

RADIO

...AN ILLUS-

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JESSICA ABEL

04

AND IRA GLASS

99

I'm Ira Glass, the host of *This American Life*, speaking to you today from the Oval Office on behalf of RADIO. When correctly harnessed, radio can be as emotional, as funny, and as satisfying as the best motion pictures or television shows. But sadly, few radio programmers even shoot for that. That's where you come in. My fellow Americans, no mass medium is cheaper to do, or easier to learn.

In these few pages we show you all the tricks you need. At least you'll learn enough to get a running start. I urge you and all Americans to make our great nation a better place for everyone by joining the movement to lift Radio to its true potential!

The staff of *This American Life* invited cartoonist Jessica Abel to spend a week with us. It happened to be the week we were putting together a show we called "Do-Gooders," in April 1999. There's much more for you to learn. And for that, I urge you to read on. Flip right now to the inside back cover, where this introduction continues.

The producers as of April 1999...



NANCY UPDIKE (WHO CO-PRODUCED DO-GOODERS WITH IRA)



JULIE SNYDER



ALIX ('ELISE') SPIEGEL



JORGE JUST (PRODUCTION INTERN)

...and, the rest of the staff:



SARAH VOWELL (CONTRIBUTING EDITOR)



TODD BACHMANN (ADMINISTRATOR)



ELIZABETH MEISTER (WEBMASTER)



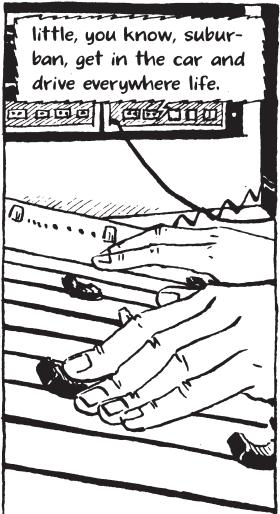
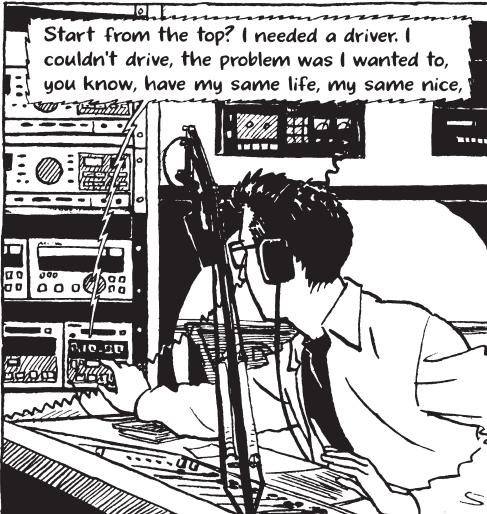
SYLVIA LEMUS (PRODUCTION ASSISTANT)

6:29 Friday 4/9, 31 minutes to air

From WBEZ Chicago—and Public Radio International—it's *This American Life*, I'm Ira Glass.

Start from the top? I needed a driver. I couldn't drive, the problem was I wanted to, you know, have my same life, my same nice,

little, you know, suburban, get in the car and drive everywhere life.



HOW TO MAKE RADIO THAT'S GOOD



WHERE DO STORIES COME FROM?

I was going through the internship process with an applicant, Mary Wiltenberg. I had asked her to pitch some stories, and in the interview, she pitched a story about this part of south-eastern Missouri...



...in the bootheel, where, in 1939, there was a sharecroppers protest all along Highway 61.

It's sort of a fascinating story in that it was both black and white sharecroppers, and it ended with the federal government giving them more or less what they wanted, but I explained why we wouldn't be interested, that essentially this is sort of an A&E type of documentary...



...which is great, they're great stories, but we feel like it's already represented in public broadcasting, and it's just not what we do.

I also explained that the stories that we do do are really character-driven, that...

...they follow the same structure, a literary structure, that a fiction story might. The story needs one character, a character that you identify with, who interacts...



...with other characters in a very specific way, and there's conflict, change, and resolution (and not necessarily always the resolution part) inherent to the story...

...and the characters change and they grow and they learn something new, and surprising. Especially with our show, that's always what we're going for, something surprising, a surprising situation—where somebody comes to a conclusion that you wouldn't expect.



is American Life
BEZ Radio
48 East Grand Avenue
Chicago, IL 60611

Dear Ms. Snyder,

You mentioned, when we last spoke in November, stories involving some kind of change in a person. I think the Bootheel, where I'm working on a social work/docent project. It involves an intrepid couple, and the death of their dream to save their tiny, rural town. The town--whose residents hate their lives, but fear change even more--is dying also. victim of the same forces that are now killing much of rural America. Lorraine Whorton met in Canalou, Missouri forty-six years ago, when she was a young girl and he was the boy next door who lived

20 January 19

And then like three months later, she faxes me a letter, saying, and it was really great, saying that, I've thought a lot about what you said and the kind of ways that you structure stories, and I've been looking around and thinking about it a lot, and I think I have a story here where I live that fits the structure you were talking about."

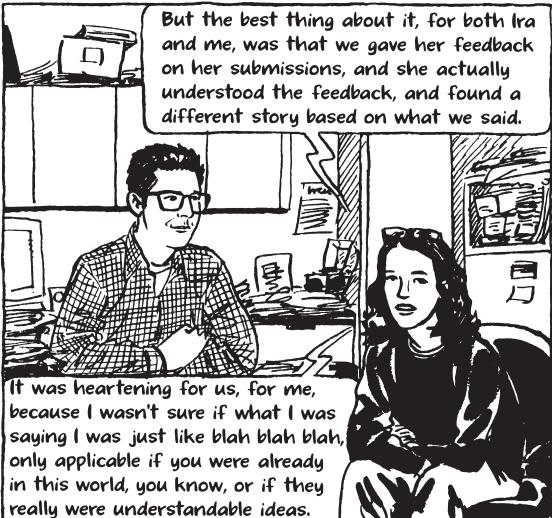
The story was about Kenny and Jackie Whorton, who grew up in this small town, Canalou [can-AL-u], Missouri, moved away, and then moved back after they retired. But the town had fallen apart in the 30 years they'd been away, and so they tried to improve things: organize activities for the kids in town, get streets and sewers fixed.



She basically wrote out the whole story, and in a really great way too. I mean, pitch letters, that's the thing about pitch letters: they kind of have to be stories in and of themselves. She's a nice writer, and she wrote it in a really beautiful way.



But the best thing about it, for both Ira and me, was that we gave her feedback on her submissions, and she actually understood the feedback, and found a different story based on what we said.



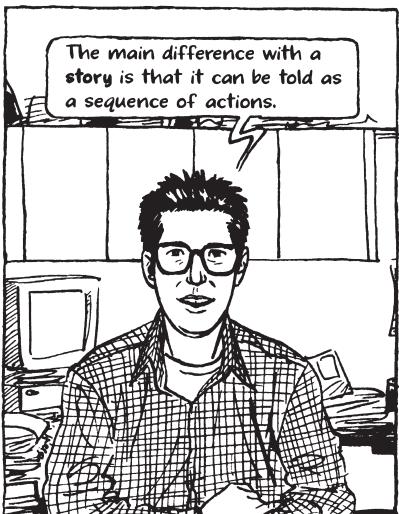
Around the same time, Elizabeth Meister, our webmaster, pitched us a story about another small town, in Kansas.



But what the Kansas idea lacked was some real story, some conflict, some event that brought everyone's attitudes into the open.



The main difference with a story is that it can be told as a sequence of actions.



FOR EXAMPLE...

This story ran on the show a few years ago.



So Brett was on the subway platform, afternoon rush hour, it's mobbed. And down the platform he sees this guy. The guy goes up to one person after another, stands very close, says something...



...and moves on. He's nicely dressed, doesn't seem to be asking for money. And he's getting closer, he approaches person after person, walks up to them, says something quietly, and moves on.



And as he gets closer, Brett can hear what he's saying.



Now at this point, no one's turning off the radio. But why? If you look at it, it's a completely banal story: a guy sees another guy on a subway platform. Where's the suspense in that?



The answer gets to the heart of what makes narrative work:

Whenever there's a sequence of events—this happened then that happened then this happened—we inevitably want to find out what happened next.



...and what he's saying is: "You, you can stay." "You gotta go." "You can stay." "You're outta here." He draws closer.

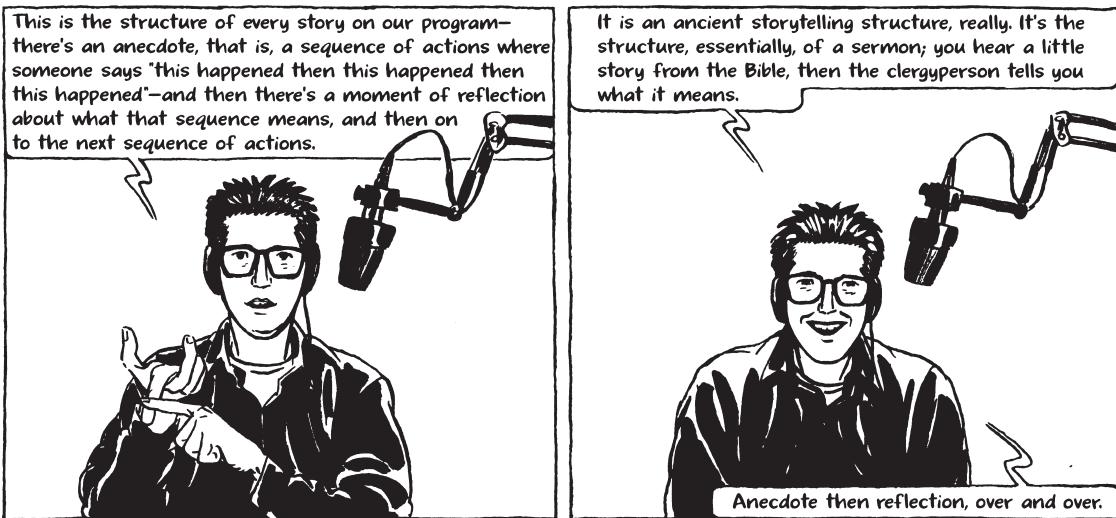
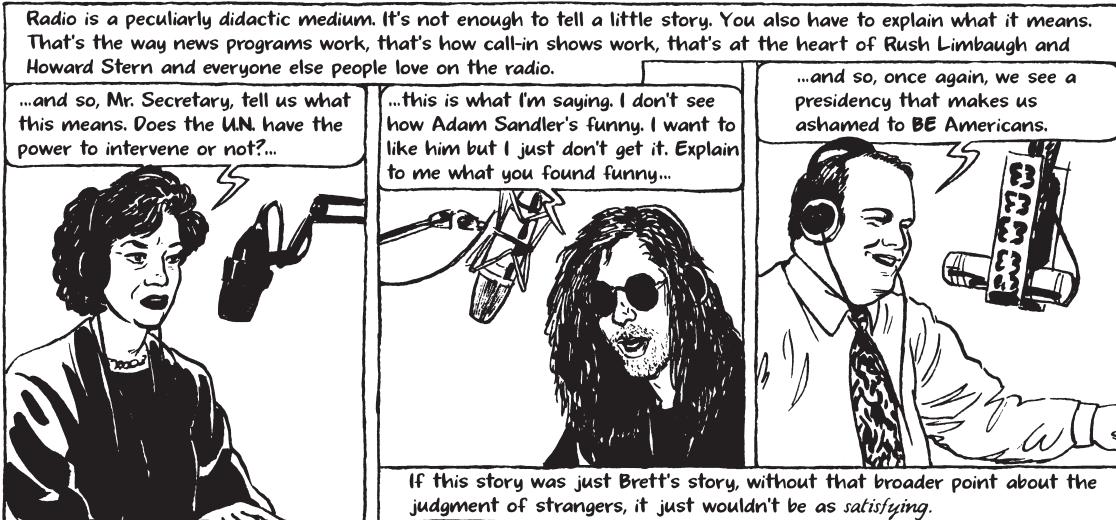
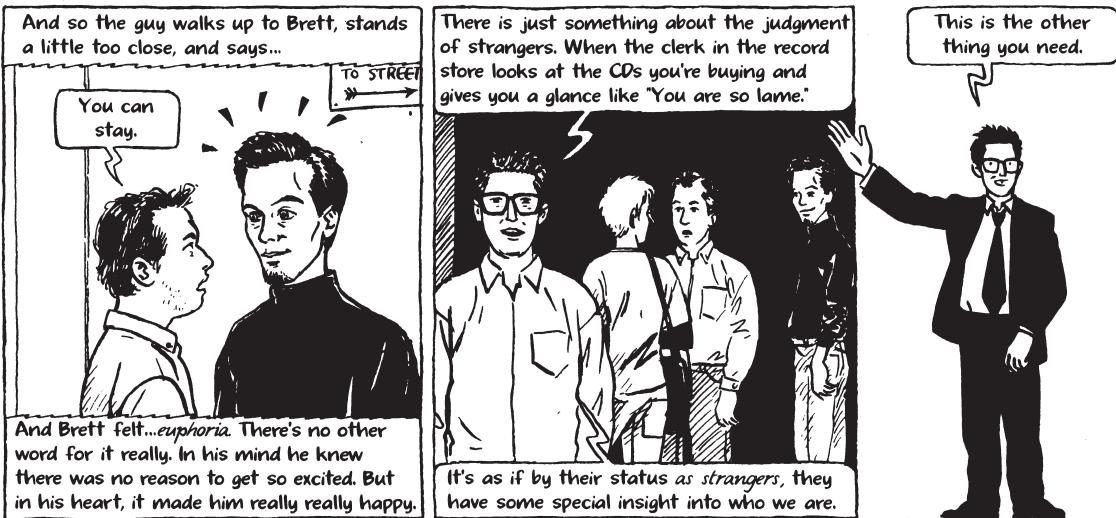


