Diaries and Detritus

One Perfectionist's Search for Imperfection

Joe Richman

HERE IS A STORY about a cough.

It was 1963, in a stuffy courtroom in South Africa, during the trial of Nelson Mandela and other anti-apartheid activists for treason. The prosecutor was just beginning his opening statement when somebody in the courtroom coughed. It was an ordinary cough; it lasted less than two seconds. The prosecutor's words—and the cough—were recorded onto a reel-to-reel tape. At the end of the trial, Mandela and the other defendants were sent to prison on Robben Island. The tape was sent to the basement of a government archives. It remained there, mislabeled and probably unheard, for more than four decades.

Making radio presents a simple challenge: re-creating reality with words and sound. If the story is too clean and perfect, the messiness of life gets lost. Often the most "real" moments can be found in the margins and jagged edges, in the audio detritus. An important speech, for example, may be recorded and saved, but left out of this official transcript of history is the anticipation of the crowd, the feedback of the microphone, or the clearing of the throat before the speaker begins. These are the brief backstage glimpses—unofficial, accidental, mundane bits of sound—that help a radio story come to life and pierce the armor of our memory. Sometimes these moments can be just two seconds long.

I spent the summer of 2004 rummaging through archives in South Africa looking for sound that would help tell the history of apartheid for our series *Mandela: An Audio History*. One day I pulled out a reel-to-reel tape that was in bad shape. I had to keep splicing the tape back together as it played. I soon realized I was listening to a recording from Mandela's trial in 1963. It was thrilling to hear the prosecutor's actual words. But it wasn't

until the moment when somebody coughed that I could suddenly hear the echo and dimensions of the room, the stillness of the hot afternoon, and the hushed anticipation of the trial. The cough put me in that courtroom.

"Punctum" is a photographic term, but we should steal it for radio. "Punctum" is defined as a point or the precise location of something. But in photography (courtesy of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*), punctum is the unintentional detail that "fills the whole picture," the lucky accident that helps us understand the true nature of a story, or a person. Recently, I saw a photo in a newspaper of a young woman visiting the grave of her husband who had been killed in Iraq. In the photo, the woman is lying barefoot on the grass, almost hugging the ground. She doesn't look especially mournful, just quiet. There is something routine and ordinary about the scene that makes it even more poignant. The photo haunted me, and I cut it out. A few weeks later I looked at the photo again, and I noticed a detail I was not conscious of before: Next to the woman, along with her shoes, a vase of flowers, and a small American flag, is a disposable bottle of water. That juxtaposition of common and cosmic, the eternal and the everyday—the water bottle got to me.

In photography, punctum is a detail. In radio, a temporal medium, punctum can be a scene or a moment, as short as a cough or as long as a conversation. You can't create or plan punctum, you just have to recognize it when it happens. That's not always easy. The moments on the edges are the easiest to miss, the hardest to work with, and the first to be edited out. But every so often you stumble on a small, odd moment that you fall in love with, that amuses you, or that haunts you. And when you find it, you have to fight with your editor, and yourself, to keep it in the story.

Audio Diaries—Looking for Lucky Accidents

At Radio Diaries, the small nonprofit production company I founded in 1999, we give tape recorders to people and work with them to document their own lives. The diarists typically record for around a year, often collecting more than forty hours of tape: sounds, scenes, conversations, and late-night thoughts. All this tape is edited and shaped into documentaries for NPR's *All Things Considered*.

Over the years I've done diaries with inmates and guards in a prison,

elderly people living in a retirement home, an illegal immigrant, a judge, and teenagers of all types. One of my first—and still one of my favorite—diaries was with Josh Cutler, a sixteen-year-old with Tourette's syndrome, a neurological disorder that causes involuntary verbal and physical tics. What made Josh a great radio diarist was that I never knew what he was going to say next. Sometimes he didn't either:

> *People are always taught to think before they speak. Everybody has deep dark things that they don't want people to know they're thinking about. [Scream.] The bottom line is sometimes I actually have to teach myself not to care. I can't care because most of the time I can't control what comes out of my mouth. I control what comes out of my ass better than I control what comes out of my mouth. But the last thing I want people to think is, "Oh, poor Josh." It's not like I'm in a wheelchair or I have snot dribbling down my chin. I really just don't want anyone to be feeling sorry for me. This is not a Sally Struthers commercial.*
> —FROM JOSH'S DIARY, "GROWING UP WITH TOURETTE'S"

The fact that Josh could not always control what came out of his mouth is a kind of metaphor for this type of documentary journalism. The process of going through hours and hours of raw audio diary tapes is like mining for gold. Ninety percent is junk, but then every so often there are little magical moments that are completely unexpected. Details emerge about people that, in an interview, I would never have thought to ask about. Scenes happen on tape that I would never have known to even look for. Lucky, happy accidents.

