



Edited by Sydney Lewis

David Isay & Sound Portraits

About David Isay

Dave Isay is the founder of Sound Portraits Productions. Over the past thirteen years his radio documentary and feature work has won almost every award in broadcasting including four Peabody Awards, two Robert F. Kennedy Awards, and two Livingston Awards for young journalists. David has also received the Prix Italia (Europe's oldest and most distinguished broadcasting honor), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1994) and most recently a MacArthur Fellowship (2000).

He is the author (or co-author) of three books based on Sound Portraits radio stories: *Holding On* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1995); *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago* (Scribner, 1997); and *Flophouse* (Random House, 2000).



Intro by Jay Allison

Dave Isay and his collaborators have made a singular mark on public radio documentary, not just by their excellent work and steadfast idealism, but by building national awareness that there even is such a thing as radio documentary. Chances are, if you know the actual title of a radio piece, it's probably one of Dave's: *Ghetto Life 101*, *The Sunshine Hotel*, *Witness to an Execution*. Dave realizes that radio is invisible and you can't touch it, so in order to make it more noticeable and palpable, he extends his projects online, in performance, photographs, books, film... all of which draw focus back to the public radio work from which they come.

The Sound Portraits team is embarking on an ambitious new project, StoryCorps. Come read about their plans and ask them about their work. They are eager to share their knowledge and are especially inviting to those new to the medium.

Greetings from 176 Grand Street

A Sound Portraits Manifesto

Down at the bottom of any emails that come out of this office - next to our address and phone number - it says “Sound Portraits Productions... Documenting a Hidden America.” Silly as it sounds, that’s as accurate a manifesto as we’ve got, and one that’s served as a pretty good benchmark for us. When we feel we’ve succeeded it’s because we’ve managed to expose - truthfully, respectfully - the hidden, forgotten, or under-heard voices of America. And where and when we fail it’s because we’re short of this mark.

There’s no mystery to this concept and it’s certainly not one we take credit for coming up with. Many of our heroes have blazed the trail for us, people like Joseph Mitchell, the great New York journalist of salon-keepers and street preachers. And so many more: the great WPA photographers, like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans; the radio and oral history dynamo Studs Terkel; and the meandering folk-life archivist extraordinaire, Alan Lomax, just to name a few. Theft being the highest form of flattery, the impulse for our documentary, *Ghetto Life 101*, was lifted directly from the pages of Alex Kotlowitz. Each through their own medium, these documentarians gave voice to the men and women living on the margins of American society. We strive to do the same, and have found radio an effective tool for doing so.

It helps that we’ve been blessed with some truly great characters along the way, people like Nathan Smith, the manager of the Sunshine Hotel, and Sylvia Rivera, the drag-queen activist. They’re at the heart of what we do. Perhaps you could derive some algorithm to define what makes someone a perfect personality for the radio - a dizzying calculation of voice, story, and circumstance - but we doubt it. More likely, it’s like the old adage about pornography: you just know it when you see it. As with a lot of things, the best advice is probably to just follow your heart.

For over ten years, Sound Portraits has attempted to “give voice to the voiceless” by making audio documentaries. But recently, we’ve become interested in exploring a new way to carry out that mission.

StoryCorps

This is our new nationwide initiative to instruct and inspire citizens to record high-quality audio interviews with family, friends, and community members.



The project is built on a few simple assumptions:

- * Everybody has a story to tell, and that story deserves to be told with dignity.
- * The lives of everyday people are as interesting and important as the lives of the rich and famous.
- * Listening well is an important but underdeveloped skill.
- * A microphone gives people the license to talk about difficult issues that might otherwise never be explored.
- * Conducting honest and intimate interviews can result in positive change in people's lives.

Basically, we will construct soundproof recording booths in public spaces (starting in New York's Grand Central Station in November 2003) and put together easy-to-use digital recording kits for home use. Participants will keep one copy of the interview; a second will become part of a growing archive, which we hope will evolve into a unique and important repository for American stories. Although we are still in the beginning stages of this project, it has already gained a lot of momentum, and we're really excited about it. For us, it is the logical outgrowth of the documentary work we've always done - making the case that anyone can do this work, and with remarkable results.

Here's our dream: StoryCorps will engage communities, teach participants to become better listeners, foster intergenerational communication, and help Americans appreciate the dignity and strength in the stories they find all around them. And, with a little luck, StoryCorps will one day grow into an oral history of our nation.

A more detailed description of this project is online at <http://www.storycorps.org>.

Who We Are

Everyone here at Sound Portraits discovered radio in a slightly different way. Below are short bios, mixed with thoughts on the medium or just stuff in general. You are welcome to shoot questions to one of us in particular or to the whole bunch. We'll be rotating the role of question-fielder over the next month, while the rest of us try to keep this boat afloat.

From Dave Isay

I've been doing radio since a year out of college - fell into it through a series of strange, wonderful, serendipitous events that happened over a 24-hour period, and never turned back. I was fortunate to get a CPB grant early on, so had the time to make stories that I could use to snag more CPB grants. I worked by myself in my apartment (un-showered in my underwear- a great indie tradition) for a long time and eventually formed a non-profit so I could get foundation money (only CPB gives to individuals, everyone else gives to non-profits). The Company started to grow & it's the best thing that ever happened. Today we have a spiffy little office in Chinatown (better than Paris!) with a great group of folks working (hard) together...Feel blessed.