And I'm starting to get a little nervous (ha ha)... Will I make the cut?

But Brett, (ha ha ha), he's not choosing you for anything.



For more stories like this one, check out Brett Leveridge's website: www.brettnews.com



THINGS COME TOGETHER, OR: GLOMMING ON

The Blind Woman.



Story meeting, 10:25, Monday 1/4, 13 weeks before broadcast.

I have an announcement to make, everybody.



Just want to keep everyone informed.



Denial, bargaining, anger, depression, acceptance...henna!



Henna. OK, so anyway, so...I was pitched this story about this woman who's going blind, and needed someone to drive her around. She hired this guy and the problem was...



I think it's interesting because it's about the moment when helpfulness ceases to be helpful.



We could do a whole show on good samaritans. There's that Ian Frazier story we've talked about, about those guys who go around clearing stuff out of the branches of trees.

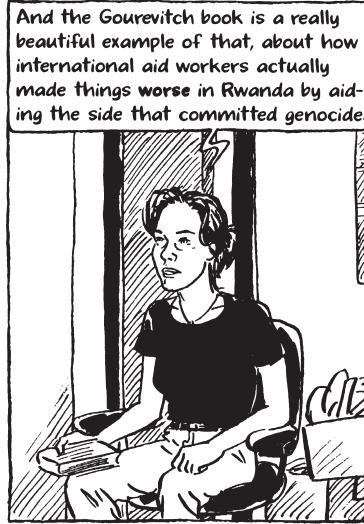
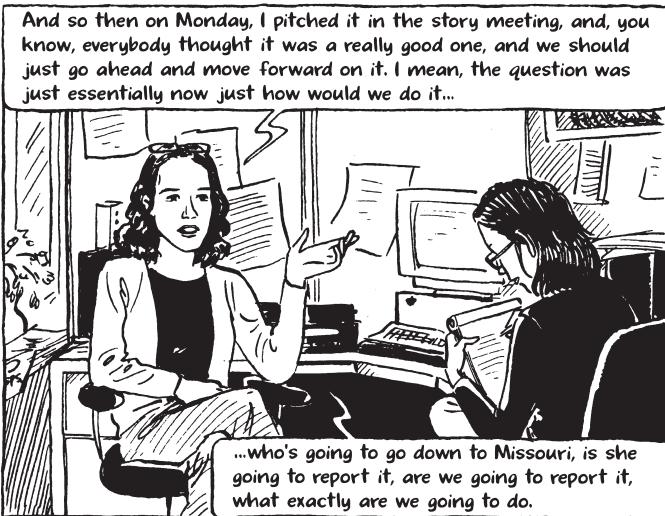
Actually, it came up during the week.



...actually, yeah, we were in the car coming back from our New York Times photo shoot!

And Nancy had the idea for a show on do-gooders, she had the blind woman story, and I was all like, this story was faxed to me that I think would be really good for a do-gooders show, but I can't deal with it this week, but I'll tell you about it on Monday.





*We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.

Story meeting. 10:42 Monday 4/5. Four days and ten hours to air.

OK, OK, this week for "Do-Gooders," here's what we've got: the blind woman, which I guess I should listen to finally, which is Tish, Canalou, which is 30, and then Philip Gourevitch, which does have two parts in it, one where he talks about the humanitarian aid being such a joke...



...and another part where he talks about the guy who's like, um, Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca, who really is an effective do-gooder.

And then the other things that are contenders for the show are still the Larry Steger story, and Spy Music, and the bag story... I mean, we don't have that much time...



Gourevitch I think realistically is like 16 to 18 minutes...



Wow, really? Then that's it...

...and worth it...

Once you get an idea going, things start to glom on to it; you know, you have a whole bunch of things, and the length that it's gonna be starts emerging, and some things drop out...



...and often, if they're good, they'll glom on to some other idea.

Yeah, I think we might want to try to make room for Larry Steger. It's only six minutes.



Is it funny?



It's just a good entertaining story.

Uh, no. Its not funny.

It's very dark.

This is going to be a really dark show.

Yeah. But whaddya expect? It's called "Do-Gooders." You thought maybe you were listening to a different radio show? ("Pimps", however, is just gonna to be a laugh riot.)



You know, one little light moment of someone handing someone else a sandwich, perhaps, I dunno.

THE ART OF THE INTERVIEW

In February, Ira and Julie went to Canalou for three days with Mary Wiltenberg, who had pitched the story and knew the town, and taped 12 hours of material ("really not very much" according to Ira).

Ira, let's talk about interviewing technique. You're known as a great interviewer. How do you prepare for an interview?

A lot of figuring out the interview is making a structure for what it's gonna be. I'll go in with like two or three things I'm going for: I want the Whortons to tell me the story about what that happened when they moved back to Canalou...



I want them to tell me why they think what happened happened, and there might be one other point.

Does that mean you don't really have specific questions?

Well, each thing might have like a million little sub-points, where I want details and details and details—little moments that I want them to be sure to cover.



But the main thing is, you want an overall plan that's simple, so you can be flexible, so you can respond to the things they say. Here're my notes for the interview.

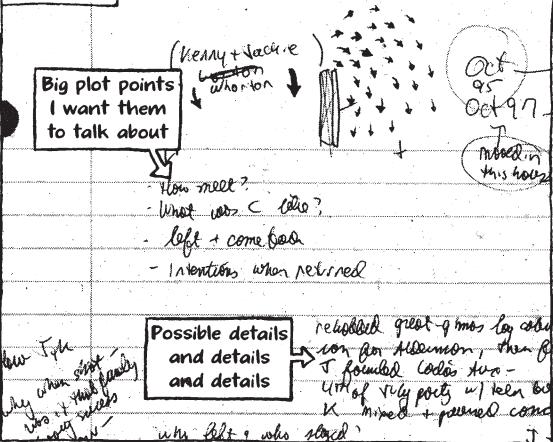
Do you tell your interviewees what the questions are ahead of time?

No! Well, kind of. You need to prepare them a little, tell them, like, this is going to take about an hour, and we're going to cut it down to just a few minutes on the radio...



...and I'm going to ask you about how you met so-and-so, or whatever. And you have to try not to act nervous. They'll follow your lead.

Usually, *This American Life* interviews—like our stories—have two major sections: the narrative, and the reflections.



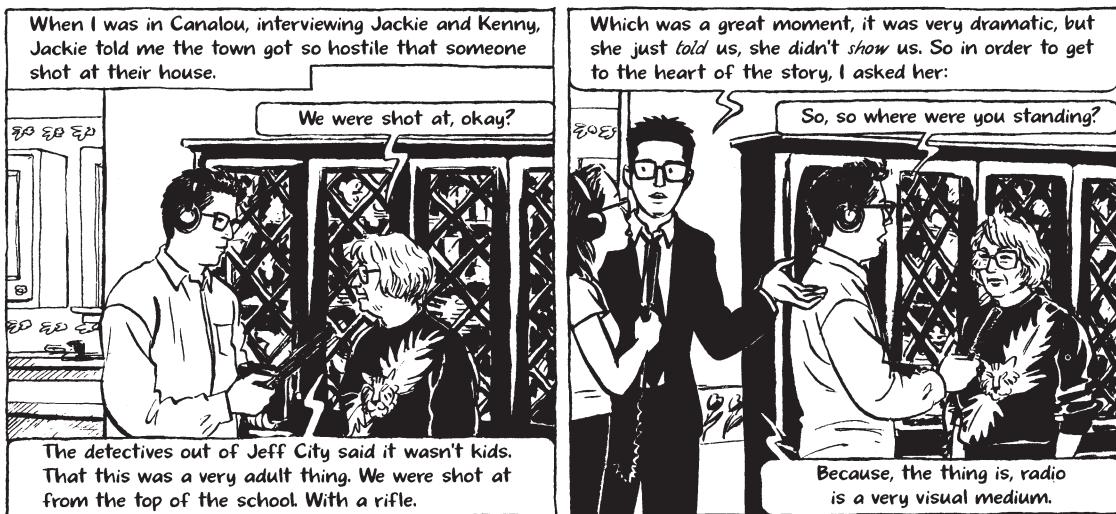
But how do—

And tell them not to be afraid to interrupt! That's really important.



