always works. Maybe Barrett can tell you what equipment he had. I can tell you I would have had a hard time holding a mic and driving a car at the same time.

The music was from a CD called "Guy Lombard: All Time Favorites." Forget which cut; actually I hate this music and would be happy to give you the CD.

It's a Mood Point

larry massett – January 3, 2002

Sydney, the old piece I like most is "Neurotica," which Jay is trying to lay hands [on] now. The humor is dated but the structure (people wandering around at a nightmarish cocktail party) still works. When it first aired in, oh, nineteen-eighty-something, people at NPR advised me never to do anything else. "Just do that over and over," they said. If only I'd listened.

What I like most right now is the "foreign ladies dot com" piece posted at HearingVoices.com. It's unfinished, maybe that's why it's still fun to think about. And I have a big docu-drama piece in my head, a courtroom drama based on the true story of a tattoo artist accused of incest; not one bit of it exists on "tape" yet. Anyway the piece has an obvious structure (from the beginning of the trial to the end) but I haven't figured out what the point is. Assuming there is one. Sometimes radio pieces are just about mood, aren't they....

Then and Now

Turbo Biscuit – January 4, 2002

I had no idea you and Jay Allison started Soundprint. What was it like in your day? What do you think about it now?

Do you think the internet is exonerating Program Directors in a way from airing more eclectic stuff or would there otherwise be nothing interesting or different circulating? Would it make a difference to you, for instance, if Neurotica had only been showcased online?

And--has there ever been a show or a piece that you've heard and thought 'I wish I had done that?' or 'Man, if only I could get my hands on that....'

Sound Art News

ben – January 4, 2002

Larry, do you listen to the radio? If so, which shows do you like? If not, why not?

When was the last time you heard something that floored you? What was it and what was so great (or, more pessimistic ally, so awful) about it?

Also, did you see Alan Hall's presentation at Third Coast? He did a whole hour and a half on "sound art" as he called it and played some nice pieces. Then somebody asked him about news and the relationship between news and all this "sound art" he was talking about. He said something to the effect of "Well, sound art is well and good, but I like my news to be news." The implication being -- never the two shall meet.

That was really disappointing to me, but it creates a question for you, Larry: is there a place for Anarchists in the NPR newsfeed? What about in the first 20 minutes of ATC?

Then the inevitable follow-up: where? or, better yet, how?

Bores, Maniacs, and the Odd Gem

larry massett – January 4, 2002

When Bill Seimering was [running] Soundprint, it was a great vehicle for long documentaries of all kinds. Bill kind of preferred big social themes ("why can't we get a good piece on affordable public housing?" he'd say) but he had a good ear, and if a piece was well-made he'd like it no matter the topic. The current Soundprint I haven't listened to in years. I heard they got some NASA money to do space science stories.

Interesting question about the net- I don't picture Program Directors saying "Well, we don't have to bother running that because it'll be on the net." As a rule I imagine them just trying to figure out what audiences want, and discovering over and over that what's wanted is a copy of the last successful thing. It's not their bent to take chances, is it (unless, of course, a show called "Taking Chances" has been a big hit for twenty years running)? So the net is a life-saver. It's sort of like self-publishing: no money, lots of bores and maniacs, the odd gem.

White Noise and Feral Lice

larry massett – January 5, 2002

Ben, I really do listen to radio only in the car, and then just as a form of white noise. It's well-known how a good piece forces you to pull off the road in order to listen. But good shows never seem to be on the air when I'm in the mood to listen, so when friends tell me about something exceptional on TAL or ATC or whatever I go find it on the web. As a result I think of individual pieces, like "so-and-so's essay on feral lice," rather than what shows originally broadcast them.

Didn't catch Allan Hall at Third Coast. If he thinks "news" and "sound art" are not likely to meet cheek-to-jowl in the first twenty minutes of ATC, he's no doubt correct. You can approximate the effect by surfing channels very rapidly; the sudden juxtaposition of the Brookings Institute with the Backstreet Boys and The Lord's Message and ads for Ruinous Home Mortgage is fascinating- exactly what ATC is hoping to avoid. And of course you get the same thing by bouncing around on the web. Some friends of mine and I have been working up pilots for a kitchen-sink sort of radio show, but of course stations would call that "comedy" or "experimental art" or something, and try to find just the right slot for it. It's puzzling.