A couple of thoughts: Radio is great. Don't talk about it, don't analyze it- just do it. It's not brain surgery; it's not some precious high art that people should be snobby about- it's just a great way to tell a (usually fairly linear) story. Probably the best medium for telling emotional stories. Just go out, find a great character and record.

I have a style, and it's the way I like to work- it doesn't mean it's the right way to do a story, it's just the way I do it. In my stories I like tape and hate narration. I try to zero-out narration as much as possible - although so far I've found it impossible to tell a 22-minute story without it.

A couple of other little thoughts/rules of thumb:

- * It's better to do an amazing/ meaningful little 2 minute story that comes from your heart than 10 half-hour programs that are just OK. CREATE GEMS, you won't regret it.
- * Fight for what you believe in. Trust your instincts and the instincts of people who's aesthetics you trust. Just because someone is an NPR editor doesn't mean they understand radio.
- * Tell the truth (to your subject, and—of course—in your stories) and don't take shortcuts.
- * Doing radio right (from Howard Stern (his old stuff) to Amy Goodman) is serious, hard work. This is not a medium for goofballs or dilettantes. It's a really tough way to earn a buck. (But I wouldn't trade it for anything.)
- * There's no excuse for making poor recordings.
- * Infuse passion, spirit, and life into everything you do.

From David Reville

As the most recent addition to the Sound Portraits team, I'm the least qualified to speak on behalf of the mission and vision of the organization. Beyond that, I'm not even here to produce radio; it's my job to coordinate the efforts required to start and maintain the StoryCorps project you just read about. I came to SPP with a background gained developing and producing projects with faculty at Brown University's Multimedia Lab and the Scholarly Technology Group, and with a personal connection to documentary work forged by a lifetime as a photographer. Even in the short two months I've been at Sound Portraits, though, I've observed the most dedicated craftspeople I've had the good fortune to work with. Feel free to ask questions about StoryCorps—we're dying to talk about it. But please make the most of this opportunity to deeply investigate the radio work you can hear at the Sound Portraits web site (www.soundportraits.org). It is a personal inspiration to watch this team work together to develop these stories, and they sustain repeated play. Listen Carefully is the StoryCorps motto. We're waiting to hear from you.

From Dave Miller

I spent two years in college trying to make film - and loving so many aspects of the storytelling and interviewing and collaborative process - before I realized two things: 1) I had no visual sense; and 2) I loved editing sound. Somehow it still took me a few more years to put these realizations together, and to make that giant leap of removing the picture



altogether and just focusing on what had held my fascination from the very beginning: sound. My three years at Sound Portraits have only increased my love of storytelling in sound. Without F-stops to worry about, I've been free to explore the music of speech, the cadences and rhythms of voice, and radio's inherent intimacy and immediacy - qualities that are certainly possible in visual media but that seem to come even more naturally to radio.

And now, after those three wonderful years at SPP, I'm embarking on the bitter-sweet process of saying goodbye to the organization that has basically taught me everything I know about making radio as I begin work on my idea for a new public radio show. It's called Radio Tag, and the basic idea is to follow stories from person to person, place to place (and week after week), in a continuous narrative. I'm currently producing pilot episodes, and I look forward to sharing more with the Transom community as the project progresses.

From Karen Callahan

Two months ago I went to Texas with Matt Ozug to interview the families directly involved in the then-imminent execution of Delma Banks. Twenty-three years ago Delma was convicted of killing 16-year-old Wayne Whitehead. We spent six very long days driving around Texas and Mississippi (and a lil' bit of Louisiana) talking with people about life and death, guilt and innocence. And in two separate interviews,



Mrs. Banks and Mrs. Whitehead asked us, crying, how do you say good-bye to your son?

Those moments encapsulate everything in this job that is so hard it makes my stomach hurt. How can I possibly tell this story, do their stories justice? And how can I edit these hours down to the perfect 4 minutes? But a job isn't a job if it doesn't keep you up at night, paralyzed with fear, right? Ah, less than two years here and I've been brainwashed.

At Sound Portraits I've learned that it's really, really hard to tell people's stories in an honest way - and in a way that's interesting to a passing listener. It's hard to make the first phone call, it's hard to sit in someone's living room and ask them about their grief, and it's so hard to whittle that tape down to a few moments. But it can be so incredible. And I thank my lucky stars that there are people here on Grand Street, and people out there on Transom, that believe that the paralyzing fear is worth it.

From Ruby Sheets

I cannot tell a lie - I became interested in radio because I have a cool voice. Enough people exclaimed, "Your voice should be on the radio!" that I started to believe them. When I got to college, I decided I would try this radio thing until I got bored with it. That hasn't happened yet.



But as cool as my voice may be, I soon realized that it wasn't the voice I was interested in getting on the air. It hit me one day when I was in the studio doing my live weekly Spanish language show - Pura Vida (Pure Life). My co-hosts alternated each week, members of the growing Mexican immigrant community of my college's small midwestern town. They picked the music and introduced the songs while I worked the boards and kept conversation flowing. On that one day, I took a break from avoiding dead air and cueing up cds to sit back and watch my two co-hosts. These two men were in their element in a town that was anything but their element. They were taking

requests and announcing dedications, dancing and singing, and sharing their stories. They were smiling, and laughing, and comfortable being themselves. And people were listening.

