

So What's the Story? A Primer on Making Radio
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Why Should Folklorists Care About Radio?

After all, radio was the technology of our grandparents and even great grandparents, and for much of my life (growing up in the age of television) I kept hearing that it was only a matter of time before radio was completely overtaken by TV. And yes there are some things that I lament as radio enters its second century. Many radio DJ's who used to play broad varieties and unusual combinations of songs have been replaced by playlists generated by market research. And of course there's talk radio, which as time goes by sounds more like "shout radio" to my ear.

But I would argue that these are relatively healthy times for public radio for several reasons.

- Adaptable- radios have been portable for decades, but it's proven to be adaptable to the internet age. NPR is making an enormous commitment to creating on-line content (\$15 million per year)...and podcasting is offering a whole new way of enjoying audio content.
- Efficient- Radio is relatively simple and inexpensive to produce. For an investment of just a few hundred dollars, you can have a very good sounding recorder and microphone, and you can edit and mix your stories on your laptop, and some of that software is free. Even though the price of TV production has come down significantly, it's still much more expensive than making radio.
- Intimate- Radio is like a one on one conversation. TV can show you more visually...but stripping away the visual and leaving it up to imagination creates an intimacy with whoever's speaking.
- Storytelling- Most importantly, radio is a very good means of telling a story, and we live in a time where story - especially personal story - is increasingly valued and where people have been empowered to tell their own story (Story Corps, YouTube, etc) And there's all kinds of experimentation going on that's pushing the boundaries of storytelling on the radio. One of my favorites is a show called RadioLab which is produced by a composer named Jad Abumrad and tells stories of science. Like this excerpt from an episode about how viruses mutate.

AUDIO 1: [RadioLab](#)

And I would also make the observation that we are living in a time where radio and audio can be a useful tool for folklorists. And I say that because of two trends that I see as creating opportunities for folklorists. The first is a tug of war that's taking place between NPR the network, and the member stations throughout the country that have been the traditional vehicles for the national programming that many of us enjoy. The fact is that the younger generation of NPR listeners is no

longer listening to that content on the radio; they are instead streaming it or hearing it on podcasts that they download to their phones, or iPads, or iPods. So in effect the member station is being pushed out of the picture, and an NPR fan who doesn't need his/her local station isn't going to contribute to that station.

So how do local stations survive? One answer to that question is by complimenting the national program with local...even hyper-local programming that strongly serves their community. And that's where folklorists could come into the picture, with programming about the traditions, ethnic culture, foodways, and history of their specific location.

This is beginning to happen in some places, including in Western Kentucky where the folklore department at Western Kentucky University under Erika Brady is in a dialogue with the program manager at WKYU to have their folklore students produce pieces for the station. Such a collaboration is very much dependant on the program director (some of them wish to focus their local programming on local public affairs)...and it remains to be seen how the above collaboration will play out. But the fact is that local stations are looking for ways to appeal to local audiences, and this could present opportunities.

The second trend is podcasting, which I touched on briefly above. A few weeks ago, a folklorist named Jon Kay from Indiana University told me about how podcasting has been a useful tool for him for sharing content with an audience. A year ago, he created a podcast called Artisan Ancestors.

AUDIO 2: [Artisan Ancestors](#)

Jon says that he has a regular listenership of several thousand, and what he likes is that he has full editorial control of his podcast, and the length doesn't need to be consistent. While there is overlap between radio and podcasting, Jon shared some of the differences that he feels are important to understand.

- Focus- A podcast series should be narrowly focused on a theme. Jon describes his audience as a devoted group of people who share the same passion he does for "researching creative lives and handmade things."
- Frequency- A successful podcast is not a one-time production. Key to its success is having new episodes ready on a consistent and regular basis in order to build a following. While there are some podcasts which are released weekly, even daily, there seems to be a consensus that it needs to be at least twice a month.

Over the years, working for the Western Folklife Center, I've come to appreciate how folklore and radio can come together, but it wasn't obvious to me from the beginning. One of the first experiences that taught me this came early on in my collaboration with Hal Cannon, Founder of the Western Folklife Center. During the first year of our work together, we produced several pieces for a public radio

show called *Savvy Traveler*. And one of the trips we took that year really opened my eyes. We were in Alaska, and we wanted to do a piece about totem poles, and what they mean to native Alaskans. We began by visiting a museum called the Totem Heritage Center in Ketchikan, where we interviewed an artist in residence, a carver named Nathan Jackson. And in the course of the conversation, he told us that the next day, in a tiny Native American village on a remote island...there was going to be the first totem pole raising in more than 60 years. So we made arrangements to take a float plane and go out to this place and witness this. Let's listen to an excerpt from this story.