The Illusive Paying Entity

Jackson Braider – January 5, 2002

Has there even been a piece you would have done, you wanted to do, you might have done, if only there had been some entity to pay you?

Nebulous Bubbling

larry massett – January 5, 2002

An unfunded idea bubbles up about every ten minutes, so it's hard to remember them. Oh wait, I recall I once thought it would be a neat idea to stage a radio drama based on Balzac's "Splendeurs et Miseres des Courtisanes," with a cast of children. Gee, why was that such a hard sell? Truth is I've been pretty lucky over the years at writing grant proposals so nebulous I can do pretty much any old thing. The hard part is finding a program to run it.

Tattoos and Incest

Sydney Lewis – January 9, 2002

This docudrama in your head sounds fringe-like all righty. Was this some news item you spied? A trial you attended? Are you going to cast this thing or track down the people or what?

Give Anarchists a News Break

ben – January 9, 2002

Should there be a place for Anarchists in the first 20 minutes of ATC, or in the NPR newsfeed?

Or

Is there a way to do breaking news other than: ambi, track, act, track, act, track, act, track, soc?

Larry, dontcha ever wanna cover the News?

Old Sailors' Tales and Tattoo Jokes

larry massett – January 9, 2002

The tattooist in this story was the subject of Jay Allison's first radio piece way back when. I went with Jay on the taping, and found out the guy- call him Mr. S- had written a book he wanted to publish, a hodgepodge of old sailor's tales and tattoo jokes. Trouble was S wrote it longhand, and was sure somebody would steal his ideas if he sent it off to be typed up. So I started hauling my portable typed down to the tattoo parlor on Friday nights. While S drilled his customers, I typed his book.

Ever since he's considered me a friend. I guess [that's] why he kept in touch after he closed the parlor and moved to the country. And I guess that's why, after a silence of some years, he began writing from prison. He wouldn't say why he was there, but in the course of helping him with his lawyer, I wound up with the complete transcripts of the trial.

Now, it's hard to deciding who's telling the truth from reading the trial. (Probably no one - the whole family was a mess.) The case was all he said/she said. And when you ask people to read the lines, it depends on how the reading comes out. The tone of voice, the pacing, the pauses, make all the difference. There's just no way be to sure- I suppose that's the point. One idea is replay the same scene a couple of times with different reads. Sure, I've thought of tracking the people down (I still correspond with Mr. S) but I know they've tried to forget the whole

business; and if they stuck to their guns you'd still never sort it out, would you? This sounds just like Rashomon, I know, but it's more the impossibility of reconstructing of history if you weren't there yourself. And even if you were, who knows?

Battered Hats

larry massett – January 9, 2002

Ben is asking " Should there be a place for Anarchists in the first 20 minutes of ATC, or in the NPR newsfeed? "

and it's the "Should" that's stumping me. I've often thought the real message of the news is the calm tone in which it's delivered- as if to say, "fifty thousand people were killed when a bus went off the road in India today, but do I sound upset? No, so why should you worry either?" So it would be fun to hear the news read in a hysterical panic-stricken voice, or by someone with a fit of giggles. There's a million ways to do the news. But the only way to do ATC is the way ATC already does it, no? That's the choice they've made....

So here is a boring news story I've made up (actually I'm stealing this from Raymond Queneau's *Excercises de Style*- one of the masterpieces of French surrealism):

"When Harold Rothman, an international economist at the Brookings Institute, got on the subway this morning, he noticed a fat man wearing a battered hat who was arguing with one of the other passengers, a thin man in a gray sweater. The fat man was accusing the other of stepping on his toes on purpose.

Later on, after getting off the subway at the L Street station, Mr. Rothman noticed the fat man in a crowd near Rupert Circle. Or perhaps it was someone else in a battered hat."