That's when I knew that radio is a good, good thing. And that I would do my best to use it to give exposure to some people who may not get it otherwise and reach some people who may not hear it otherwise. With goals like that, there is no better place to land than Sound Portraits. The mutual respect people have here is humbling and inspiring and keeps me coming back. Their passion, their work, and they themselves are nothing less than pura vida.

From Matt Ozug

Throughout my childhood, my father would use the expression “step in shit” to describe strokes of incredible - usually blind - good fortune. It was a filthy and confusing way to grow up. I have no idea how he came up with this, but the phrase is unshakable in my mind. So, I can only describe the process of finding my way to Sound Portraits as a case of really “stepping in shit.”



There were some early warning signs - like an obsession with the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* - but mostly I thank the good people at the Salt Center for Documentary Studies, in Portland, Maine for setting me on the right path. I enrolled at Salt largely on a whim - tickled from a short trip doing ‘ethnography’ on a Trappist monastery, I thought I’d explore the idea of doing documentary work. Through their passion for their calling, everyone at Salt quickly disabused me of any notion that this work could be a pet or side interest. Their work ethic was rivaled only by those they often document - the blueberry pickers and lobster-pot pullers of Maine.

At Sound Portraits, I continue to be amazed by the wild kinetic energy created by this same care for stories and subjects. To be a part of two groups of people so passionate and driven...well I’m very, very lucky.

Finally...

...and not to stack the deck - but we’d especially like to encourage newcomers to write in with their thoughts or questions about how to actually make radio. There’s no better way to diversify what we hear on the radio than to shake up who’s making it.

Sincerely,
The Staff at Sound Portraits Productions
Documenting a Hidden America

A Conversation w/ Davis Isay & the Crew at Sound Portraits

Cold Story Sweat

bw - *May 16, 2003* - #11

Have any of you woken up in the middle of the night yet in a cold sweat with the understanding that this story corps project could well end up taking over the rest of your lives??

I can't get over the booth idea - It's like something out of a great twilight zone episode. When will one be coming to New England?

Portraits And Kits

david reville - *May 16, 2003* - #13

Yep. The magnitude of the project has struck us all, I think...Seriously, though, there doesn't seem to be a chance of StoryCorps swamping Sound Portraits. While the project at scale will require a bigger staff, and a larger budget than SPP currently runs on, Sound Portraits has a clear vision and will remain a radio production company first and foremost. Part of my job is insulating the rest of the company from the administrivia a project this size entails.

We're not ready to say when we'll build a StoryBooth outside of New York, but one of our dreams is to make one that travels...Beyond that, we hope to begin piloting a portable StoryKit (the components of which--a MiniDisc recorder, microphone, and instruction manual will be very familiar to most Transomites) for people who can't get to a booth for any reason (distance, infirmity, scheduling conflicts). In fact that may be the way most people end up conducting a StoryCorps interview.

Booth Portrait

Sydney Lewis - *May 20, 2003* - #18

Could someone describe the StoryBooth? What's a person going to find when they enter, what will draw them to the booth? Culturally, we're conditioned to be passive recipients of "entertainment." Will there be suggestions of things for nervous/shy/flummoxed by mic people to tell stories about, assuming they're brave enough to venture into the StoryBooth in the first place?

From Translucence To Talk

david reville - *May 21, 2003* - #19

You can get an idea of what a typical StoryBooth will look like at <http://www.storycorps.net/>, although the picture is small. What you're looking at is a compact soundbooth, sheathed in an exoskeleton of translucent material. The space between the booth and the shell houses necessary recording equipment, and supports speakers and video monitors that play back edited stories, and present information about the project.

Inside the booth is enough space for three people to sit comfortably, the interviewer and narrator, and a StoryCorps facilitator who's job is to monitor and insure the quality of the recording, as well as to provide helpful advice to the participants. Dave and co. have lots of experience quickly training non-professional interviewers. We'll have to train the facilitators to do that, and we have also developed an on-line "question generator" to help people start to think about the content they want to cover in their encounter.

As to pairing interviewers, we expect interviewers to select their own subjects (often these will be family members, friends, coworkers, but anything is possible). We are working hard not to program any particular agenda, rather to provide the means and observe what happens organically.

The NPR Step

bw - *May 19, 2003* - #15

One thing that I have always been curious about is about how you work with npr - do they take sound portraits pieces "as is" or is it more complicated.

Polish And Sprint

David Isay - *May 22, 2003* - #22

We're lucky enough, after all these many years, to just work with single point-people in the network. So, for example, we work with Chris Turpin at ATC. When I bring pieces to him, they've been edited (by the best editor in the business by many football fields- Gary Covino), and listened to and vetted dozens of times by everyone here. By the time it gets to NPR we're usually on draft 15 or 20. If Chris likes the piece, we'll make whatever changes he suggests (he's a smart guy and knows radio). If he doesn't like the piece, we take it elsewhere. We're really, really lucky. The worst thing in the world is an editor who makes a story worse- God that makes me insane. You have to trust your instincts (esp. if confirmed by people you trust) and fight like hell for getting the best piece you can on the air. I used to think of it as trying to run a very delicate and detailed sculpture through a very, very tough, mean nasty and not-too-bright defensive front line.