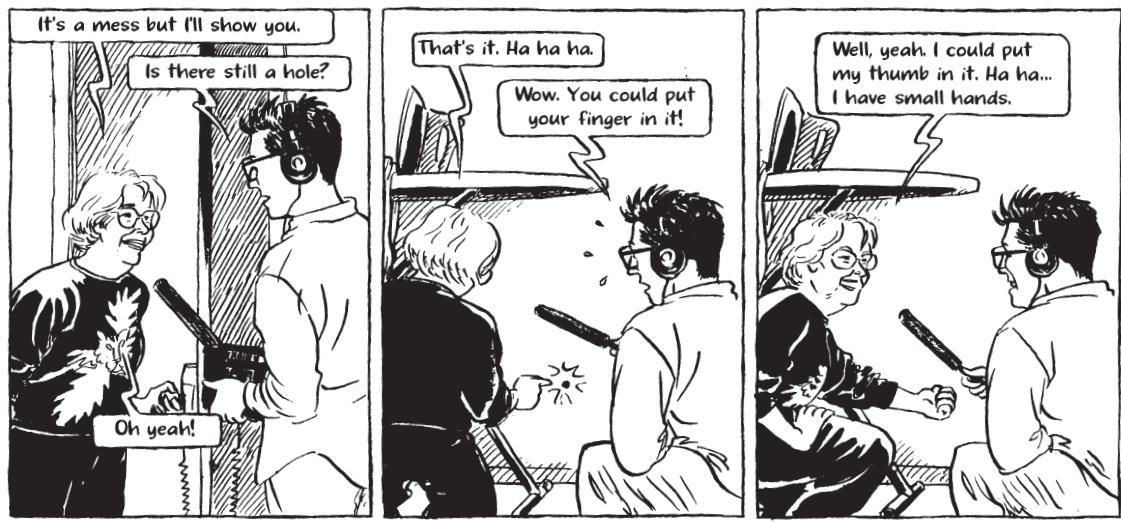
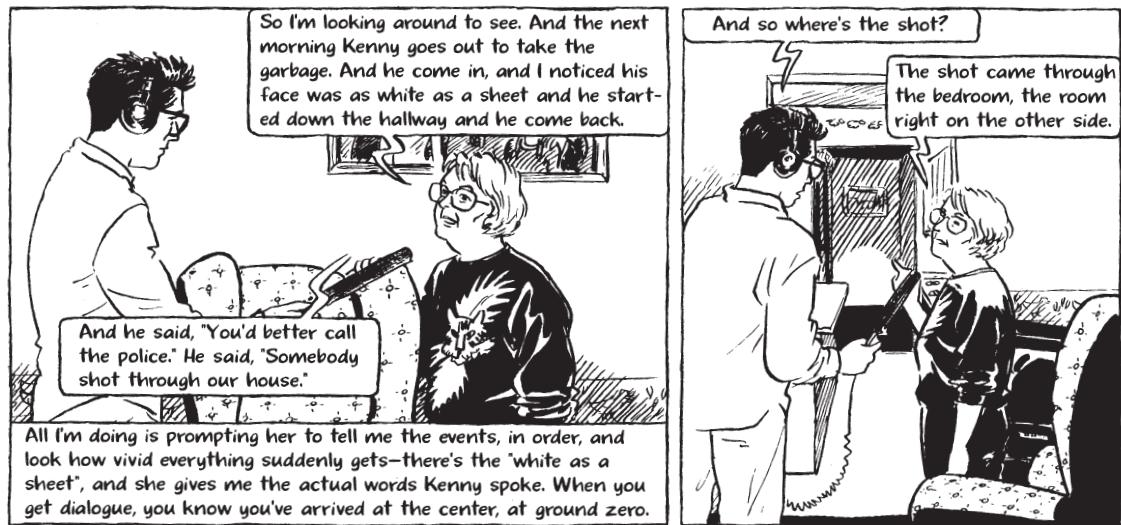
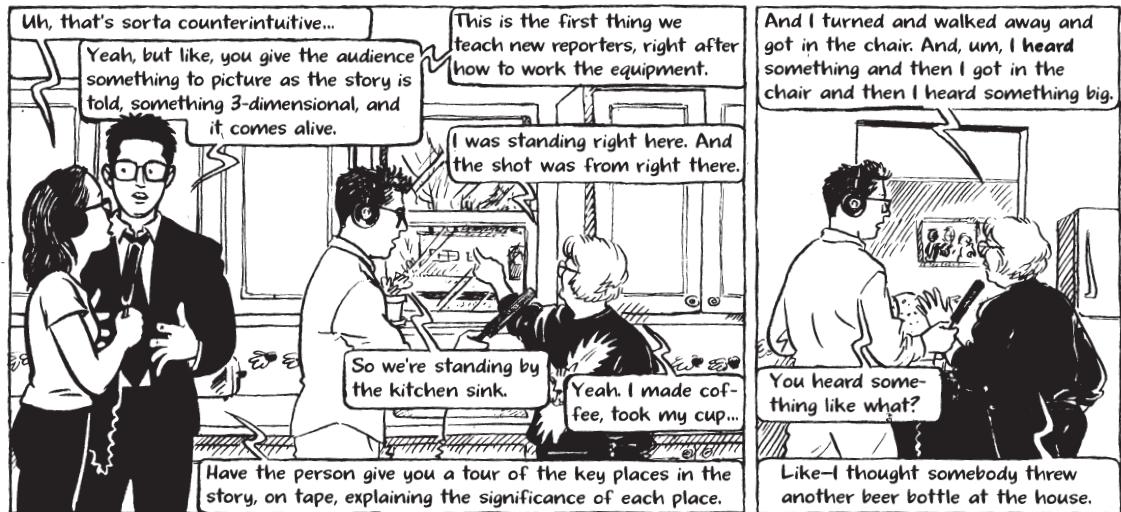
Right, so—

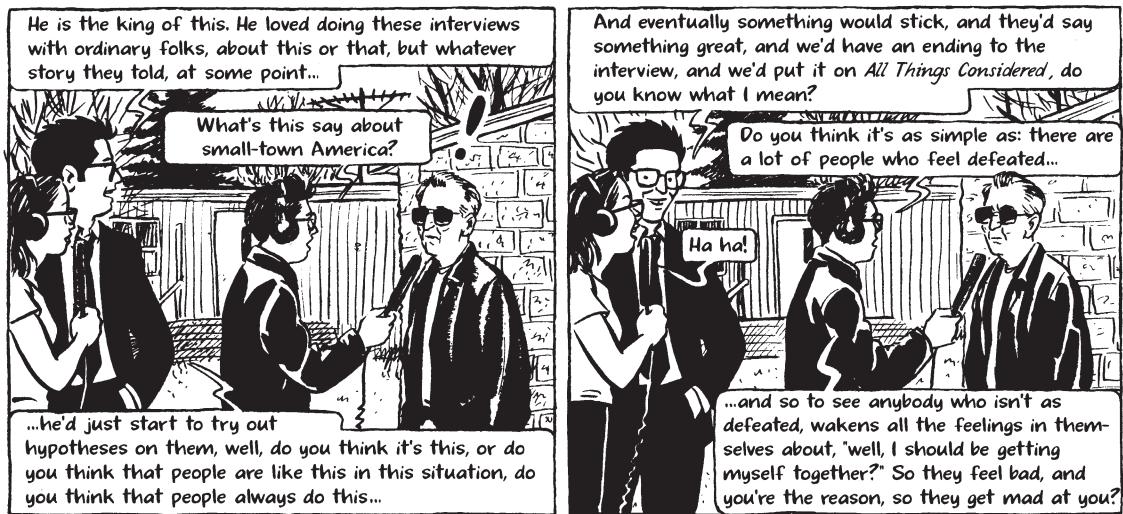
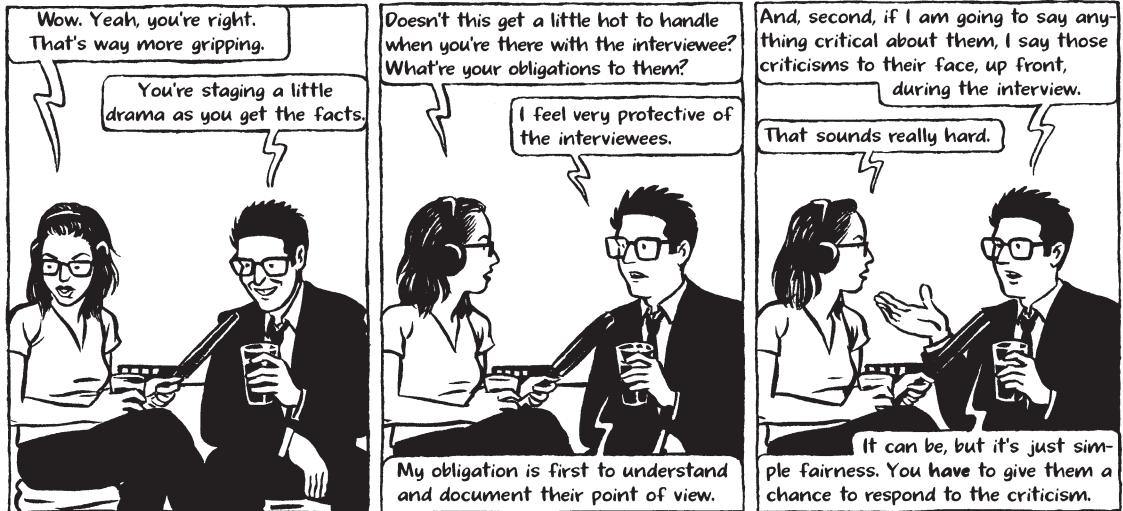
Like, this great producer I worked with, Keith Talbot, used to say that doing an interview is like hosting a party.



The detectives out of Jeff City said it wasn't kids. That this was a very adult thing. We were shot at from the top of the school. With a rifle.







Like, without that thing which says: in general, people, when they're in this situation, do this, it really, it just doesn't make sense in the context of radio. And some of these questions just go absolutely nowhere.

Has this changed your picture of what this country is?

Mine? No! Nothing to do with the country. This is America, man! If you don't like one place, you go somewhere else. Like the Bible says, "You dust your heels off and go on."

But eventually something will stick.

You ever hear this phrase, "No good deed goes unpunished?"

Ha ha ha... "No good deed goes unpunished"?! Well, probably not. But maybe we haven't done such a good deed for these people here. Not what they wanted, that's for sure. Maybe it's more what we wanted than what they wanted.

Like I said, radio is a peculiarly didactic medium, unlike, for example, theater, or comics, where something can kind of happen, and you're in a setting where people will infer the meaning.

The way we're used to listening to radio is: something happens, and then they say "here's why we're talking about this. Here's what it means."

So you do this because we're used to it this way?

Also because it's more satisfying. If you tell the story without the moment of reflection at the end, it loses grandeur. Moving to the general statement takes you out of the province of bar story and into the world of literature...you know, where you want to be (hee hee)...at least at this end of the radio dial!

What do you think it means that radio has to spell out for listeners the significance of the stories it tells, but, in other art forms, that sort of thing comes across as heavy handed?

It's just another example of how much more fun it is to make radio than to work in any other medium.

Just for that, I'm drawing you without hair for the next page. Then we'll see what's fun.

INTERVIEWING LIVE

If you're thinking about trying to do an interview yourself, remember this: all of the interviews you hear on *This American Life* are edited—in the case of the Canalou story, 12 hours of interviews with five or ten people ended up being whittled down to about 15 minutes of quotes and sound. If you're not planning to attempt editing (see further info about editing, pages 18-19 and computer editing tools, pages 20-21), keep these rules in mind: You aren't going to be able to cut anything boring out, so structure your interview carefully. Choose your sequence of events.