Okay, how many ways can you think of to do that story? Make it sound like ATC, like TAL, like audio art or whatever you can think of..... Either in your head, or for real on tape. I will if you will.

Authoritative Noise

Viki Merrick – January 11, 2002

Larry and Ben trying to bend the news got me thinking about when I heard a radio rookies piece at the 3rd Coast - a young boy who went to question Bush at one of his appearances. His piece was an intimate play-by-play.

The end result was virtually the same as if some established local "authoritative" reporter did the piece - but the voyage, the delivery was absolutely engaging. It was hilarious, real, disappointing results for audience and reporter, but because of the honesty, the realness, it left me actually wondering - what DOES Bush care about?

This is a lot better than having a radio right next to me during the news and my co-worker asking - what did they say? Huh?-.I didn't hear it.

The formulaic authoritative voice has become, white noise.

Between the War and Rosie's
Alan Smithee – January 12, 2002

I'm kind of curious as to why so many people I talk to are obsessed with reformatting All Things Considered. It's a news show, isn't it? While I would always invite more creative ways to deliver news and perspective, isn't the real complaint that NPR has few other venues for taking chances, or presenting work that's more "fringy"? If one show tries to do too many things, it may inevitably succeed in failing to do any of them right.

I like the idea of incubation on the Web. Larry's description of listening to the radio in the car because he has no other choice really holds some weight. True, in most cases public radio is the best thing on in the 45 minutes between the war and Rosie's bar and brothel, but what's going to happen when access to media in that venue starts to catch up with the choices we have on the Web? There are enough carny folk out there to keep those bored with ATC distracted. Sometimes Carny Folk bore me too.

Alt.Work.ATC
Barrett Golding – January 12, 2002

the reason i like working with, and getting my stuff on ATC is their 8 million listeners. i make stuff to be heard, by as many people as possible. no start-up alt.venue new series will have anywhere near that many listeners, at least not this decade. i think ATC does have room for alt.work and has presented it well in the past. it does seem they're presenting less lately tho.

Life Beyond News
Jay Allison – January 12, 2002

I'm kind of curious as to why so many people I talk to are obsessed with reformatting All Things Considered. It's a news show, isn't it?

Partly nostalgia. When the show began, and was named, it had an embracing nature. Plenty of life beyond news. It was the 70s, after all. In those days, people lamented that the straight news wasn't very thorough or dependable and they were right. Now they complain that the show can sound joyless and droning. Also right.

Public radio tends to reflect the general culture, about 10 years behind.

ATC: The Original Mission
Barrett Golding – January 12, 2002

as a producer of a new pubradio series told me when describing his show: "I also borrow Bill Siemering's original mission statement for ATC: to be a 'radio magazine of the human experience.' I figure they're not using it, so I can."

Joe Frank and General Custer
Larry Massett – January 12, 2002

At some point in the Seventies before they knew what they were doing, NPR hired Joe Frank to host Weekend ATC. Joe didn't know what he was doing either. The first time they handed him a headline to read, he supposedly said "Hey, I don't read other people's scripts." He did, though, read many of his surreal stories on the air. Judging by the mail, audiences loved it. But the brass soon saw they'd made a huge mistake: a voice hired to announce objective reality was veering off into fantasy! In the same show! Impossible!

Interesting the brass didn't care whether audiences liked "All Things Surreal" or not. They only cared about their peers, the other journalists.

I'd agree "Public radio tends to reflect the general culture, about 10 years behind" if I could figure out what the general culture is. College professors claim there is no such thing anymore (what do they know- maybe they're confusing it with General Custer?) Yet the folks running the public radio system have been there a long, long time, and must be at least 10 years behind anything, including themselves. One day they will die off and be replaced by their protégés, who will be only 7 or 8 years behind the times, initially.

My point...where was I...yes, something about the fragmentation of mass media of all kinds....which is fine, only how do we make any money? Oh right, we don't make any money.....never mind.