Ben For Ben

bw - *May 22, 2003* - #23

I would love to have you say a few things about what it was like working with that cartoon genius Ben Katchor. the radio cartoons you two produced:

<http://www.hearingvoices.com/knipl.html>...still blow me away - in fact the only bad thing I can say about them is that there are so few of them!! why'd you stop makin em??

Lonely Fun

David Isay - *May 27, 2003* - #32

it was fun doing those cartoons, but they were a hell of a lot of work and was doing everything on my own back then... Was burning out and WESAT getting negative mail so we were cancelled after something like 13 episodes (although when we went off air got a torrent of amazing notes)... Ben is a genius. It was a lot of fun. Some people like them a lot, some people really don't. I'd have to listen again to figure out what i think... My one and only foray into non-fiction radio.

Lost In Tape

Michael Sanders - *May 19, 2003* - #17

I have tried to make recordings for a personal audio journal of my life...I feel confident that I can accumulate lots of information, but I am not sure how to create meaningful audio from it.

My question to those of you at Sound Portraits is what helps you to decide what audio segments assist you in creating a cohesive story without omitting important details.

Merciless With The Mound

David Miller - *May 21, 2003* - #20

Michael Sanders's post and question reminded me of "The World's Longest Diary," Dave I's piece about Robert Shields. For decades, Shields basically spent so much time notating the passage of his life that he had no time or energy left for actually living...

As for the practical question of how to handle a mountain of tape, my best advice is to be ruthless. Zero in on the most moving (or most funny, or most surprising, or most whatever) parts and cut away the fat. Even the parts you like; if they don't make sense in the narrative you're working towards, get rid of them. Just keep cutting until out of your amorphous audio mound you have a definite shape. Don't worry about the ratio of raw tape to cooked piece.

Here it seems like we cut and cut and cut until all of a sudden the last cut removes some bit of the story's soul. So we add that part back -- whatever it might be in this case (a laugh, another anecdote, a music post) -- and we know we're getting very close.

Down To Soul

Jay Allison - *May 21, 2003 - #21*

Good advice about cutting fat until you hit muscle... or body down to soul.

I thought of that OCD piece of Dave's too... and it reminded me a little of our "Quest" in Lost & Found Sound. We got a huge, unmanageable response. After the calls came in, it was like being in a mine filled with gems and only a little time. All we could do, finally, was grab the brightest ones and run to the surface to show them. I know we left some beautiful stories behind.

The big idea of StoryCorps is seductive, but it's wise to start small.

Better To Move

Kim Green - *May 22, 2003 - #25*

My husband Hal and I are freelance radio producers in Nashville, TN... I'm particularly interested in Sound Portraits because I keep finding myself drawn to the little-or-no narration style of storytelling.

It didn't take long for friends and acquaintances to start approaching us about helping out with doing family histories...I was hoping for some advice about how to get these friends started. Interviewing tips, etc. Also, how can I help them put together something with their mounds of tape without promising them 750 hours of my cheap freelance time?

Send To Tools!

David Isay - *May 27, 2003 - #32*

we do have our ten or whatever rules for doing interviews...As far as putting something together out of mounds of tape in a little time- can't be done. Faster probably to teach them protocols free and let them do it themselves.

Interviewing Jigsaw

IT - *May 19, 2003 - #16*

I'm fascinated by your plans to use novice interviewers for, and to foster intergenerational contact with, storycorps. Do you think that interviewers' experiences will impact the interviews? Have you given any thought to matching interviewers and interviewees with

similar life experiences, i.e. teens who are recent immigrants interviewing seniors who were themselves immigrants?

Could you talk a little more about the ways in which you plan to use the archive of stories you'll accumulate?

Time Capsules And Kiosks

John Basile - *May 23, 2003* - #27

When I think of [StoryCorps] success, I don't think of an ATC mini-series or award-winning SPP documentaries. While these outcomes are more than likely, I rather appreciate the gift StoryCorps would grant each participant - a tangible time capsule to which they could return again and again. Does SPP have any idea what they'll have to charge for these discs or rentals of the StoryKits? On a technical tip, what kind of CD recorder do you intend to use in the booths? Do you have a projection of how many kiosks you think you'll have after your first year, or any long-term goals beyond what is mentioned on the site?

Bubbling Gravy For The Air

David Isay - *May 27, 2003* - #32

You got it. StoryCorps' primary mission is to create a meaningful experience for interviewer-interviewee pair. Any radio that comes out of it is gravy. And the model - each booth is paired with a local station that runs best stuff. Best of the best bubbles up nationally. StoryKit rental cost- we don't know. Booth will probably be \$10 for 40 minutes (to limit the cranks). Projections- scaled back considerably due to economy- at this point wouldn't hazard a guess.

Isn't It Hard To Walk?

Nannette - *May 23, 2003* - #28

Do you have one foot in the tidy, respectable, grant-writing, management world, and another foot -or one or two ears- and your imagination... someplace else?

Green Lightning

David Isay - *May 27, 2003* - #32

When fundraising basically I'm in not such a different head as when in production- it's all about getting out there and making calls and meeting people. With hard work, once-in-a-while lightning strikes.

Where's The "R" Word?

Davia - *May 24, 2003 - #30*

One of the many things I find so intriguing about this whole project is how scarce the word "radio" is in your description. Does a vision of radio come into it much for you?