Think about when you are going to have the person tell stories, and when you are going to, as Ira puts it, "deploy them against them", i.e., when you are going to quote things they have previously said or written back to them.

Never stop thinking about pacing. If an answer seems boring, politely move things along. Charm. Cajole. React with amazement when they say something amazing. Laugh if they're funny. Don't forget that YOU are part of the interview.

For reflections, Noah Adams once said that if you're thrown into an interview situation under-prepared, one question that always works is: "What did you think this was going to be like before you started, and then what was it really like?" This will almost always yield a great answer, because it evokes two stories, and it evokes a lesson.

WRITING: GETTING YOUR STORY STRAIGHT

So you're done with the interviews, you go home, and then you do what with 12 hours of...stuff?

First, you have to get control of the tape. It's really easy to get overwhelmed, to lose sight of the story.

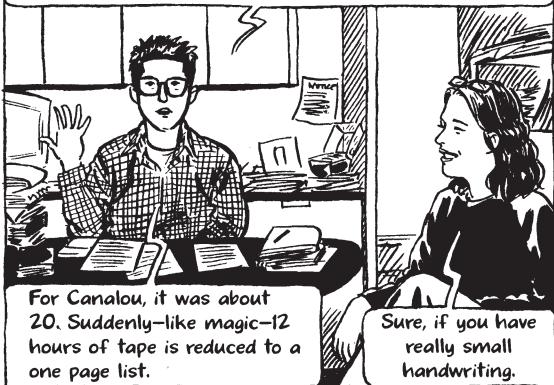


You have to whittle 12 hours down to 15 or 20 minutes, so the first step is to LOG the tape.

It's impossible to overstate how important it is to take good notes if you're making radio. After all, you're working in a medium which is just sound floating through the air. It's ether. Vapor. You need a representation—on paper—so you can see what the hell you've got and make hard choices.



Logs are long. 119 pages for the Canalou story. So next you go through and circle your favorite three or four moments from each interview. Then you take out a clean piece of paper, and make a list of all those favorite moments.



For Canalou, it was about 20. Suddenly-like magic—12 hours of tape is reduced to a one page list.

Sure, if you have really small handwriting.

What's a log?

A log is like a transcript, but less exact. You don't need every word. You can type or hand-write. The key is: You want to take notes on what's in the tape without ever stopping it.



Have a word or phrase for each sentence. You'll need this later, when you're editing, choosing which sentences to keep. The log will be a map of what's there.

have problems like big town's have these days.

SO 1950S GREW UP HERE?

yes for both of us.

DESCRIBE HOW TOWN WAS BACK THEN?

*****kenny: the town was relaly a booming town, on saturday had to get here early to get place to park. had six grocery stores four or five restaurants and come to town to visit, no tv back then.

VISIT EACH OTHER?

visit each other. play checkers, old men play checkers, old men would be visiting and kids would be playing until two or three in the morning.

jackie: and they'd put us little ones in the back of the cars to sleep b/c we couldn't stay with them. they played rough.

Logging an interview in real-time is one of the tests you have to pass to become a tape cutter on Fresh Air. It's one of the first things we teach our interns.

Then you just stare at your list, until it seems clear which piece of tape (or which script idea) should be the first moment in the story, and which should be the last. This is the Zen part.

When Kenny + Jackie were kids
- talk tape
- intvw

So decided to move back -
but a lot had changed

Brad + Susan + lot
- (dead now)
dont move houses - h made video

Don't think or himself as de godder
- everyone talking
- everyone calling
- And from that, you build an outline.

Then you start writing. You choose and edit your final quotes at the same time as you write the script. Some tips on writing for radio:

TESTIMONIALS, ETC.

from all the surrounding

And when Kenny Whorton and his wife Jackie talk about what it was like in Canalou when they were kids, it's a dream, a town in an old black and white

tape -- :10 This was the place ...
the last four seconds of this]

tape -- :16 The old men ... give out [laugh]

Notice how you tell the story when you tell your friends. Notice the things you say, and the order you say them. This paragraph is in the story because whenever Julie told anyone about Canalou, one of the first things she found herself talking about was this kid.

When I pulled into Canalou, a 4-yr old who lives next door to the Whortons was playing in a drainage ditch. These ditches line both sides of every street in town, because there's no sewage system here. Most people live in trailers, not regular houses. And some people empty their septic tanks straight into these ditches, where kids play. The day I arrived it had rained and the ground was soft and muddy everywhere. An adult who'd let this four-year old touch her a few weeks back had gotten a rash on her face that even the doctors up in St Louis couldn't identify or cure.

This is the town Kenny and Jackie couldn't wait to get back to ...

Write the way you talk. If there's any phrase in your script that you wouldn't actually say to a person in a real conversation at dinner, rewrite. These dot-dot-dot sentence constructions are normal in radio scripts, but would never cut it in a newspaper.

to come back and build a home here.

supervisor at McDonnell Douglas - the n the suburbs ... raised two kids ... sociations and the board of ed ... And ed back to Canalou, they'd try to bring

back some of the spirit [they remembered growing up here in the 50's & 60's ... maybe start a little league ... park with swings and trees ... put up a gym wheel ball ... the kinds of straightforward, innocent hard to imagine anyone opposing anywhere ...

Remember that in a narrative, you have to keep raising a series of broader questions, woven into the storytelling.

This is the story of why they failed ... of why people did turn their backs on the Whortons ... why three years of using every skill they had - devoting energy and hope - only proved to them that Canalou did not want to be improved ... and that something had changed in this small town that would take a lot more than two do-gooders to reverse.

Hopefully people hear this and want to know what happened. Moments like this create suspense. Suspense, after all, is simply an unanswered question.

The key is to keep moving between different kinds of moments: funny scenes, emotional scenes, raising questions. After several minutes of people talking about how terrible Canalou is...

So we put in a scene where we heard people goofing around at home: a kid does his Forrest Gump and Sling Blade imitations; a woman talks wistfully about how great it'll be to grow old in Canalou.



Julie and I felt strongly that we needed a moment explaining what's good about the town. After all, some people like it there.



Once you have a first draft, you run the whole thing by someone else. You read them the script and play the quotes. They critique. On our show, I edit the producers' stories, and they edit mine.

That transition to the last scene makes no sense. The tape's pretty but I have no idea why I'm hearing it.

I know,
I know.

You know what the point of this scene is? In order to do good of any kind, you have to have a vision of the way you want things...There's a ruthlessness to changing anything...



Hold it—let me type this into the script...

...to imposing your will on what the world is...And the danger of having a vision is that your vision can cloud your eyes about what is...

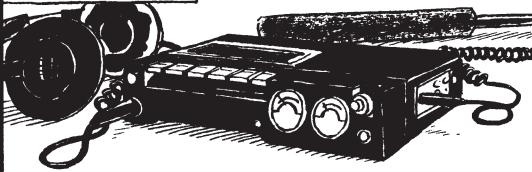
...will on what the world is...And the danger of having a vision is that your vision can cloud your eyes about what is...

Often when I talked to Jack with her vision of Canalou the past was to her ... People here 40 years saw the town



TAPING AN INTERVIEW

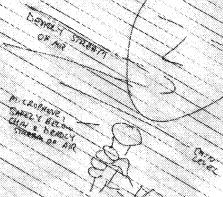
First of all, equipment: for broadcast quality recordings, you'll need a recorder and a microphone (built-in mics won't cut it).



They're expensive to rent (\$30-\$100), but if you're volunteering at a public radio station, you might be able to borrow the gear. If you're buying, some good models are the Marantz PMD 222 (\$370) or the Sony TC-D5 (\$800—this is the one we use). Acceptable mics: Beyer M58 (\$160), Electrovoice RE50 (\$170), Audio Technica AT835B (\$200, a shotgun mic; harder to use, but the one we use). There are other good recorders, including minidisc and DAT recorders.

3) Get in close. The single biggest factor in making a good recording is proper mic placement. You can make cheap equipment sound good if you do this right. Hold the mic 3-4 inches below the interviewee's mouth, just below the chin. Yes, you'll feel weird getting this close to a stranger's face. **But you must.** Be brave! Now I will demonstrate the cartooning skills that inspired me to hire Jessica for this job:

Ira © 1999



Keep the mic below the mouth: if it's 4" away, but directly in front of the mouth, the air coming out of the interviewee's mouth will make annoying "p-pops."

2) Location location location. You need quiet. No noisy fans, no music or TV playing in the background, no street noise, nothing that'll make it hard to edit later. Avoid echoey rooms. A carpeted living room is ideal. And wear headphones so you can be sure the recording's OK.

NO

Shall we do our interview in this restaurant?



YES

Shall we do our interview in my hotel room?



Why is it so important to get close? Make a recording with the mic 4", 8" and 12" from your mouth. Listen. When the mic's closer, your recordings sound richer, with more frequencies present, with less of the hum of the room.



4) More mic placement. When you ask a question, point the mic back at yourself. Otherwise, the question won't be loud enough on tape. At the end of the interview, record a half minute of room sound, without anyone talking; you'll need this for editing.

*For further information about and links for taping, see the TAL website: www.thislife.org

EDITING: THE INVISIBLE ART

If you're trying to make something that sounds like the interviews or documentary stories on *This American Life*, you have to edit the sound. It's not as hard as you might think. In fact, editing is one of the great pleasures of working in radio. It's easy to go into a kind of trance.



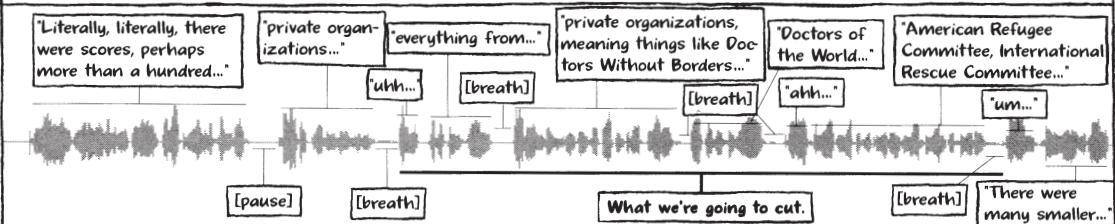
You can edit sound on reel-to-reel tape, using a razor blade to literally cut sentences out of your story.

On good minidisc decks you can do basic editing but nothing too subtle. And there's lots of good software that lets you edit cheaply on a normal home computer (see pages 20-21).

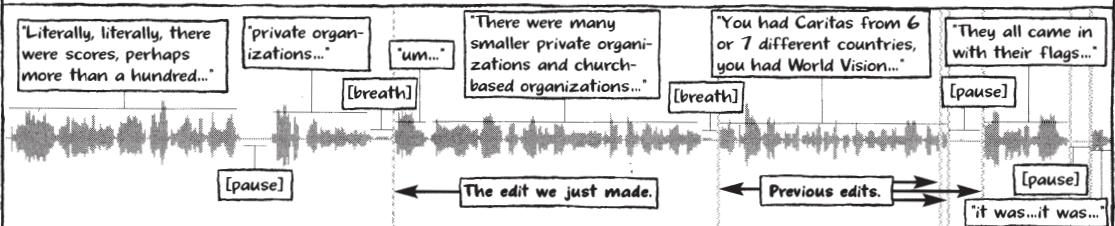


But whichever system you use, when you're editing people talking, there are certain basic rules. First, you have to preserve the rhythm of normal speech. When we speak, we normally say a sentence, and then we breathe, and then we say another sentence. Then we breathe again.