Rhythm of Change
Alan Smithee – January 13, 2002

I think the excitement or nostalgia about ATC in the early days was the fact that it really was a little laboratory where everyone was trying everything and chances were being taken. I suppose what happens eventually is that observations by the brass or whomever lead to decisions about what formula serves the larger goal, or larger audience....

ATC kind of found its rhythm. To the satisfaction of the masses and chagrin of those who miss the excitement - Or the freedom that came with it's old format. It's a great news source now, my preferred, but you are right, it is not as deep or empathetic as it once was. The news is better though.

Dear Mista Massett, I was interested by your comment about listening selectively to individual stories on the Web. Do you think as the technology advances and this becomes more the trend, audio artists and more creative producers may just choose to skip the networks altogether and place their work online where their work is not filling a slot? There are times I'm listening to a program and hear a segment so beautiful, so profound that I wish I could erase everything before and after and respectfully surround the experience by silence. Car Talk's Click and Clack really choke me up, ya know?

Do you think the access and ability to be selective at our own convenience will change the way we listen to radio art? Could it change the aesthetic by which it's created? Will the change only be delivery?

Real Time Snap

larry massett – January 13, 2002

Alan asks "Do you think as the technology advances ... more creative producers may just choose to skip the networks altogether and place their work online where their work is not filling a slot."

Yeah, I think this is already happening. And yeah, I think it will change the aesthetics as people experiment with Flash and other technologies; but it's too new (and bandwidth still too narrow, and computers too big and heavy) to guess where it will go. One change is predictable, though: Keith Talbot, one of the Grand Old Theoreticians of radio, used to say everything on the radio appears to be 'now'- meaning you assume it's happening in real time as you listen. Remember what it was like when a piece of tape snapped during a news feed, or someone had edited in the same phrase twice by mistake? A sudden, almost shocking suspension of disbelief for the listener. Obviously you won't feel that way about a piece you can dial up any time night or day. What this means aesthetically is anyone's guess. And say, why bother speculating? We could just do stuff instead.....

The Existential Apple

ben – January 15, 2002

“Okay, how many ways can you think of to do that story? Make it sound like ATC, like TAL, like audio art or whatever you can think of..... Either in your head, or for real on tape.”

I've always assumed there's a best way to do every story. That these arbitrary "styles" are just that -- facades, fakes. Maybe that's what's disturbing to me about when a show reaches for an aesthetic -- whether it's the ATC aesthetic, the TAL aesthetic or the Transom aesthetic (to speak nothing of the Savvy Traveler aesthetic) -- it's always an assumption that a particular style can fit the particular story you're working on.

And it can, I suppose. But nine times out of ten, I'm going to suppose again, that's not the best way to do that story. So you can cover the pentagon press conference and do an ax-and-trax

story and get the information across. Sure. There's a deadline and that's easy. You can also interview a schizophrenic, or go to the dentist, and do an ax and trax story and everything will be fine.

I think what's getting to me is that Larry's definition of an alien ("these folks have something to get off their chests. They don't give a rat's ass about the art of documentary but they're dying to unload") should be the definition for everybody, regardless of how we tell our stories, or which of three arbitrary groupings we fall into. I feel like if that's not your MO and you're not struggling with the best way to do whatever it is you're doing, then you're not only wasting my time, you're also wasting your own.

I think more reporters need to have existential crises. Like, daily.

Same goes for sound artistes.

Argggh

Jay Allison – January 15, 2002

“the Transom aesthetic”

Argggh. This is a notion we've tried hard to defy. Can you define the Transom Aesthetic? ATC and TAL may have certain style sheets that they'd be willing to defend, but we want Transom's style to be governed by the story at hand, as you suggest above. No one should have to FIT anything here. Indeed, that's the point.

Pieces here are judged on their own merits. We have no hosts, no themes, no news pegs, no audience expectation, or narrative imperative. Or so we hope. We want individual, distinctive voices to out.

Have you noticed an over-riding aesthetic creeping in?