I Just Want They Should Be Happy Talking

David Isay - *May 27, 2003 - #32*

...I don't know how much stuff these booths will generate that's good for bdcst, so I'm going to assume very little...as long as it's good for the participants, I'm happy. That's where my heads been lately- more into thinking about what projects do for subjects/collaborators than worrying about bdcst... Although I do love editing...

Who Wants To Hear About Uncle Otto's Model T?

joni murphy - *May 27, 2003 - #35*

What will be done with these mountains of recordings that StoryCorps collects? There will be hundreds (thousands even) of hours of tape for the archive, but who will listen to it? Will people (other than family members) want to access this material?

I think the Transom forum is a good place to ask what people are interested in-- I mean, if you're reading this you're obviously passionate about sound-- but would you want to listen to the unedited 40-minute recordings of strangers?

This is something I know Sound Portraits people have struggled with -- because there are legal/privacy issues and also organizational issues-- but it's still an question that trips me up. On the one hand, the possibility of finding story gems is so exciting...But there's also a lot of potential/ probable boredom.

Flag System Will Save Us

David Isay - *June 1, 2003 - #44*

The #1 purpose of storycorps, by a long-shot is creating a meaningful experience for participants. If we get radio out of it, great. We're going to figure out some system to flag the 1 out of 100 that's worth listening to (should be easy to train facilitators- dealing with tapes that come in off kits will be more of a challenge)... even the 1 out of 1000 that's been listened to and is deemed good enough to air will be cut to 5 minutes. We're all about less is more- not to fear!... "but would you want to listen to the unedited 40-minute recordings of strangers?"...hell no. (although i will say that sitting in on those sessions we've started doing for pilots is pretty profound and moving.) ,,i don't think the average long interview will be of interest outside of family and maybe a handful of others. our job is to help find the gold in the sand.

Popping The Clutch

danielferri - *May 31, 2003 - #42*

If creating the front porch community is the goal, then why the medium of radio? Are there other ways to present the interview that might better get the speakers heard and the community listening? Could local students edit them and print them on paper placemats for local restaurants for people to read while waiting for their meal? Could they be printed in a weekly column in the local paper? Is the purpose to give voice, is it to make radio, or is there some kind of hybrid pop-the-clutch-and-see-what-happens-next-kind-of-thing-deal which you are waiting to see appear?

Far And Wide

David Isay - *June 1, 2003 - #44*

same answer as above (wow- i guess the whole thing about this being primarily experience for participants didn't come through in our description)...as far as dissemination- as far and wide as possible- books, articles, placemats- whatever.. I'm a big fan of print + photos...

Loveless Baseline

Amy O'Leary - *May 29, 2003 - #40*

What happens when you need to interview someone that you feel not even kind of a baseline-humanity-connection to? What happens when you need to listen, but you just don't feel the love?

No Love, No Fun

David Isay - *June 1, 2003 - #44*

our general rule at SPP is that we don't do stories about people we dislike- so, thankfully, never have to deal with that problem. curious to hear what others have to say. i would find it very not fun.

Continue Casting Career

Kerry Seed - *May 30, 2003 - #41*

1. What inside you led to the development of StoryCorps? Are you planning to continue doing large-scale SPP projects a la Yiddish Radio? How will you find the energy and resources to manage both endeavors?

2. The StoryCorps concept makes me think of my own struggles in casting pieces. I'm a firm believer in scrapping characters if they are not captivating. How much will facilitators work on StoryCorps participants to pull the best-told version of life out of them?

3. You mentioned that you were fortunate to win CPB monies early in your career. With what type of story did you apply for funding? How long did it take you before you were airing longer pieces (9:00, 15:00, 22:00)?

Equal Ear Eccentric

David Isay - June 1, 2003 - #44

1-storycorps came out of youth portraits + also general shift in interest towards looking at how participating in projects can be of benefit to subjects. And yes- we will always devote at least 1/2 our time to radio docs. I think the 2 projects occupy very different parts of the brain, so should be able to pull it off.

2- Goes to above- it's up to what the families want... It's not our place to disrupt the experience. I think we'll be playing it by ear- for example maybe if there's a great subject we'll invite him/her back for a straight-up interview.

3- First project was to do eccentric characters across the country. And those early pieces mostly ran on WATC which ran longer stories back then (don't listen to much radio and don't know what situation is today)

The “R” Word Again

Kerry Seed - June 2, 2003 - #45

Dave, you mentioned that you don't listen to a lot of radio. While I assume this is for lack of time, I'm wondering if you think not listening has affected the way you produce stories? If so, how?

CD Time

David Isay - June 22, 2003 - #64

yes, it's lack of time. I listen to Democracy Now in the morning when I can and that's about it at this point. I do, though, try to listen on CD to stuff that I hear is excellent for inspiration. So, for example, I got my hands on Alex Kotlowitz's last series... This simple, new style he + his producer Amy have come up with is brilliant.

On Mics, Moats, Mobiles and Mandates

Rob Rosenthal - May 22, 2003 - #24

When I first heard about the [StoryCorps] project, I wondered how you were going to pull it off. It seemed a bit amorphous and unruly. Now, however, you've pared the idea down to something manageable, tangible, and doable. It's genius -- an oral history vox pop on a

massive scale, bringing the mics to the people rather than sequestering them behind the moats that encircle public radio stations.