In documentaries, the key to getting lucky is time; spending enough time for people to trust you with their stories, hanging out enough so that you're there when things happen. By turning the tape recorder into a constant companion, the diarists take this process a step further. It's like bringing the microphone backstage, to a place where truth and understanding are found not just in words but between words—in the pauses and accents, in the sighs and silences.

Teenagers are good diarists because they have an abundance of time. It's also an age when people are just beginning to discover themselves and their world. They are curious, and impatient for their life story to begin. And unlike many adults, teenagers have an inherent belief that whatever they say is important and people should be listening. When I ask a teenager to carry a tape recorder around for a year, they don't think I'm crazy.

Over the past decade I've lost, rather than gained, confidence in my ability to predict who will be a good diarist. I used to look for good talkers: extroverted, funny, energetic personalities. I call them talk-outers. Now I am often more drawn to talk-inners, voices that are soft and intimate, that make you lean in closer to your radio to hear what they have to say. The best diarists are a bit of both.

Radio is the perfect medium for diaries. The equipment is inexpensive and easy to use. A microphone is less intrusive than a video camera, so people can be more natural, more themselves. It takes a lot of time and practice to be natural. With all the diarists there comes a point, usually after a few weeks of recording, when they get bored. That's what I'm waiting for. They're no longer trying to sound like Tom Brokaw. They relax and become themselves.

It's like a photographer who takes beautiful portraits that are just a little bit . . . off. A photographer who doesn't snap the picture when you are expecting it. She waits a few beats until subjects begin to lose their pose, when the smile starts to slack, when they let their guard down, or get a bit uncomfortable. That moment happens in radio, too. And it's when you get the most interesting and authentic tape.

I think the real value of doing audio diaries is simply that the diarists can record things you can't. Most diarists find it easiest and safest to sit in their room and talk . . . like writing in a diary. But the real magic is when they record things happening on tape, when conversation or scene or action unfolds in a way that lets the listener experience life along with the diarist. If you manage to get just a few intimate and true moments like that into a story you're doing pretty well.

Cristel was eighteen when she began recording her diary inside a juvenile detention facility in Rhode Island. Late one night, while Cristel was recording, she heard a faint tap on the wall from the cell next door. It was a thirteen-year-old who had just recently been locked up. Neither of the girls could sleep. So they took turns knocking on either side of the cement wall, tapping out syncopated rhythms for the other girl to repeat. After about ten minutes the knocking stopped. Then Cristel picked up the tape

recorder, walked over to her window, and brought the microphone close to her mouth:

> *Sometimes, you know, I look out the window and I just sit here and think: Something I decided in ten minutes changed my entire life. Not even ten minutes. I mean three years have gone by, and I'm still sitting here. What would I be doing if I was out? What would my life be like? Would I have finished school? Would I have settled down? Would I have done something worse? I just look out the window and I think about all this stuff.*—FROM CRISTEL'S DIARY FOR THE *PRISON DIARIES* SERIES

To hear Cristel speaking quietly into a tape recorder late at night, it's almost possible to enter into her world, to imagine ourselves in that cell. Moments like these can't be captured by an outside reporter. There are some stories that can only be told by those who live them.

Diarists play two roles, subject and reporter, and negotiating the two can be tricky. So the rules—my rules, anyway—are different from those of traditional journalism. I give each diarist final editorial control over their story. This allows them to record as honestly and unselfconsciously as possible; they don't need to worry about censoring themselves in the moment if they know they'll be given an opportunity to edit later. I also pay most of the diarists a small stipend for their work. These ground rules are no different from those in any newsroom when you consider that the diarist is the reporter and I am the producer. Although, usually, I feel more like a midwife.

For many people, one of the few things they have control over is their own story. Removing the professional filter of a scripted reporter or host allows the diarist to communicate directly and intimately with the audience. This is why I believe audio diaries are uniquely valuable for telling the stories of those who are marginalized, forgotten, and voiceless.

I FIRST MET Thembi Ngubane in 2004. She was nineteen and living in a shack in a township outside Cape Town, South Africa. I was interviewing a few dozen teenagers with HIV/AIDS. But, at the time, I wasn't sure I really wanted to do a diary on such an overwhelming and heartbreaking topic. Then I met Thembi. She told me how she starts every morning by looking into the mirror and talking to her HIV virus; she called it her "HIV prayer":

> *Hello HIV, you trespasser. You are in my body. You have to obey the rules. You have to respect me, and if you don't hurt me, I won't hurt you. You mind your business, and I'll mind mine. Then I'll give you a ticket when your time comes.*
> —THEMBI NGUBANE, FROM "THEMBI'S AIDS DIARY"

I realized this would not be a documentary about AIDS; it would be a story about Thembi. She was—and still is—my window into an incomprehensible epidemic. She's also my reminder about what diaries do best.