If Prince Can Do It.....

larry massett – January 16, 2002

of course- from a producer's point of view, the only worthwhile thing is try to tell a story you care about in the best way you can possibly come up with. When I suggested you think of how many different ways you could tell the same story, I was pointing - obscurely, I guess- in a different direction. Raymond Queneau, from whom I stole the idea, tells a story so many different ways you begin to suspect ANY way of telling a story is artificial; indeed the whole notion of "story" starts to dissolve. In the end, when he runs out of identifiable genres, Queneau begins mixing up the syllables and throwing in exclamation points according to some cockamamie mathematical formula, dissolving not only "story" but "language" and "sense" as well. I was just funnin' ya, okay?

Of course radio programs want to have -- their accountants tell them they better have -- a predictable style for the same reasons as McDonald's. Not so many customers wander into a back alley restaurant with a sign that reads "?" That's show biz for you; as producers our business is to ignore it as far as possible. Transom may not have a style sheet but it definitely has a taste for shows that bore me.

If there was a radio show called "?" I'd listen.

Suck on This
Turbo Biscuit – January 16, 2002

In regard to the "shows that bore me" do you ever post on the discussion boards that this is so?

Ok, so there are a lot of thumbs-upping and high-fiving and not much criticism and analysis. Maybe this is because it takes some effort to be critical--maybe it's because most of the productions on Transom are "works -in-progress-" so everyone has a tendency to be quite kind. (This of course this leads to the inevitable 'how can there be any progress without criticism?')

How easy it is to write "way to go!" And in the end what does that mean? "Way to go! " It's counterpart --"this sucks" --no one has ever dared to post.

So, do you think Transom needs a more rigorous conversation to minimize boredom and static?

Anarchist Baking Tips?
Alan Smithee – January 16, 2002

Larry, got around to listening to the "Neurotica" piece, and I am duly impressed. I can hear what you are talking about with the whole "?" thing. It very much borders on art. I hesitate in using that term as it implies AESTHETIC, and we have all seen what a sensitive subject that is around here.

What I liked most about the piece is it's multilayered construction - where script, location tape, and a fair portion of playacting are so thinly divided. That the sum of its parts implies a larger idea, or playground for a particular range of emotion.

There is an audience out there that wants to be surprised, that wants a bit more of a challenge, that does not want to be spoon fed. An audience that wants to see radio travel the full distance of aural and psychological experiences we know it's capable of.

Then again, what would happen if the unexpected suddenly became cliché? What would the anarchists be pushing if absolute expression were the norm? Cranberry Recipes?

Turgid Smelly Pile VS The Inspired Souls **larry massett – January 16, 2002**

I don't post about shows that bore me because- as you note- "this sucks" is no more useful than "way to go." Detailed criticism would be helpful, that's for sure, but I tend to run the other [way] when faced with boredom. Besides, Transom adopts the convention that producers are fragile souls who'd be crushed by a casual remark like "cow poop is more interesting than that turgid smelly pile of platitudes you just laid." Hmm, maybe Transom is right? Maybe there should be two discussion boards, one labeled "Careful," the other "Reckless?" But I think you do see "more rigorous conversation" when a show is good enough to inspire it.

The Thrill of Disaster **larry massett – January 16, 2002**

Alan asks " what would happen if the unexpected suddenly became cliché'?"

There are these road signs in China that just show a big exclamation mark. You're driving along and you see a "!" by the side of the road. It means something around the bend is going to be a hell of a surprise- but whether it's a landslide, a flood, or guerilla warfare depends on the day. The cliché of the sign doesn't really diminish the thrill of the disaster. Course if was public radio and we had to crank out a surprise on schedule once a week we'd naturally stark faking it, and audiences would once again long for the thrill of the predictable.

Chisels, Cynicism, Irony, and Shock Therapy **Jackson Braider – January 19, 2002**

Where do we put the likes of Anne Robinson or "The Chamber" or Survivor or Enron? Not that I am devotee of righteous indignation, but if market-testing says anything, people want to be shocked. It's up to the shocker to decide what form of shock he/she wants to deliver to the shockee.

Cynicism and irony are wonderful tools, but they can only work when they propel us forward....