Somewhere along the line, I recall reading or talking to someone in the SP office about a mobile version of StoryCorps...I'm struck by the notion of a state-by-state approach -- a StoryCorps Winnebago in every state. A collaboration between public radio, community radio, and state folklife centers, producers travel the state working with local libraries, historic societies, heritage councils, and festival presenters to get into the nooks and crannies of (as Kerouac put it) "the great bulge of America" following the blue highways.

Tape would be collected and used in the way you folks intend. But, with releases from participants, captivating, compelling, stellar radio pieces could be produced for local broadcast (and maybe national) -- a clever and sparkling way to serve the mandate of localism, foster sense of place, and get people talking about the important stuff -- their lives.

PubRadLib

Celine - *May 31, 2003 - #43*

I am struck by the parallel images of the traveling StoryCorps vehicle and the old fashioned Book Mobile. I see so many connections between public radio and public libraries--all that free information and inspiration for and by the people. I like the idea that the Story Mobile would house a collection of stories as well as the means to record them. I picture various headphone stations where you can listen to randomly playing stories, like overhearing conversations.

Listening Libraries

David Isay - *June 1, 2003 - #44*

YES! you got it... I really like that image (and yes- listening Stations are a big part of the project!) i never made connection between libraries and public radio-excellent.

Wafts Of Tony And Tenn

Jackson - *May 19, 2003 - #14*

The Story Booth reminds me of two things: Tony Kahn's "What's Your Story?" featured here lo those many years ago and the Tennessee Williams piece that came up in Lost and Found Sound.

The Movable Point

david reville - *June 4, 2003 - #51*

The idea of a mobile booth has been kicking around the office from the very beginning. It seems more important (and more immanent) to us every day...I'm pretty sure that a 1-month stay in a small town or a neighborhood, or a stopover at a county fair or regional festival, would motivate communities to come out in droves. Our most dreamy scenario has the mobile booth (I've always pictured a tricked-out airstream trailer) pulling into a town where we've laid the groundwork with a local organization (NPR affiliated radio station, library, historical society, humanities council, or some combination of these) and lined up a group of coconspirators rooted there. After the booth takes off to the next destination, that organization could maintain an archive of the stories collected there, and the now highly trained and experienced facilitators could loan out StoryKits to people unable to participate previously, or people who want to do more, either with their original interviewee or with new people. Celine is right on point here. The mobile booth will display stories itself, but we really hope to leave something tangible behind, not just the means to make more recordings, but a place to experience those that have been made.

Jackson mentioned Tony Kahn's "What's Your Story?"...and it is certainly a key predecessor. We have also been looking closely at Alex Chadwick's Interviews 50¢ which is a remarkable project, all the more so because it aired on broadcast TV!...Of course while both of these project engage regular folks in an intimate and low-pressure format, neither of the producers relinquishes the role of "interviewer". It's just an observation of one of the key differences between those projects and StoryCorps). Dave's said repeatedly that StoryCorps is not about making radio. It may be a crackpot idea on its own terms...but it would be a truly ludicrous way to go about collecting material for broadcast...I recognize that makes it a strange thing to talk about on Transom, but you gotta believe us: of course we expect to find great stuff, just like you might when you approach any huge, unruly archive, but THAT IS NOT THE POINT.

Test Runners Vote Aye

Kalpana Krishnamurthy - *June 2, 2003 - #46*

A big thanks to the Sound Portrait folks for letting my Dad and I come in and participate in a test run of the Story Corps adventure.

I have no background in radio or media, or any other type of production. I don't know if I asked the right questions of my Dad or if we got totally off track during our session. So I hear/read the posts loud and clear about how to make a 40 minute interview interesting...

At the same time, I think Story Corp hits it dead on: the lives of everyday people are as interesting and important as the lives of the rich and famous ...It democratizes storytelling,

cuz you don't have to be a character or have survived a crazy event or lived through some dramatic time to be worthy of being recorded.

It was great for me to hear new stories, ask questions that I don't get to ask everyday, and know that in the end I would have the recording to listen to and follow up with. But it was also a great experience for my Dad - who couldn't stop talking about it for the rest of the weekend.

Soundacratc Oath

Matt Ozug - *June 3, 2003 - #48*

It's so exciting to hear that your dad "couldn't stop talking" about his StoryCorps experience. I think that the Hippocratic oath of StoryCorps states that people leave feeling like their story has been validated by the telling. Thank you for letting me share in the listening.

A couple of things: From my perspective, your lack of "background in radio or media" was totally to your advantage. You did your homework and thought about what kinds of stories you wanted to capture (And therefore, which questions to ask) You had the 'inside scoop' on your dad's life that allowed you to get to the heart of things with greater precision than any seasoned interviewer.

Getting The Tape

Jackson - *June 3, 2003 - #49*

When an old man dies, a library burns down

I just got this line from Tony Kahn, when I asked him about what I should do to get tape of a long-time Broadway pit player who is getting a little short on memory. Get the tape was the other part of his answer.

...There are, for example, stories, with beginnings, middles, and ends...Much more difficult is the day-in-day-out... I'd love to hear thoughts on the story vs. pointless narration approach to the booth.

I know you dream of getting all stories. But what kind of stories are you planning to get?

180 Degrees Of The Unimaginable

david reville - *June 4, 2003 - #50*

...We can imagine all sorts of uses for the StoryBooth including (but not limited to!) the undirected family history collection we've spent a lot of time talking about, targeted oral histories, and collaborations with folklorists, etc. We talk about inviting back a great talker

one of the facilitators has identified for a "Sound Portraits Interview" with one of the producers here. We expect that organizations hosting a booth might make use of the space/equipment to bring in people they want to get on tape for specific purposes as well. Our goal here is to build the most flexible thing we can, prepare for surprises, and to let the content take care of itself...