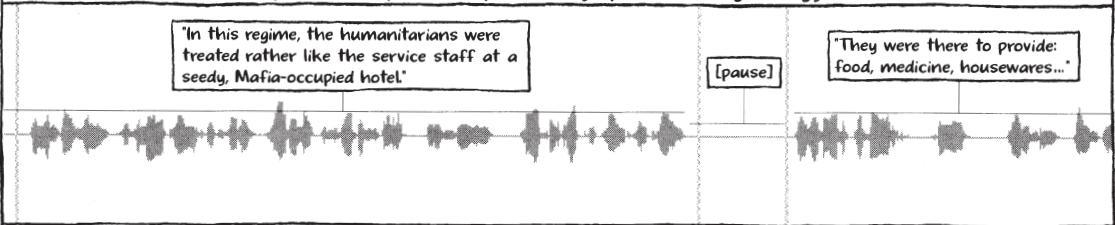
This is a section of Philip Gourevitch's interview, loaded into the editing software we use at *This American Life*. On the computer, sounds and words are graphically represented as waveforms, and edits are also visible, as vertical lines. Pauses are flat sections of line, and breaths are small waveforms. Notice where the breaths fall: often at the ends of sentences, but sometimes in the middle.



If you remove a phrase or a sentence, you have to keep the rhythm natural. Usually that means keeping a breath after each sentence, at the edit points. Sometimes you have to try different breaths, to see which one sounds more natural. Your edit points are almost always at the very beginning of a word (after a pause or breath) or at the very end of a word (before a pause or breath).

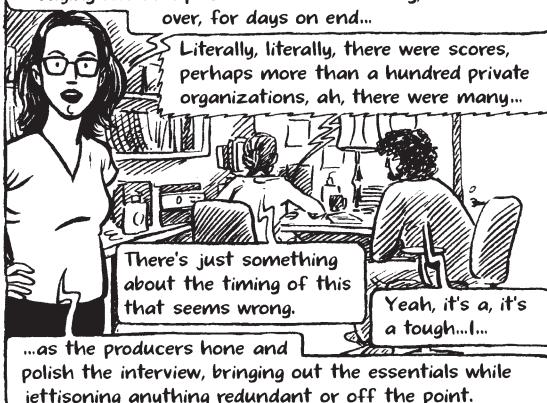


Second, there's a difference between a pause and a breath. Sometimes an interviewee will finish an important point, take a quick breath, but then rush on to the next idea. If you insert a pause—just the sound of the room—before the breath—or replace the breath with a pause, then their big idea will register more clearly with the listener. Here we inserted a pause to emphasize a particularly apt and chilling analogy.



Philip Gourevitch is one of the best interviewees possible. He has surprising and moving stories to tell, and many urgent and thoughtful things to say about those anecdotes. It took Nancy and Jorge two full days to choose among the many stories and ideas, and to shorten anecdotes here and there.

One of the most striking things about watching the producers at *This American Life* work is just this, the editing process—the sound of the interviewee's voice, saying bits and pieces of the same thing, over and over, for days on end...



Aside from anything else, they are capable of discussing the organization of ten or twelve selections of tape out of an hour-plus-long interview without referring to their notes, quoting back long sections of dialogue in order to make a point, and of listening to the same minute-long snippet more times than I think you want to know about.



It's just that the "ah" was at a different pitch...



...in a hundred private organizations, ahm, there were many smaller Christian organizations and church-based organizations, you had Caritas from six or seven different countries, you had World Vision and the International Red Cross, the United Nations agencies, it was really...

3:05 Tuesday 4/6: three days, four hours to air. The fierceness of the attention they pay to the minutest details of the tape is truly amazing to witness. While I watched, Nancy fixed an "um" of the wrong pitch that made the edited list of aid organizations sound, well, edited.



As an observer, it's hard to understand how they can remain enthusiastic about a story after having listened to it continuously for four ten-hour days in a row, but they do, which either says something about the type of person who's cut out to be a radio producer, or, possibly, the Zen-like trance Ira claims editing can cause one to go into.



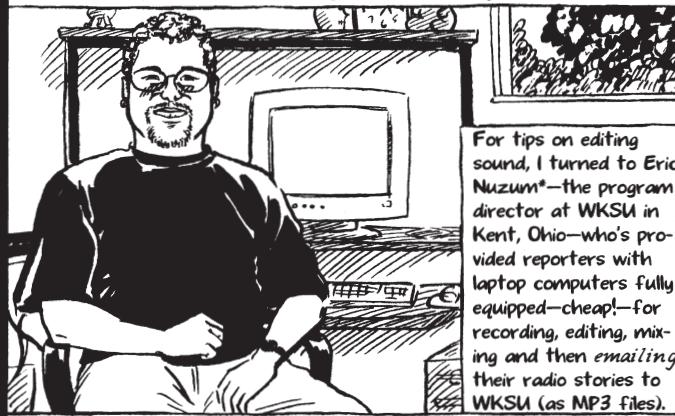
That one...



MAKE RADIO AT HOME WITH TECHNOLOGY!

So, if after reading this far, you think you want to try to make a radio story, think about this: home computers and webpages can be your best friends when you want to edit, or just disseminate your work.

Once you've recorded your tape (following taping hints, page 17), you will need certain simple equipment to continue.

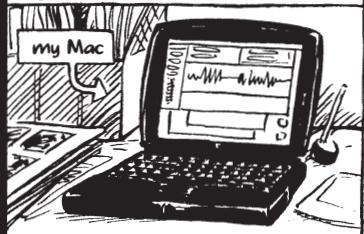


For tips on editing sound, I turned to Eric Nuzum*—the program director at WKSU in Kent, Ohio—who's provided reporters with laptop computers fully equipped—cheap!—for recording, editing, mixing and then emailing their radio stories to WKSU (as MP3 files).



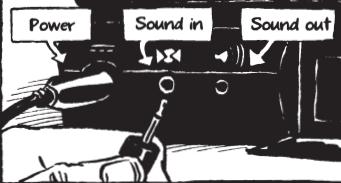
Whether you plan to just put the whole tape on the web, or you want to try editing it down, you have to convert your cassette tape (analog) into a computer sound file (digital). For that you will need:

1) A computer, the more recent and faster the better, but models up to five years old will probably do. (However, remember that sound takes up a LOT of storage space, so you'll need a very large and empty hard drive, or another large storage device.)



2) If you have a Mac, it's already sound-ready. If you have a PC, you'll need a sound card.

3) Sound-in (microphone) and sound-out (headphone) jacks on your computer.



4) A cord to connect the headphone jack on your tape deck to the sound-in jack on your computer, and another cord to connect the computer's sound-out jack to the microphone jack on your tape deck. Look for that kind of stuff at someplace like Radio Shack. On computers, the jacks are often 1/8"—that's walkman size.

Finally, software. This part's the most complicated, partly because there are so many choices. To begin with, try some of the free- and shareware options, since buying software will cost you between \$300-\$3000, and you don't even know if you like editing yet.



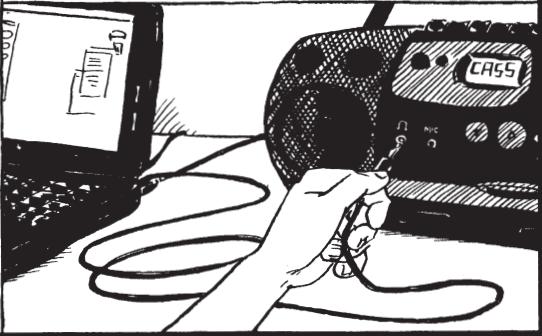
Most of what's available for cheap has a limited number of tracks, like eight instead of 24. Eight tracks are all you should ever need to edit a professional-quality radio piece with music, anyway.

The key is to find something that fits your needs as well as your system. On Eric's suggestion, I'm using Pro Tools Free, which has eight tracks, to edit on my Mac. You can get this at www.digidesign.com. There is a version of Pro Tools for PC, but it's a bit more complicated to learn, and so Eric prefers Cool Edit 2000 [\$69; www.cooledit.com].



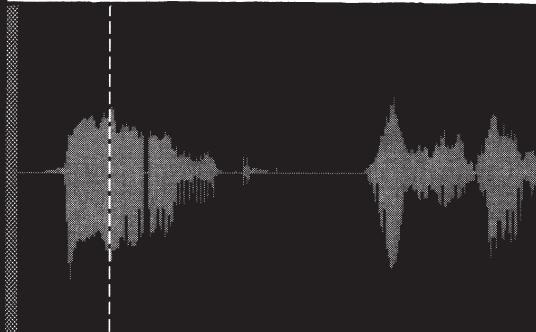
Eric usually gives Cool Edit to his news reporters who are completely new to digital editing. There are other programs, and you may find that your particular computer configuration means that you have to look around on the web for a different option, and, well, improvise.

The process: Digitize your tape. In general, you do this by plugging the sound out jack on your tape player into the sound in jack on your computer, opening your recording software, pressing play on the tape deck, and then pressing record on your computer screen. The piece will take as long to record onto the computer as it takes to play ("real time").



*For more editing hints from Eric Nuzum, check www.thisamericanlife.org. Also, look for his first book, *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America*, from Harper Collins.

When you're done, you'll have a big, huge file that looks, in the window on the screen, like a chain of beads. Those "beads" are words and sounds.



Once you've got the tape on the computer, if you're doing an unedited story, you can skip to the part about putting it on the web. If you're editing, remember these few rules:

3) Whatever program you're using—obviously, and seriously—read the manual. You're going to be on your own with the details of how the program works, and if you start by reading the manual, you will make your life much easier.

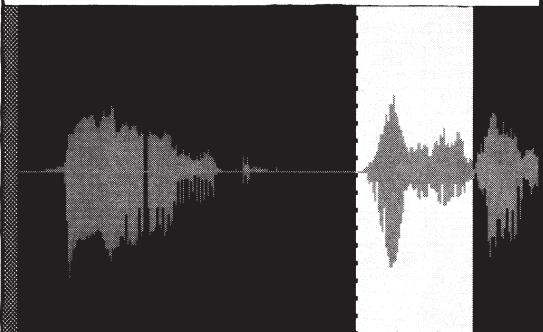


Whichever format you choose, you have to convert your digital audio file into that format. You will need the "encoder" software to do that. Obviously, each format has its own encoder, but there's usually a free version available. For MP3, check an MP3 website [like www.mp3.com] for info and software.



In order for RealAudio and Windows Media Player to work at maximum capacity, they require your server to have a special configuration: something that might be hard to find and will almost certainly cost you a fee. What you get for that, though, is "streaming": the listener can hear the piece while it is downloading.

D Editing sound is a lot like editing text: The waveform bumps are the equivalent of spoken words, and you can cut and paste them just like in a word processing program.