Just Wait Till the NPR 100 Tackles Turnips **larry massett – January 20, 2002**

You know, public radio in America started ex nihilo in the '70's and groped around for a few years before finding it's guiding light (demographic polling, just like soap and cereal manufacturers.) In monarchical Europe it was assumed that government radio should play what was good for you whether you wanted it or not. Hence 14-hour series on the history of turnips in medieval civilization. Take it or leave it. Both views have merit, but fortunately there are always folks who somehow slip through the cracks and manage to do what they want, more or less.

Best Kisser?

Nanette – January 22, 2002

Larry,

What was the most effective advice, example, or encouragement that ever came your way?

Keith, Hands Down

larry massett – January 22, 2002

Nannette, in the 70's there was a producer at NPR named Keith Talbot who just used to show up at people's houses with a tape recorder, and insist on playing tapes- European "art" radio, "mostly, which no one else had ever heard. And after duly astonishing you with these sounds, he'd say, "well, you could do that too." And he would give you studio time at NPR and encourage you- nothing specific, just general admiration. (NPR fired his ass, naturally.)

There's a lot to be said for general encouragement- maybe the "attaboy" posts aren't useless after all.

Three Things

Nanette – January 23, 2002

Larry, you could name three things you like and one thing you don't like about each show... or about one show...or about your piece.

Three Things and a Dance Story

larry massett – January 23, 2002

"you could name three things you like and one thing you don't like about each show"

Usually if I don't like a show there are just three things I don't like: the beginning, the middle, and the end. The technique of cooking up good points ("I loved the way you interviewed real people") so as to slip in a wee bit of advice ("and it would work even better if they said something") is a job I have to leave to professional psychologists. Or gifted teachers. I'm simply not good at it, sorry. I can only find the heart to critique works I love.

There are even worse critics around. Years ago I had a side job playing piano for a ballet class. There the teacher was an ancient and highly inflammable Russian. One day he called a halt in the middle of some group exercise. "Amanda, "he rasped, "come forward and do these steps by yourself."

She did, the poor girl.

"See," he said, "Did you all see that? Only Amanda is dancing the meaning. She has heart, sincerity, passion, refinement. Compared to her the rest of you are a bunch of sticks. Amanda, you are a genius."

She began to feel much better.

"Unfortunately my dear, " he added. "You'll never dance on stage. Your neck's too short."

More Sex

Nanette – January 23, 2002

...Do you think there could be more (fun) sex on radio? any ideas how?

I Coulda' Been a Contender

larry massett – January 24, 2002

This is a very overlooked area in public radio. Especially pornography. I've been corresponding with a radio producer who wants to do a piece about "fluffers" in gay porn. His reasoning: "What does it mean if this is the best job you can get right now? " You can see why this would be a little dicey on television, but it could work on radio.

Sometime I'd like to interview the woman whose stage name was Georgina Spelvina, star of "The Devil in Miss Jones." That film was- far as I know- unique in having a strong Catholic sense of sin; it's set in Hell after Georgina commits suicide in the opening shot, and is far more scary than erotic. Unless you think a woman simulating sex with a slimy 8-foot boa constrictor is arousing. Anyway Ms. Spelvina now works for a computer firm in California and recently told a reporter: "Actually I wanted to be an opera singer. But we all make compromises." So true.... Seriously, I think the lack of visuals means public radio could explore sex in all kinds of ways. We must get on this immediately.

They Just Couldn't Relax...

ben – January 25, 2002

I can tell you this -- never have I been the victim of more listener venom than when my Stans part 1 aired on Savvy. I received dozens of emails and some personal voice mails (I had stopped answering my phone at that point) all singling me out for absolutely ruining their weekend by talking about sex and prostitution. It's too bad because it makes programmers very nervous to ever talk about sex on public radio.

I was talking in a fairly detached, non-personal way about sex and sexuality. I'd hate to see what would happen if I said what I really feel.

Anarchist Hurdle?

ben – January 25, 2002

What do you guys think is the biggest barrier to "anarchists" getting on the air?