This is an audacious project. From the start we talked about it as "a national initiative," ... "an oral history of America." There were at least two ways to start development: we could move cautiously, doing pilot interviews, researching historical antecedents, mocking up facilities and inviting people to try it out, or we could announce to the world we were going to open this big new thing in Grand Central Terminal in six months time (or less, originally 3+ months!). Of course we went for the grand gesture. That, to my mind, locked us into a design strategy both for the physical structure, and for the program itself, that embraces change over time. We have demanded multiple options at every stage. The space itself will have moveable furniture rather than custom built-ins. The equipment is off-the rack, not just to save money and time but to insure that we can switch things easily if something doesn't work. The electronic back-end reservation system, story-tracker, database and metadata are component-based and flexible as well. This overarching philosophy guides nearly all of our decisions. I try to stay constantly aware that we are, most of the time, making assumptions that could turn out to be 180 degrees off, and to plan for alternatives I can't even imagine.

Wring Out The Culture

Andrea Murray - *June 16, 2003 - #59*

I struggle with this: The increasing self-consciousness and media-awareness of interviewees. The first-person narrative has become the most esteemed storytelling mode in American media...

Anyway, people I encounter are becoming more and more aware of how they think The Media want them to sound - emotionally vulnerable, profound in a homespun way, quirky, etc. People trying to sound genuine, which is of course a total impossibility. They know when it's good tape, but I wonder if the -listener- also knows they know. Y'know? ;-) And does it matter, in the end?

Maybe it's a larger question about maintaining individual authenticity in a media-saturated culture. But it really bugs me.

The Laser-Beam Lock

David Isay - *Jun 22, 2003 - #64*

in my experience, it isn't the case.. when you're sitting and talking to people and have that laser-beam connection thing going, then they're just them. the stuff we do, it's about

people who don't care about or think about or want to be famous for the most part- so i think you get a very different sort of interview (for that and many other reasons) than you get on the reality shows.... also, 90% of the people we talk to don't listen to public radio and 99.99% never heard of Sound Portraits (just about the national average). I will send potential subjects CDs of our stuff without hesitation- because they'll be hearing interviews which are, i think, heartfelt and not self-conscious and hopefully whatever weird media signals they've gotten from elsewhere will get wiped out and they'll pattern themselves after the interviews they hear in our stories.

Milton In The House

Sydney Lewis - *June 19, 2003 - #61*

Was listening to piece on and interview with Milton Rogovin last weekend, I believe it was, and there was discussion of the impact the process of being photographed had had on his subjects. He spoke of coming into homes and seeing portraits displayed on mantelpieces, a sign of their value, and one of his subjects described her mother's excitement because Milton was coming to take their picture. Which reminded me of Kalpana relaying her experience in the storybooth and Matt being thrilled to hear that her father couldn't stop talking about the experience.

Rogovin shoots in his community, has a relationship with the streets and the people he freeze-frames. He can hear and see the impact their shared experience has on at least some of his subjects. You (the collective you) place heavy weight on the value of the interviewer/interviewee experience. What happens after your subjects walk with their tape? Is there some follow-up so the tree fall is heard?

More About Them

David Isay - *Jun 22, 2003 - #64*

for the typical spp piece, as i've said many times, we think of the subjects as part of the ever growing sound portraits family and try to stay in their lives and keep them in ours (part of why milton is such a hero to us- the incredible longitudinal reach of his connections). With storycorps, we're not going to be able to do that in the same way, but are focused on making it as personal we can (for example having facilitators call their subjects after the interview to talk about what happened) and hopefully the connection between the interviewer and interviewee will be the new bond that is made and strengthened through the years.

When Should You See?

Amy O'Leary - *June 20, 2003 - #62*

[At] the opening of the Milton Rogovin exhibit at the NY Historical Society there were several comments made...alluding to the interplay between sound and image.

As Jay wrote in his intro, one of the unique things about Sound Portraits, is the realization that "radio is invisible and you can't touch it, so in order to make it more noticeable and palpable, [SP] extends [its] projects online, in performance, photographs, books, film... "

Yet at the same time, one of the particularly penetrating qualities to radio is its ability to bring you a voice, and a story, in a way that is untainted by judgments that are often based on someone's appearance.

Can someone talk to this? Are there times when you think it's especially important for your subjects to be both heard and seen? Are there times when it's easier to tell their story in only one medium?

Ah, Well, Er, Ah...

David Isay - Jun 22, 2003 - #65

i think stories should be told in the best way they can be told- and can be told in different media to a cool effect... milton's story wasn't a radio documentary to me- it was an audio tour and a book and snippets of sound that could be included in a 2-way with scott simon- so that was the way to go: always tell the story the best way it can be told (yes i realize this wasn't your question).. ok let me try again: we have public premieres when we have a new radio piece , and there's an ongoing debate about whether to put pictures (slide shows) with the sound... i guess i tend to go with the slideshow (others feel really strongly against) because i figure if people just want to go for the radio thing they can close their eyes(once again- that wasn't your question).. I don't think there's anything wrong with seeing a picture of the person you're hearing- i think it adds to the story- but I've run around lecturing for years about how you don't have preconceived notions when you just hear peoples voices and how great that is.. So I guess I'm just confused... ok how's this: we take pictures with stories.. the pictures present our subjects in a dignified way, as do our radio stories (I hope).. They're sort of like illustrations with a magazine article or the little glossy pages in the middle of a non-fiction book. I like book with pictures. if you feel like putting a picture with a radio story, you should. If you don't you shouldn't. That's probably the rule I follow.