2) Always remember to respect natural speech patterns (sentence-breath-sentence) and retain those breaths when you move sentences around.

When you've edited to your heart's content, you can record the finished piece back onto a cassette (by reversing the "digitizing the sound" process), or you can convert it to some other format and put it on the web.



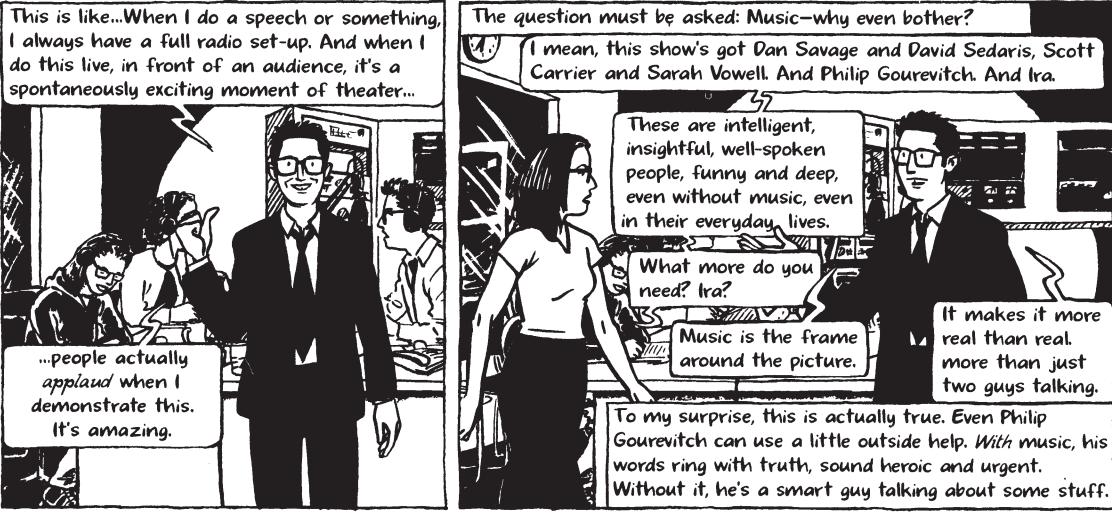
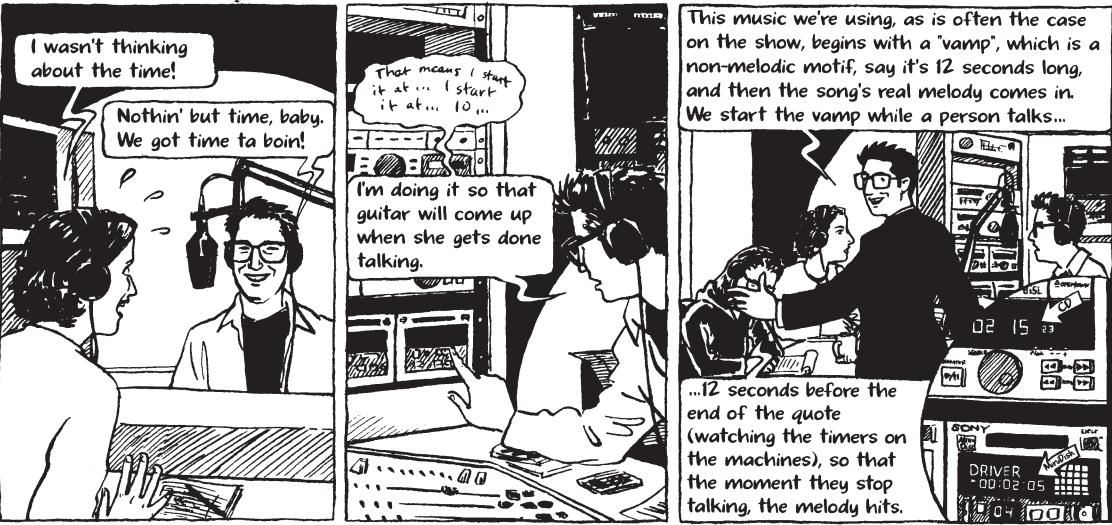
The old standard for sound files on the web was RealPlayer [www.realaudio.com], which is freeware. Now you've got Windows Media Player and MP3 (which provides higher-quality audio), among other things, so there's no way to cover everything, but here are some basics.

MP3 is a format that does not require anything special of your server, but the listener will have to download the whole thing before playing it. (And, of course, for any format, your listeners will have to have the applicable "reader" or "player" software).



PUTTING MUSIC TO WORDS

6:32 Friday 4/9, 28 minutes to air.



With music, his points are divided into sections, his most important statements highlighted. When he finishes presenting an idea, the music plays for six or seven seconds, and you can just ponder. It gives you time to understand him better.



Finally the killing was brought to a halt by a rebel army within Rwanda, and the command that had been going out over the government radio, to the Hutu majority...

...had been previously: kill all the Tutsi, join in the killing. Now it was: Flee. Join in the exodus. And really close to a million and a half or two million people fled Rwanda in the largest and fastest mass exodus...



...I mean, this guy says great stuff, but he talks in a way that's not so helpful for scoring: it's very long, he doesn't tell a lot of specific, discrete anecdotes, and there's a lot of changing of scenes.

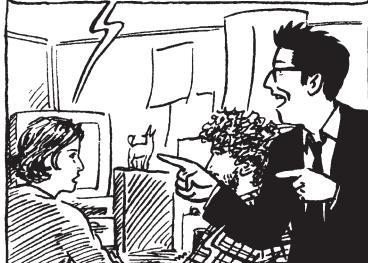
2:35 Wednesday 4/7: two days, four hours, and 25 minutes to air: Alix is teaching Jorge how to score a piece, using the Philip Gourevitch interview.



Sometimes there're obvious music cues, like, somebody will introduce a new character, or they'll talk about some event, or some feeling, and you bring in music which speaks to that in some way.



...and you always take out the music when there's a big idea that you really want people to pay attention to. You lose the music so it stands out.



It's like shining a light on it.



COMMUNITY RADIO: FCC-APPROVED AND OTHERWISE

With an eye to figuring out just how straightforward it would be to actually get on the radio, I visited two Chicago community-oriented radio stations. One was WHPK, the station attached to the University of Chicago. The other was Free Radio West Town, a pirate (or, the preferred term, micro-powered radio) station.

It's part of HPK's mission statement to have non-students do shows. Probably 40% of our DJs aren't students: they're the ones who make the station viable 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

People who are willing to come in Christmas day, who are very dedicated.

Ben is one of two DJs responsible for Pure Hype, a show where bands play live from WHPK's studio.

This year, we invited the candidates for alderman in the 4th and 5th wards to do interviews. That was great. We're hoping to do more of that.



Pure Hype tries to play 60% local music. Even when the music isn't incredible, it's great to hear this local stuff; it's really important.

Dave, now a grad student at University of Illinois, dropped out of Columbia University to go to a city where he could hear Chicago Blues every night—

There was only one city that met that qualification.



There was already a blues show, called the Evil Show, on HPK at the time. I started hanging out with the DJ, and when he left town, maybe 3 years later, I was his successor. I've been doing the show for 11 years.

FCC-APPROVED
AND OTHERWISE

I don't think there's a conscious effort to bring in community members, but within the last week, we probably got ten calls from people who want to do shows.



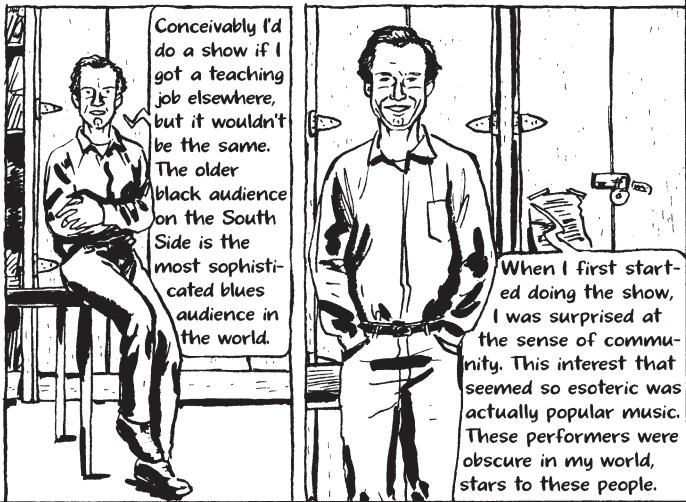
Sandra just ended her one-year stint as station manager.

Arkansas Red is the DJ of a very popular blues and R&B show on WHPK.

When I moved to Chicago in 1973, I could see that radio lacked...where I come from in Arkansas, all we listened to was the blues. I thought, maybe I can play something I like, and maybe somebody else will like it too. In 1985, I just came over to WHPK and asked did they need someone to play blues, and they said yes.



The music that I play, the talk I do along with it, sometimes the regular callers—someone will call in and say I wonder how is so-and-so, I haven't heard from them in a while. And if one of the listeners passes, I go to the funeral, I announce it on the air, and a lot of listeners feel just as sad as if they knew the person.

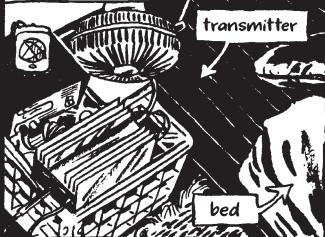


Conceivably I'd do a show if I got a teaching job elsewhere, but it wouldn't be the same.

The older black audience on the South Side is the most sophisticated blues audience in the world.

When I first started doing the show, I was surprised at the sense of community. This interest that seemed so esoteric was actually popular music. These performers were obscure in my world, stars to these people.

According to the spiritual head (hey, the station's transmitter sits on a milk crate at the foot of his bed) of FRWT, "Colin Sick", Class D licenses, for stations under 100 watts, were scrapped by the FCC in '79, largely due to lobbying by NPR and NAB [Nat'l Association of Broadcasters] to increase "professionalism" on the airwaves.



It's harder to do and sometimes a bit boring when you only have your own record collection to draw on. This week, I'm playing all my old 7-inches!



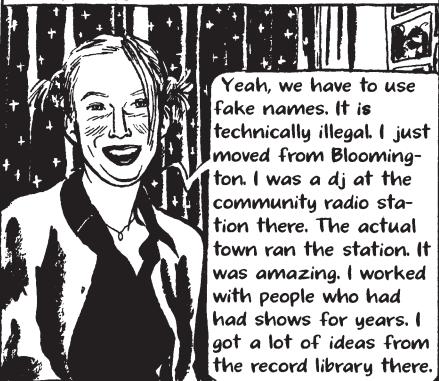
I love radio—I saw a flyer for the station at the Autonomous Zone [a local anarchist community center], called a phone number and met 'Colin Sick' at the Hollywood Grill for an interview.

So let's take a moment to acknowledge his generosity in not holding a grudge against public radio, and talking to me.



We've been on the air for just over a year. Initially, it was mainly me, Toxic Cloud—who's in Paris right now, but will be back—and El Goma, who moved to Boston.

"But although it started a year ago, the community involvement has grown enormously very recently. We just expanded our schedule: 5 p.m. to 1 a.m. Mon. and Tues., and we're hoping to upgrade to a 60-watt transmitter."