AUDIO 3: [Alaska Totem](#) (3:11)

I remember how moved I was by seeing this community come together to bring back this tradition of raising a totem pole... because what they were really trying to do was resurrect their dignity after being shoved into this place decades before. And it hammered home the point that important things aren't just done by the "newsmakers" of the day. This story had just as much value as whatever you'd hear on the news. And it began to change my perception of what truly is the American story...and to begin to appreciate what folklorists try to do in their work: "value the undervalued." And here is where I think there's a lot of overlap between what I do as a radio producer and what you do as folklorists: we tell stories that would otherwise be ignored or forgotten.

Making Radio Part 1: Get Ready

Before making radio, you need to ask yourself some questions.

- What is the story I want to tell? (it helps if you can answer this in 1 sentence)
- What's the format of my story? (For example: newscast, essay with music, essay with sound, narration, reporter style with interviews, sound and music?)
- What's the tone of your piece? The tone should be a good fit with your topic. A fun topic might dictate a lighthearted and playful approach, but you wouldn't want to be flippant with a serious topic.
- Who is telling the story? Is the story from your perspective or someone else's?
- If the story is to include others, who are the best people to interview? Of course they must know the relevant information and be involved with the story, but for radio it's important that they also be good talkers, people with energy in their voice, maybe even a little attitude.
- Where is the best place to record the narration and interviews? Usually you want a quiet, controlled space, but sometimes the story may call for something less tame.
- What are potential scenes for my story & how can I make them come alive in sound

- TV producers are always talking about building a sequence of shots to create a scene.
 - With radio you build a scene by creating a sonic environment that will help create a picture and a feeling in the mind of the listener.
- An example that illustrates some of the points above is a piece we did several years ago about the folk legend Casey Jones. Back in early 2000 we'd heard that April of that year marked the 100th anniversary of the death of Casey, and we were looking for a way to tell his story without it being a straight history piece.

Then our archivist at the Folklife Center, Steve Green, did some research and found that there was a recording made in the 1940's or '50's of someone who was on the train with Casey when it crashed. And then we decided to collect as many versions of the song as we could find, and there were certainly hundreds. So this now made it more of a story.

AUDIO 4: [Casey Jones](#)

Making Radio Part 2: Is it a story yet?

When does a topic become a story? This is one of the most crucial questions in any production. You can have a concept or a theme, but it's not a story until it crosses a threshold. Here are some of the elements of a story:

- Something is at stake.
- Someone goes thru a transformation and is somehow changed by an experience
- A narrative arc: An unfolding series of events that gives the story a beginning, a middle and an end.

SpyHop Example

Sometimes you know you have an idea, a good idea, but it's not yet a story. This was the case with a piece about an organization called Spy Hop in Salt Lake City. Spy Hop Productions is a nonprofit youth media arts center that empowers youth by teaching them media skills: video production, audio production, and web skills. A few years ago, they began a program called Open Mic, in which they encouraged young people to express themselves through music. They'd be guided through the process by mentors who'd help them with lyrics, creating a beat (most of it was hip hop), recording and mixing.

I'd attended a couple of Open Mic sessions, and despite recording some good tape, several short interviews and lots of sound, felt it wasn't yet a story. It lacked a central character who could articulate how Spy Hop had transformed his life. So after thinking about it, I sat on the tape for couple months...and put out feelers for just such a character...until I found him.

We'll hear the 2nd half of the story which picks up after we explain the details of how Open Mic works. We pick it up when the program's founder Matt Mateus explains what happened when they decided to open this music program to any teen who walks off the street...for free.

AUDIO 5: [SPY Hop Excerpt](#)

Making Radio Part 3: The Interview

Interviews are a core element of most radio pieces, and often the key to a good story. So what are the secrets to getting a good interview? Here are a few pearls of wisdom from some of my radio colleagues at NPR, people who I consider some of the best interviewers for radio:

AUDIO 6: [NPR Interview Montage](#) (2:12)

As you heard, there are few hard and fast rules to getting a good interview, just lots of tools to use depending on the situation, and your personality.

The Encounter: As with anything else, it's important to get off on the right foot with an interview, and here are some rules of thumb to keep in mind.

- First impressions affect what happens—don't look nervous because it'll make the person you're talking to think you don't know what you're doing
- Make eye contact and smile.
- Thank them for talking to you.
- Get comfy & set up:
- Standing- If you and the interviewee are to be standing, get as close as you can w/out making them uncomfortable, & in a position where you can mic them and nonchalantly check your equipment.
- Sitting- For sit down interviews, get as close as possible and don't sit across a big table or desk, as this will make it difficult to mic and reduce intimacy.
- You want to be at eye level with the person...neither one of you should loom over the other.