No country is more affected by AIDS than South Africa. Yet journalists there, and all over the world, have a tough time getting people to pay attention to the issue. The editor of a newspaper in Soweto told me that every time they have a story about AIDS on the front page they can expect a drop in circulation of ten to fifteen thousand papers (more than 10 percent).

People feel differently about an issue—AIDS, prison, immigration—when it affects someone they know and love. I picture a person driving home from work, listening to NPR, with Thembi or Cristel or Josh in the passenger seat. It's not me in the car telling the listener about Thembi. It's Thembi. And by the end of the story, maybe the listener feels like Thembi is somebody they have gotten to know and now care for.

How do you turn a statistic into a real person? How do you make listeners love or understand your characters the way you do? How do you bring the audience into the story and let them experience it for themselves? The key lies in the poetry of the everyday. A cough in the courtroom, a soft knock on a prison wall, a teenager's prayer as she looks in the mirror. The stuff on the edges. The irony is that often the scenes that feel the most natural, ordinary, and raw actually require the most editing and crafting. You have to be a perfectionist to capture the messiness of life.

There is one particular moment like this in Thembi's diary that taught me an important lesson, a lesson I keep having to learn over and over. In the scene, Thembi and her boyfriend, Melikhaya, are at home. He puts on some music. Thembi says, "Let's dance." She talks about how hard it was to tell him the news when she first learned she was HIV positive. And as the music fades, she asks him a question.

THEMBI: Melikhaya, do you ever wish that maybe you would have never met me?

MELIKHAYA: No [laughs], just because the only thing is that I love you. You know that?

THEMBI: Yes, but I am the one who has infected you.

MELIKHAYA: I don't want to blame you. You didn't chase after AIDS. You didn't go to the top of the mountain and say you want to have AIDS, you know? And I don't want you to blame yourself. Just be strong.

In an early draft of the documentary, the scene ends here. It felt "moving" to me at the time. But as I was listening through some old tape I discovered a part of their conversation that I had previously edited out. For some reason it had seemed too peripheral, or too frivolous, or too imperfect to make it into the story. But when I put this moment back into their conversation, it turned an overly earnest and humorless scene ending into something playful, surprising, and much more powerful. Now, these are probably my favorite thirty seconds of Thembi's diary.

THEMBI: For me, what scares me most is I think we are not going to die at the same time if we die.

MELIKHAYA: I know that you think that if you die first I'm going to have another girlfriend. [They both laugh.]

THEMBI: No! [laughing] No! Really I'm thinking if one of us dies, how would it be. At least if we were going to die [Thembi and Melikhaya speak simultaneously], die at the same time [laughs].

MELIKHAYA: Give me a kiss for that.

[kiss]

Two teenagers joking about death. It's that juxtaposition of eternal and everyday, silly and profound. It's one of those throwaway moments that, at first listen, didn't seem to say much. But in the end, it says everything. I thought it was an imperfection. I had to rediscover, once again, that there are some magical imperfections that, while hard to recognize, are worth searching for.

Living History

Stephen Smith

WHEN IT'S DONE WELL, history on the radio is like a ride in Mr. Peabody's WABAC Machine: you end up somewhere you've never been before and meet characters you never quite imagined—and it's all in color. To explain: on the 1960s television cartoon show *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, the canine genius, Mr. Peabody, would instruct his pet boy, Sherman, to set the machine for a given date. A big "danger" sign on the WABAC (pronounced "wayback") suggested time travel was no trifling matter. The pair would wander across the centuries getting in scrapes and meeting historical characters like Cleopatra, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Calamity Jane. Most episodes concluded with a dreadful pun, like "Captain Clift is from Dover. Haven't you heard of the white Clifts of Dover?"

Using cartoon as metaphor only goes so far because much of history is not very comical. But whenever possible, a vivid sense of "being there" is the objective for radio history programs. A powerfully crafted history piece transports the listener to distant, imaginative terrain the way great travel writing delivers the reader to faraway lands. The writer Bill McKibben calls radio "mental travel." Archival tape and first-person narratives are the booster rockets of radio's Wayback Machine. Tape blasts the listener into another time.

As a producer, I prefer to journey through twentieth-century American history using found audio objects and interviews with people who lived through the events. However important a theme or an idea may be, stories and characters drive the narrative, not scholarly debates. Psychologists say that the stories we tell about ourselves are a critical and ever-changing facet of self-knowledge. And, as every great history teacher knows, a good story will stick with us in a way that facts and dates do not.

Some might say we are built of stories. At the very least, we are changed by stories.