A Catatonic Drone Might Do The Trick
larry massett – January 25, 2002

Somehow I'm not surprised Ben caught flak for talking about sex on public radio. Even if it was in " a fairly detached, non-personal way."

But it ought to be surprising. Sex is everywhere in American culture today - in the movies, in TV, in advertising, even (research indicates) in real life. So why can't it appear on public radio?

I used to have a theory about why television is so dull: it's meant to be dull, on purpose, because the audience uses it as a low-grade narcotic. Folks come home exhausted from the office and after a frazzled fast dinner with the family, want nothing so much as oblivion. They plop down on the couch and guzzle their favorite show, like downing a six-pack. The induced torpor is relaxing, possibly therapeutic. Any show too interesting or unfamiliar simply would not do the job.

Applying this line of reasoning to radio, we reach a startling conclusion: People listen to public radio in order not to think about sex! The constant, nagging sexual temptations that surround us can be avoided only by listening to an ATC host interview some dwebe from a think tank.

This makes sense, but it doesn't mean we can't change things.

Only it seems we'll have to move carefully. "Fairly detached, non-personal" was too aggressive. Maybe Ben can say what he really feels if he starts out in a deliberately catatonic drone.....

Well, wait: there are people- like Benjamin Walker, reachable from this site- who seem to get away with it. Maybe that's because it's not a national show? Could it be that the real problem for Anarchists is a mass audience?

Small Doses of Hemlock
ben – January 26, 2002

Larry, I do think there is a difference between local and national programs. Definitely. I mean, things that are fine in NY or LA just don't work on say, Mississippi Public Radio. Or even Wisconsin Public Radio. We have PDs telling us "too much!" and others saying "not enough" -- all about the exact same program.

Nowhere is this [truer] than on subjects of sex? Politics is a little different -- a liberal's a liberal, right? -- and touchy feely emotional stuff is nice and shinshiny happy even when it's poor kids in the ghetto.

Here's the rationalization I came up with after that first show broadcast: There are very few subjects that people aren't used to hearing about. All the sad tales of poverty, woe, political corruption, blackmail, etc. -- it's all been like small doses of hemlock taken everyday by every single public radio listener for the last 20 years. I mean, it's gotten to the point where we

producers think we've achieved public radio's mission whenever we hear about a brother's cousin's nephew's sister's driveway moment. People listen to something like Remorse and then go about their day. "I laid off 20 people today. Please pass the potatoes."

Which means, then, that being a dedicated public radio producer you have two choices -- because what you're really aiming for is to make people think, right? And to make people think, you have to give them something other than hemlock -- something other than what they're already used to. You have to make them a little uncomfortable.

Two ways to do this:

- 1) Do your story in a way that's like nothing anybody's ever heard before.
- 2) Do your story about something that people don't like to talk about.

People are used to sex in the network TV / advertising context, but are completely shocked when you bring up things like an intelligent discussion of desire, or lust, or, as I was trying to do (emphasis on "trying"), social-sexual power dynamics. This is something that Joe Frank does wonderfully and it makes his show great.

Okay, say you succeed. You do a great piece and people are uncomfortable and actually thinking about something. Okay, two times out of five, that listener is going to react to that discomfort by getting upset. And one time out of 100 that upset person is going to get mad enough to write a letter. PDs weight those letters (which, truly, only trickle in) very, very heavily. Show producers weight those letters very, very heavily. And that really sucks, because the 60-80 percent who liked the story and reacted to their discomfort by thinking for thirty seconds or so, they never write letters. Ever.

It was interesting to me to see my bosses go from loving that Stans pt.1 to being very apprehensive about it, to making me write a defensive, tail between our legs "This is why we ran the piece..." for Rudy to say the following week. It was a little disappointing but I wondered who that small apology was for: the listeners or the PDs.

What Would You Pay, and for What?

larry massett – January 27, 2002

Yes well, Ben, I went to look at your piece and of course I see why the authorities freaked. ...your question is whether radio can fragment- as book publishing did ages ago, as television is doing now- into profitable, or at least life-sustaining- niches. People are accustomed to paying fifteen or twenty bucks or more for a book. They pay whatever the hell it is they pay for cable TV. What would you pay for a premium radio - or internet- audio feed? And where would the content come from?