Yeah, we have to use fake names. It is technically illegal. I just moved from Bloomington. I was a dj at the community radio station there. The actual town ran the station. It was amazing. I worked with people who had had shows for years. I got a lot of ideas from the record library there.

I went to an illegal party over on Chicago Avenue a couple months ago... a guy was passing out flyers saying there might be slots. At this point, I've been here a little over a month. Maybe radio didn't exactly occur to me before...



...but I had a very strong desire to be involved in music. It was like a pipe-dream for me, and then this guy hands me a flyer.

We did a survey, and found five spots on dial with three vacant frequencies in a row. Then we cross-referenced them with FCC's website. That was handy!



The educational band, down at the low end of the dial, was way way too full.

There're companies that will sell the equipment mail order; it's not too hard to get. It's not illegal to sell it, just to use it!



Oh, cool!

There's a flyer over the phone with instructions on it...

How does it work?



A lot of the equipment was donated: FM receiver and turntables, speakers. The broadcasting setup, the transmitter, power supply, the antenna, the SWR [standing wave ratio] meter, coaxial cable, compressor limiter, that was all under \$1000: student loan money (but I'm not saying whose!).

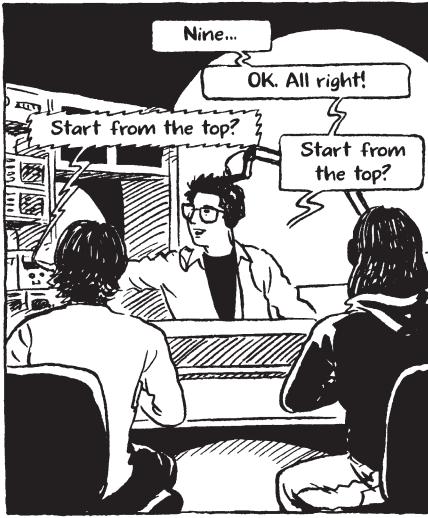
*For some micro-powered (pirate) radio resources, see the TAL website: www.thisislife.org

FROM THE TOP, TAKE 2

6:22 Friday 4/9: 38 minutes to air



What is 'rolling off'? You can't play it off the computer?



The top of the show—that five-minute-or-so introduction Ira does each week—is recorded ahead of time, but sometimes not much ahead of time.

I grew up on a daily news show. That's normal to me. That's what I'm used to. There's no slack in the system.

It was common to get a feed that needed editing and mixing 20 minutes before it went on the air.

For a while we tried to not do *This American Life* live; we went on the air locally on Friday and then put it up on the satellite a week later. But then we didn't take the initial broadcast seriously. It was like an art project—um, not that there's anything wrong with an art project...

Doing it so close to the edge—for better or worse—makes it feel like a real radio show.

Now it's like, when we broadcast the show, at that exact moment—

—our voices are going into SPACE!!

You know when a deadline isn't real, and when it is.

For "Do-Gooders," Ira and Alix finished recording the top at about 20 minutes to air, and Alix finished the edit at about four minutes to air, (and had missed one stumble in Ira's reading, which would be fixed before the re-broadcast on Saturday, but still caused her to lose sleep on Friday night).

On the other hand, we normally try to record the top of the show by 5:00 on Friday. It's a lot easier to read the script if there's less pressure.

The top is the biggest section of the show that's mixed live—meaning that all the music is brought in and cut out, and all the quotes—"actualities" in radio-speak—are played by hitting buttons and sliders on the console, not by orchestrating everything on a computer screen.

Ironically, the story that became the top of the Do-Gooders show, finished at four minutes to seven on Friday 4/9, was the story that got the whole idea for the show rolling in the first place, back in January: the Blind Woman.

HOW TO GET ON THE (PUBLIC) RADIO

Many people you meet in public radio started by working at a station for free. Or interning. I did both. I worked at a college station, where I learned the rudiments of cutting audio tape and using the equipment. The technology's so simple, you can learn the basics in just a few weeks.



Then I got an internship at NPR's headquarters in Washington, making 30 and 60-second promos. That led to a paid job when I was 20, with a guy whose job was to invent new ways to do radio documentaries, Keith Talbot.



After a few years as a tape cutter at NPR, I decided to learn to write and report for the radio. I again worked for free, this time on the all-volunteer news staff at the Pacifica station in Washington, WPFW.

The absolute fastest way to a paid job at NPR in Washington is to learn to edit reel-to-reel tape. Because so few people know how to cut tape, there's always a demand for decent tape cutters to fill in for people who are sick, vacationing, on assignment, or promoted.



It's a fun, great job, and once you fill in for a while, you become more qualified for the full-time jobs at NPR than any outsider ever could be.

For a long time after that, I was a freelance reporter. But it took me so long to do each story that I couldn't make a living at it. So I supported myself as a temp typist, two or three days a week (and actually loved it, loved it, loved it).



Here I am—between typing gigs.

That's pretty much how everyone on the show got their start in public radio, just by sort of being around.



Ira did his internship, Julie and I both did internships, but then after the internship you just sort of keep showing up, keep presenting yourself, "here I am, here I am again." And that's why Alix's story is so perfect.

She saw some little notice in the paper, literally like this tiny, little, one-sentence thing, that said that I, me, Ira, was going to start a radio show. She says she saw this little window—and she always holds up her fingers with the space of two or three lines of text between them at this point in the story...



And she says "this is the window that I will climb through," or crawl through, I think is the word she used, "to get to this life that I want to make for myself" and then she just willed it to happen.

So she called him, relentlessly, for, I don't know, two or three weeks, and finally they spoke in person, and then he said, you know what, I appreciate your interest, you seem like a competent person, but I just don't know what I would have you do.



And so finally I called Ira up and said "I need to know if you are going to give me this internship." And Ira said "No, I have no idea what I would do with you. No."



So I just called Ira back and said, okay, here's the deal. I'm gonna come in for two weeks. And at the end of the two weeks, you can send me away.

I remember saying, okay, that's fine. And I hung up the phone. And then I remember sitting on the couch in my kitchen. And I just—he'd just been the only thing I wanted to do. For months. It was the only thing I could imagine doing. It just didn't seem possible that it wasn't going to happen.

...and she just kept going back and back and saying no, you really need an intern, I know you're going to need an intern, and even hung up the phone and called him back later and said you know what, I'm just going to come down there and be your intern, and then as far as I heard, she did.



And you know, Ira just kind of couldn't say no. And then she just made herself totally indispensable. It's the perfect getting-a-job-in-public-radio story, but it's also so much better than that...



because it's a story that you want to be true, and it actually is true, like the starlet who gets picked while she's just having a sundae.

I mean, as it turned out she was just phenomenally precocious. She just worked tremendously hard and caught on very very quickly and created her own style of doing things very very quickly.



But there are a couple things about Alix's story that makes it something I'm hesitant to have people take to heart. One is that she was able to do that only because she had saved up some money and didn't actually need an income for the next six months.

I think that one of the problems of public radio is that only people who have some sort of financial stability, either of their own, or more likely, their parents, can afford to take this route.



I think that's a real flaw.

...um, and the other thing is, I don't encourage people to stalk us. I just want to say that anybody reading this in here, in the comic book, just please don't stalk us.



Now we have a real internship program where you get paid well for learning radio. Details on our web page.

...Nor do I recommend it as a good way of getting involved, and I'm not just saying that because it encourages stalkers, but because I think that persistence is great but I also think that NOT everyone's going to get hired this way, and there are other ways to get experience.



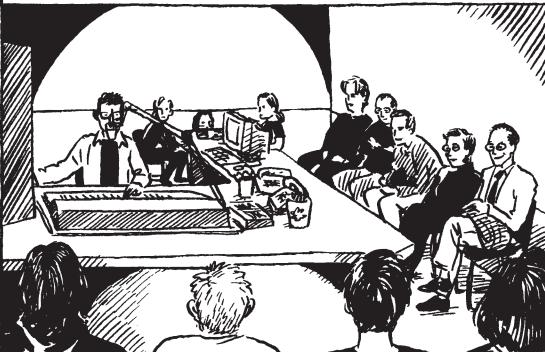
If you're thinking about getting into this, you should just assume that for the first year or two you're not going to make enough money to live on. You have to take this as the cost of learning...



Figure at least it's cheaper than grad school. After that, you'll have the skills to support yourself in radio.

FROM THE TOP, TAKE 3

And then, finally, on Friday at 6:58 exactly, the public radio satellite is put at the disposal of *This American Life*.



At that moment, the studio is often full of visitors, watching, hoping they don't have an irresistible urge to cough at the wrong moment, excited to see how the whole thing works. And here is how it works:

Thirty-three minutes later, Jackie and Kenny's story ends. Ira plays the song that he and Sarah have just chosen. Next, he reads the script that goes into the ID break, pauses a second, plays 59 seconds of ID-break music for local announcements, pauses for a second, and reads the next intro (to the Gourevitch story, in this case) live.



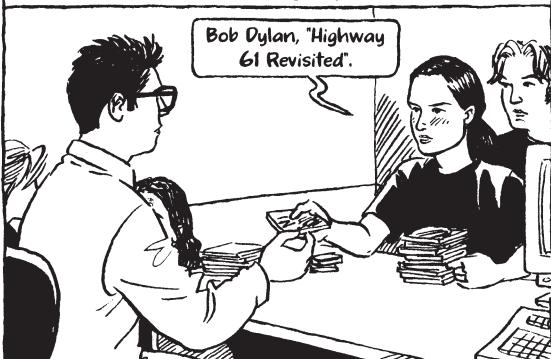
Coming up, do-gooders with a million dollars a day in their pockets and plane tickets overseas. That's in a minute, from Public Radio International, when our program continues.

The key to the whole thing isn't structure. In fact, the simpler the structure, the more space you have to follow your curiosity, to work in the moments and quotes that give you pleasure, or evoke some feeling in you, or amuse you.



Wait, so, we just spent 30 pages giving away all the secrets to the show and now you tell me that you're still basically on your own and have to follow your own instincts to make radio?!

First, Ira plays a tone for a minute and 50 seconds. This lets stations that are recording set the proper level on their tape machines. At 7:00 exactly, he plays the DAT of the show's opening (the "top"), then the DAT of the first story—about Kenny and Jackie. As the story plays, he and Sarah Vowell discuss what song to put on when it ends.



You know, when you spell out how the show is made, it sounds almost formulaic—an anecdote, some bigger idea, another anecdote, a few seconds of music—but on the air, it doesn't feel like a formula.



Well, that structure—and all the rules here—they're just the bare frame of a stage on which the people and ideas of a show can take place. We stretch and break these rules all the time. But they give us a framework to think about what we're doing.

Well, yeah! A group of people with different personalities than ours could take the same ideas about structure and writing and editing, and make a show that's way sassier than ours, or way more emotional, or way more reverent.



The key is to express your own personality. Radio is boring when the people on the air just want to sound like everyone else. The people who are the most fun to listen to—from Paul Harvey to Terry Gross—they sound only like themselves. Everyone should try it.