Layers Of Liking

Jay Allison - June 20, 2003 - #63

Dave wrote: our general rule at SPP is that we don't do stories about people we dislike

I've been thinking about this. Have you ever come to dislike someone in the course of documenting them? What did you do? Or, what would you do, theoretically?

People are not always what they seem, and the process of examining them under a microphone can reveal that. The discovery of layers of truth and contradiction tend to

make a piece interesting. How does liking or not liking play into that process for you? Do you ever feel it might be a limitation to pre-exclude people you initially dislike? Is it possible that through the process of documenting them, you might come to like them? Does that thought interest you?

Simply Most

David Isay - *Jun 22, 2003 - #65*

i think my comment was a simplification (that's a specialty).. i don't love everyone we have in pieces- i just try not to do crucification / mock-people pieces (at least so far)- that doesn't sound fun to me. A lot of the fun for me is the pleasure subjects get out of their own stories... There are people we do stories about or with who become huge pains in the ass; and others we get closer too... Since I basically like most people i think (especially ones that can help make stories better), there are very few i'd pre-exclude...

Conflicted

Bonnie Primbsch - *June 25, 2003 - #67*

At my station, I'm in the odd position of training-up new interviewers... For the book/author interviewers, this comes up now & then, this disliking of subject matter. A book sounds interesting, we book the interview--and then the interviewer reads the book & doesn't like it. Most of the time, it's a lovely exercise in expansive & generous consideration of another human being & their efforts--the interviewer finds something to enjoy about the book & focuses on that in the interview.

But one time, one of the newer interviewers, a salty 60's pro-woman woman, got herself locked into interviewing an author... the material stuck in my interviewer's craw... She tried to restrain herself, but she was like a testy cat with a twitching tail, slipped into being quarrelsome, and got into the thick of some obscure tangent when time was up, interview over, sort of halfway through an argument. It made for some pretty weird radio, & I never ran the interview.

Somewhere in there, there's a lesson about channeling disagreement into lively discussion; but I think it involves being able to get past the strong feeling you have for your subject.

Which leads me to the warning about not letting our like/appreciation/love for the subject carry the treatment of our pieces, either.

In an interview, this is easy: throw in some devil's advocate questions into the conversation, challenge your guest a little. But I'm just getting into more produced, character pieces, and I wonder if I'm letting my affection for most of my subjects get in the way of bringing out the strongest pieces I can. I'd be interested in hearing about how

challenge/conflict/fly in the honey type stuff can be brought into a piece effectively. Is it easier when there's no narration, no voiceover commentary?

Salty's Good

David Isay - *July 2, 2003 - #79*

conflict and uncomfortable moments can make for the best radio (did anyone ever hear amy goodman on the air when pacifica was taken over by all those losers a few years ago?) - that salty interview could have been more interesting than others... conflict makes for good radio (maybe even the best radio)...

Peeking At The Poky

Daniel Costello - *June 28, 2003 - #68*

I've been doing some re-listening to older pieces on your web site, and I am interested in your process for getting interviewees for your projects...One I am thinking of specifically is Witness to an Execution...I have an idea for a story about a man who has been in prison since 1946 when he was 17, but I have no idea about how to approach him or the prison.

Dial

David Isay - *July 2, 2003 - #79*

just ask. really, that's it. for witness, no one turned us down i don't think and everyone thrilled to talk- no one had asked them before.. call the prison and ask, call the inmate and ask. that's it- very simple.

The Irritated Quest

Nubar - *June 28, 2003 - #70*

In my work it's also more fun working with subjects I like. It's important, in part, because I need to connect with them in some way in order to produce photographs I care about. However, as I look back, I have the sense that though these stories have been more fun, I often learn more from people who are less like me, and even people I wouldn't have a beer with. To push this further, I'm embarking on a short film in which I'll be interviewing mostly people whose political points of view I find irritating. Why? Not to make fun of them, or slam them. But the country we live in is way more conservative than I am. And I don't know anything about these people. What is a conservative republican anyway? I have no idea, except that I have strong feelings about how harmful their beliefs can be. So I guess it's a quest toward understanding. I wonder whether you've thought about doing stories with people in this manner as well David.

Building Bridges On Solid Ground

David Isay - *July 2, 2003* - #79

I have no problem doing stories with people I wouldn't have a beer with- in fact, I was thinking about that a bit after having lunch with someone today who i did a story with when he was in a hospital for the criminally insane (i always liked him, but some others scared me) ... plenty of people very different than me- the cool thing is when you get to see shared humanity with folks who are so different and build bridges through the documentary work. As long as you treat subjects with dignity, you're on solid ground.

Sound Portraits Links

Sound Portraits:

<http://www.soundportraits.org>

Yiddish Radio Project:

<http://www.yiddishradioproject.org>

Youth Portraits:

<http://www.youthportraits.org>

StoryCorps:

<http://www.storycorps.net>

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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