Questions: Make sure to give yourself enough time before the interview to think about what you are going to ask. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- I like making a list of questions, and I do so in 2 steps.
- First I write down all the questions I can think of.
- Then I edit them. I try to imagine the unfolding conversation and arrange the questions strategically. The first question is the one that will get us off to a good start. Remember, the goal is not just to get information, but to have a conversation. The more conversational your interview is, the more radio-phonic it will be.
- Making a list helps me organize my thoughts, but I normally don't read my questions from the list. I familiarize myself with them before going into the interview, then shove the list in my pocket for reference.

- Have a plan, but be flexible. Sometimes the best information is stuff you never anticipated in your questions. Listen to people's answers and follow up on interesting things they may say. This may end up changing your story, but that may be for the better. Likewise, if a conversation is going astray, don't be afraid to reel it in.
- I often end an interview by asking the person what I forgot to ask. Is there something they feel is important to the story that I overlooked?

A Radio Interview vs. an Interview for Documentation:

- An interview for radio follows the story. It may be less comprehensive than a documentation interview, but remember that you're not necessarily trying to capture a person's life history.
- Emotion. Emotion comes across very well on radio, and while you want to avoid melodrama, eliciting emotion in an interview will make listeners pay attention to the story.

Let's Listen Together

Here are several examples of radio stories that hold lessons for aspiring producers:

- Mary Beth Kirshner's "The Graying of the Convent." MBK visits an order of nuns in Chicago called the Senecals of North America. Listen to how Mary Beth uses her voice to reach a level of intimacy with Sister Judy Doogan, and also how she uses silence at one point in the interview instead of jumping in with a question.

AUDIO 7: [The Graying of the Convent](#) (2:36)

- The piece we just heard was very intimate...very one-on-one. Most interviews ARE one-on-one, but sometimes it's more effective to put 2 or more people together as Hal and I did in this next piece we recorded in Hawaii. This interview is with a teenaged boy Josh and a Hawaiian elder named Kindy Sproat. Josh was being shy about talking to us, so we decided to put him together with the person who'd been his friend and mentor.

AUDIO 8: [Josh & Kindy](#) (2:45)

- The Internal Interview: So far, we've focused on conversations that are perceptible to the naked ear...but that's not all that's going on during an interview. Outwardly, you're asking questions of the individual and trying to have a conversation with him or her. But there should also be another, simultaneous conversation taking place inside: an internal conversation in which you're dissecting what's going on and asking yourself questions such as.
 - What information am I getting?

- How comfortable have I made the person?
- Are they answering the question, or avoiding it?
- Are we clicking?
- As an example of how this works, let's listen to an interview in which we hear this internal conversation taking place alongside the audible one. This interview is from a piece about a brothel in Wells, Nevada called Donna's Ranch, where the prostitutes drum up business by using the CB radio. Hal has just interviewed some of the working girls @ Donna's and now is about to talk to a trucker who's a regular customer. Hal's a bit nervous. On one channel we'll hear the Q&A from this raw interview with a trucker named Colin, and on the other channel what's going on in Hal's mind.

AUDIO 9: [Donna's Ranch](#) (5:20)

- Lessons to take away:
- Keep your questions conversational, but focused
- Don't be afraid to rephrase a question if it doesn't come out right the first time, or if the person didn't answer it.
- Look for opportunities to ask a follow-up question
- Expressing your feelings could prompt the person you're interviewing to do the same.
- Constantly assess how it's going and course correct as necessary
- A Wild Ride: Most interviews are done sitting down in a quiet place like the first two you heard...the theory being that you'll have more control over the conversation, and the quiet will give you more flexibility later when you edit your tape. The interview with Colin was in his truck, and hopefully that allowed your mind to picture the scene. It's trickier to edit, but there is definitely a payoff. The next example is how an out-of-control environment can give you great tape. It's with NPR host Danny Zwerdling who went to Africa after the massacres in Rwanda, and interviewed a group of refugees who were displaced by the war. They'd spent a year in a refugee camp in Zaire and were about to return back to their destroyed villages...60 of them in the back of a cattle truck.

AUDIO 10: [Rwandan Refugees](#) (2:40)

This entire 22 minute piece was an interview...NO FORMAL NARRATION. It has an immediacy that few pieces have. I decided on this excerpt because it stood out in Danny's mind because of the laughter; the fact that these refugees could still have a sense of humor despite the horror they'd experienced revealed much about these people—their ability to make the best of an awful situation meant that they would probably succeed in putting their lives back together.