END. 8/18/99

THIS AMERICAN LIFE FROM WBEZ

TECH UPDATE FROM PP. 20-21

Most of the technical information on those pages is still relatively accurate, with one notable exception: recording has gone digital, not just editing. No one really records on tape anymore. There are lots of digital recorders out there, ranging in cost from a couple hundred bucks into the thousands. You can even record good sound on most smartphones now, with mic attachments. In 2012 we use Marantz PMD 661 recorders, which cost about \$600. A few good mid-range options are made by Zoom.

There are also new free editing platforms, including Garage Band, Audacity and more. Ask a young person - seems like they just know how to make media at birth these days. Cool Edit, referenced on p. 20, is now known as Adobe Audition. And Eric Nuzum, who recommended that software, is now Director of Programming and Acquisitions at NPR.

Web audio has gotten more advanced: RealAudio has faded, mp3 is dominant, and streaming on demand is replacing downloading. Services like SoundCloud (basically YouTube for Audio) make hosting files easy. And platforms like the Public Radio Exchange (PRX) make it easier for your stories to find their way to the airwaves. Podcasting is huge in public broadcasting: at the time of this writing, seven of the top ten iTunes podcasts are public radio shows. The podcast and streaming audience for *This American Life* is about half of that on the radio, and growing.

STAFF

In April 1999 (when this comic was written) *This American Life* was produced by Ira Glass, Julie Snyder, Alix Spiegel and Nancy Updike, with help from Todd Bachmann, Jorge Just and Sylvia Lemus.

The 2012 staff includes producers Alex Blumberg, Ben Calhoun, Sarah Koenig, Jonathan Menjivar, Lisa Pollak, Robyn Semien and Alissa Shipp. Julie Snyder is now the show's Senior Producer. Seth Lind is the production manager. Emily Condon is the office Manager. Adrienne Mathiowetz runs the website.

THANKS

Marketing help from the friendly folks at Public Radio International. Legal advice from Bennett Epstein. And many thanks to the public radio stations across the country who have supported us through thick and thin.

LISTEN

You can hear the "Do Gooders" show you've now read about—or any other episode of *This American Life*—for absolutely free, at:

www.thisamericanlife.org

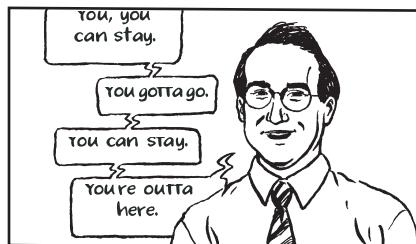
You can also find out how to find the show on a radio station near you, subscribe to our free podcast, download our mobile apps, or purchase merch.

KEEP LEARNING

You might also look at Transom.org, which is a website devoted to putting tools into people's hands to make interesting radio stories. It not only has a ton of basic information about the tech side of things; it's the only place where radio newbies get to chat with experienced radio oldtimers like Scott Carrier, David Isay, Joe Richman and Jay Allison.

ONE MORE THING

WBEZ management oversight by Torey Malatia, who walks through the *This American Life* offices every day saying:



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Photo by Seth Kushner

(Fantagraphics Books), two collections that gather stories and drawings from her omnibus comic book *Artbabe*, which she published between 1992 and 1999.

Abel won the Xeric Grant, and both the Harvey and Lulu awards for "Best New Talent" in 1997; *La Perdida* won the 2002 "Best New Series" Harvey Award. She teaches at New York's School of Visual Arts. Madden and Abel are also series editors for *The Best American Comics*. They live in Brooklyn with their two children.

Find out more at:

jessicaabel.com and dw-wp.com

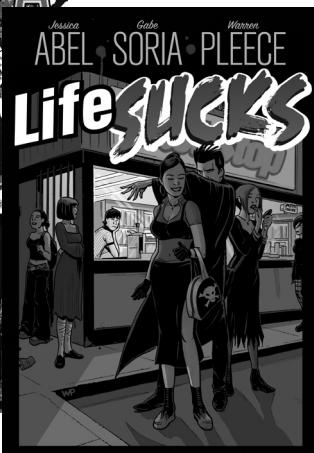
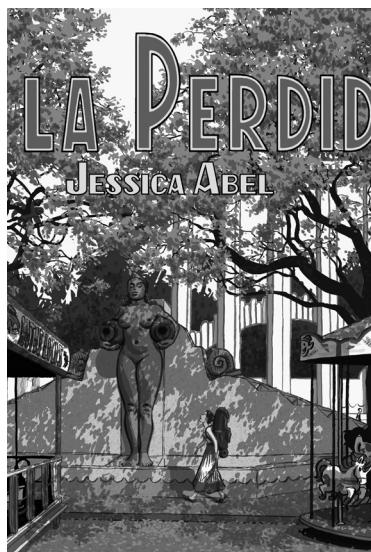
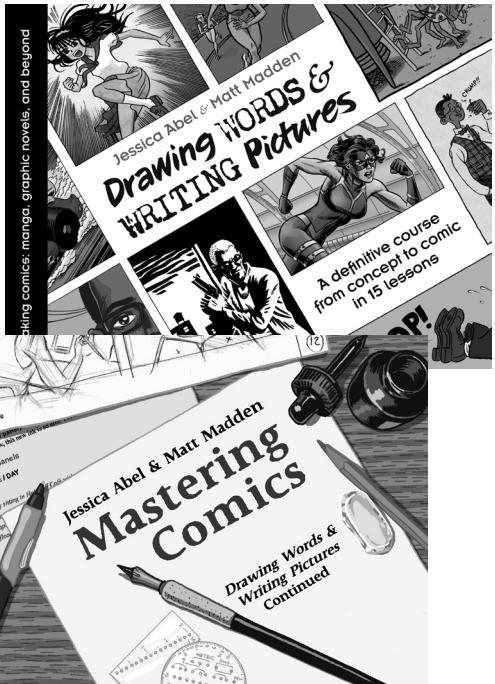
About the cartoonist

Cartoonist and writer Jessica Abel is the author of two textbooks about making comics written in collaboration with her husband, the cartoonist Matt Madden: *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures*, and *Mastering Comics*. She's also the creator of the graphic novel *La Perdida* (Pantheon Books) and co-writer of the graphic novel *Life Sucks* (First Second Books). Previously, she published

Soundtrack and Mirror, Window

(Fantagraphics Books), two collections that gather stories and drawings from her omnibus comic book *Artbabe*, which she published between 1992 and 1999.

Abel won the Xeric Grant, and both the Harvey and Lulu awards for "Best New Talent" in 1997; *La Perdida* won the 2002 "Best New Series" Harvey Award. She teaches at New York's School of Visual Arts. Madden and Abel are also series editors for *The Best American Comics*. They live in Brooklyn with their two children.



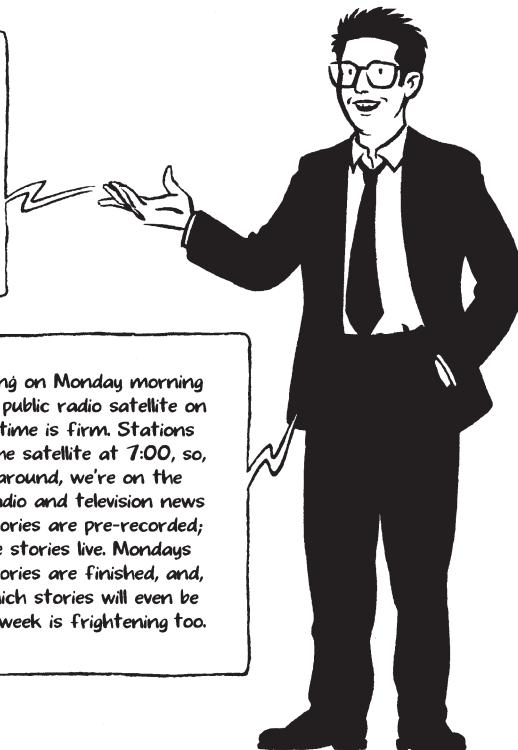
Acknowledgements

My thanks go to the staff of This American Life, and in particular Ira, Todd, and Elizabeth, for all their help and patience; Eric Nuzum for his generosity with his time and knowledge about computer editing; Brett Leveridge for help with photo reference; Dean Haspiel for sharing his comics and hip hop expertise; and all the people I talked to at WHPK and Free Radio West Town for their time. I'd also like to thank Seth Lind for his efforts in keeping this book in print and up to date.

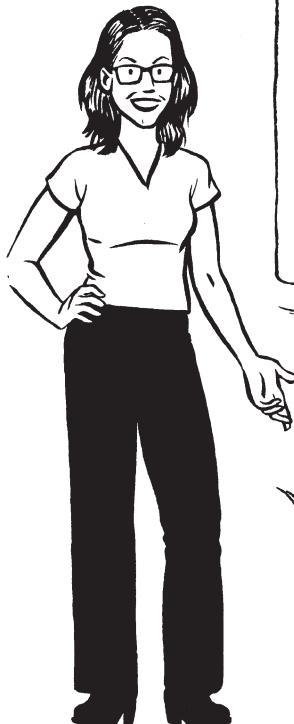
This comic is dedicated to Matt, with appreciation for his help, both concrete and ephemeral, his unwavering support, and his patience throughout this long process. With love.

[continued from inside front cover]

A few basics: Typically, we'll work on a episode of our show for three or four months before it makes it onto the air. For most of that time, we're just collecting stories. We'll consider 15 or 20 story ideas, and start collecting interviews on six or seven of those stories, before we finally settle on the three or four that make it into the show. The first time the Do-Gooders show came up in a story meeting was January 4th, 1999. The show aired April 9th.



Our work week begins with a story meeting on Monday morning and ends when we feed the show on the public radio satellite on Friday night at 7:00 Chicago time. That time is firm. Stations around the country tape the show off the satellite at 7:00, so, no matter what, when 7:00 Friday rolls around, we're on the air. The satellite feed is done like most radio and television news and magazine programs: The individual stories are pre-recorded; but the host—me—reads his intros to the stories live. Mondays can be rather frightening: none of the stories are finished, and, in fact, we still haven't totally decided which stories will even be ON the show. Of course, the rest of the week is frightening too.



Imagine this scenario: you are a fan of *This American Life* (if you're reading this comic book, that part's probably not too hard), and, in fact, have been a listener since it was still an unsyndicated local Chicago show called *Your Radio Playhouse*. You don't even own a TV, and Ira Glass would be an easy contender for your "favorite celebrity." A lifelong Chicagoan, you finally decide to see some of the world, and so you move to Mexico City in early 1998. One day, a few months after you've settled into your new home, the phone rings, and you answer *¿Bueno?* A nervous voice on the other end of the line says hello? um, my name is Ira Glass...and you about keel over. Hey, it happened to me.

I'm Jessica Abel, the cartoonist responsible for this book. I'm a professional in comics, but in radio, I'm a rank amateur, so this was as much of an education for me as I hope it will be for you. As an amateur, I decided that the responsible thing to do would be to try out all my instructions myself first. As this comic goes to press, I'm still in the middle of my attempts at making a radio story, so I can't guarantee results, but things are heading in the right direction. After hanging out with these guys for weeks, you'd want to start making radio too! And I hope after reading this book, you will. There are some instructions to get you started in these pages, but you should also check the TAL website (www.thisamericanlife.org) for more details and info on producing audio at home. Good luck!

I CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT MY



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