Balzac et Enfants

Jackson Braider – January 27, 2002

.....Larry, maybe we have taken the wrong course with public radio. You were right -- if only you had suggested your Balzac's "Splendeurs et Miseres des Courtisanes," with a cast of children for pledge!

Russian Gals With Green Cards

larry massett – January 28, 2002

Jackson, what I'd really like to suggest for pledge week is a tape my friend Ned Dantes made in full hypermanic frenzy (see "foreign ladies dot com over" at hearingvoices.com for background) of a lapdance session in Las Vegas. The lapdance ladies were- no surprise- nice Russians gals with green cards. The sound quality is appalling cause Ned used a Radio Shack mic hidden in his... er... pocket. I guess I can't broadcast it or netcast it as there was no "consent" going on. And the Russians did not want their day-job employers to know about their outside gig. Ethics are such a nuisance.

But let's face it, we all love hidden mics and cameras.

That White Noise Thing

ben – January 29, 2002

We tell ourselves that when people complain it's a good thing. What I wrote up there really is what I've come to think -- people are not only paying attention, they're moved to do something about it (albeit not what I'd hoped for).

However, this is not a widely held view among those in charge of programming. People get skittish. They get nervous. They want everybody happy all the time and giving giving giving when pledge drive comes along. Which means NPR news is a perfect thing to put on the radio. And 95 percent of public radio is a perfect thing to broadcast. It's background. It's somewhat interesting and allows you to go about your day. "Oh, they killed fifty thousand in Afghanistan today. Five hundred people drowned in Nigeria and 14 thousand laid off Enron employees committed mass suicide. Please pass the potatoes." Bob Edwards is telling me these things right now. Time for apple jacks.

Geeks Will Pay

ben – January 29, 2002

paying for radio This is the question all the satellite radio people are asking right now, right?

Would I pay? I've thought about it. I don't drive that much, so I'll wait until they come up with home receivers I remember when I moved away from KCRW for a while -- up to Sacramento before the station even carried This American Life. I almost went crazy. I figure even with NPR

in charge of two of these satellite stations and PRI in charge of one, that's a lot of time for *just the networks* to fill. Some cool stuff has to sneak through, right?

So, yeah, I'd pay. But does that make it a viable business model? God no. I'm a public radio geek for chrissake.

Humble Producers

Jackson Braider – January 29, 2002

It is a difficult call. Working in a union shop, I respect and understand the need for the trades -- especially the engineers who have to get the sound to work even when producers point the microphone in the wrong direction ... then there's the frustration of knowing that at least 75% of the time, a humble producer can make a reasonable facsimile of a mix at home without needing station studio time at station studio time costs.

No, no, no to Visual Aids

Sara Grady – January 30, 2002

I have been thinking about the "sex on public radio" idea for a while, and I think I have a theory, in two parts:

1) We've been conditioned by images, and not so deeply by sounds. When we hear about sex, we are given the ability and the liberty to fill in the visuals ourselves. In a way, hearing about sex and related topics and activities is more titillating. A picture may be worth 1,000 words, but it is much more enjoyable to hear those words than just look at a picture, in my opinion.

2)In the case of learning about sexual health, it is hard to describe anatomy and physiology without some form of visual, unfortunately. Advice can be given freely through radio just as it is given over hotlines, however. Perhaps public radio should take over and polish up the "Loveline" concept. It would be an intriguing attempt, to say the least.

Calling Meg Ryan

scott carrier – February 4, 2002

I'd like to hear women faking orgasms. Please.

Or I'd like to hear somebody trying to talk a woman into faking an orgasm for the microphone. And then I'd like to hear some people listening to it and talking about it. And then a discussion group. Or did Joe Frank already do this?

And With That.....

larry massett – February 4, 2002

ATC last night ran a piece on chipmunks who fake orgasms, you didn't catch that?
Or am I confusing that with the hosts, who fake being alive?

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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