Get Technical

Equipment: There are three basic ingredients to sound recording

- Recorder- these days there's no tape, the sound goes onto a flashcard, much like a digital camera, which you then download to your computer
- Microphone- though some recorders come with a built in mic, the quality often is poor, so it's best to purchase a separate mic. A great recorder will do you no good if you don't have a good mic. Microphones record in various patterns so keep that in mind when you purchase; I like cardoids in particular which record what's in front of the mic, and mute what's behind it.
- Headphones- it's important to monitor as your recording, so invest in headphones, or at least ear buds

I also like having a boom pole that allows me to conveniently have a mic close to the interviewee without crowding him/her.

Educate yourself: A great resource for comparing recording equipment, editing software, and generally taking the pulse of what's going on in the radio community: www.transom.org.

While you may find the best price for equipment online, try to at least see and handle the device in person before you purchase. Recorders are getting smaller and more menu-driven, which on the one hand is good, but could also cross the threshold into being inconvenient if even simple adjustments require diving into a menu system.

Where to buy: I usually shop around for the best price, but here are 2 places where I've had good luck.

Oade Brothers Audio: <http://www.oade.com/> (very knowledgeable about recorders, and offer custom modifications to make recorders sound even better than the stock versions).

B&H: <http://www.bhphotovideo.com/> (wide selection, good prices, reliable seller).

Get Close: The most important thing in recording for radio is being the right distance from the sound or person you're interviewing. And in almost all cases this means quite close. For an interview, I like having the mic less than a foot away from the person's mouth (6 – 8 inches preferably). Having a mic boom pole makes this easier, and allows you to be at a more comfortable distance from the person. I don't put the mic right in front of their mouth, but below it and to the side. This keeps the "p" sounds and other consonants from overwhelming the mic, and it means the mic will be less visible and intimidating to the person you're speaking with. While a person may be intelligible if you record him/her from further away, what you lose is the personality of the voice, and the intimacy of the 2-way conversation.

As an example, listen to this story told by a one-time bartender at the Pioneer Hotel, now the headquarters of the Western Folklife Center in Elko. He describes

a fistfight he got into in the 1950's. In this version he was recorded with the mic less than a foot away.

AUDIO 11: [Bonnie Bustes](#) (on-mic)

Now listen to the same story with the mic 2 feet away.

AUDIO 12: [Bonnie Bustes](#) (mic 2 feet away)

Here it is again with the mic 4 feet away.

AUDIO 13: [Bonnie Bustes](#) (mic 4 feet away)

And finally with the mic 6 feet away.

AUDIO 14: [Bonnie Bustes](#) (mic 6 feet away)

You'll notice that as the mic gets further away, you can still understand the words, but the personality and intimacy disappear...and you start hearing the hollow space.

Putting it all together

Once you've recorded the elements of your story, you will need software to edit them down, mix them together, and generate a file of the finished product. There are many choices for editing software out there, from ProTools, to Vegas, to Audacity, to the one with my favorite name: Hindenberg. There is probably something that comes already installed on your computer.

For an in-depth review of the pro's and con's of different programs, once again visit transom: <http://transom.org/?cat=56>.

It's easy to be intimidated by all the bells and whistles that various editors tout, but they all share certain basic elements which are important to understand conceptually.

- The bin- a place where all your audio resides (usually both in its raw form and in edited form. Sometimes it's in list form, or icon form.
- The Timeline- In the old days of tape, you had tape scrolling past a fixed play head. With digital editing, imagine the tape unraveled horizontally on your computer, with the play head scrolling across it. A timeline is a visual representation of the tape, as well as the sound waves that are recorded on it. You are using the timeline to arrange the snippets of tape from left to right in the order you want to hear them in your story.
- Editing Tools- There is normally a space in your editor that houses your editing tools. These include a splicer to make cuts, a zoom-in/zoom-out function,

a scrubbing function which allows you to play things slowly for fine editing. In editing, you're starting from the raw audio and widdling it down into smaller & smaller clips of voice, sound, and music.

- **Mixing Tools-** Mixing is when you adjust the volume levels of the various elements relative to each other to achieve the desired effect of the story. This includes evening out levels between the narration and clips from the interviewees, fading music in and out of a story, creating a scene with sounds you've gathered. With some software, you are making level adjustments by sliding "virtual" faders up and down, while in others volume is represented in a horizontal line that you are moving up or down to adjust the volume.

Thank you for your interest in making radio, and for taking the time to read through this resource. I encourage you to start paying close attention to what you hear on the radio; dissect it, analyze it for its narrative qualities, texture, note what kind of impact it makes on you. This will get the wheels turning in your mind about a story you'll want to tell, and how you'll want to tell it. One of the best things about being a radio producer is learning about other people and their lives, skills, and passions, and celebrating their story for the benefit of others. That also sounds a lot like being a folklorist, doesn't it. Digital technology has revolutionized radio, and made it more accessible to a new generation of storytellers like yourself. Good luck!