Chapter 4

Radio Documentaries: A "Best-Kept Secret" No More
By Mike Janssen

Independent filmmakers have Sundance. Why shouldn't independent *radio* producers have their own international showcase?

That question came to Johanna Zorn, a senior producer at public radio station WBEZ in Chicago, who thought it was time that the genre of radio documentary, which feeds public radio some of its most memorable work, get its due.

"I've been in public radio my entire career," she says. "You get a little tired of being a best-kept secret."

If you listen to public radio, you've probably heard an audio documentary, either as a stand-alone hour in a station's schedule or amid the flow of hard news on magazine-style shows like NPR's *All Things Considered*.

Some audio documentaries study pressing societal issues such as poverty, mental illness or incarceration. Others veer toward the avant-garde, collaging snippets of conversations with sounds from everyday life, such as a rumbling train or crashing ocean waves. Whatever the subject, they stand out. They take their time to unfold, present a strong narrative thread, and sound intricately layered and realized.

You might not know, however, that most of these documentaries come from producers who survive on grants, far from the payrolls of stations and networks. As the label "independent" suggests, many of them work alone, and although public radio has a yearly roster of conferences about everything from programming to new media, it had been years since documentarians had a gathering of their own.

WBEZ was an apt sponsor for such an event. The station is home to *This American Life*, a weekly public radio show that often includes work from independent producers who specialize in personal narrative, and another of its programs, *Chicago Matters*, also features documentaries. Zorn garnered support from the station's board and management and started to plan what, in November 2001, became the inaugural Third Coast International Audio Festival.

Radio documentarians from around the world flocked to Chicago and shared their insights in panel discussions, and WBEZ encouraged them to enter their works in a judged competition that culminated in an awards banquet on the last day of the conference. The station worked the winning pieces and other entries into a three-hour program that aired on public radio stations around the country, and even overseas. Finally, a Web site (**www.thirdcoastfestival.org**) extended the conference's life and brought audio files of the documentaries to a wired and even wider audience.

When Zorn and her colleagues started to seek funding for the festival, they looked at how film festivals such as Sundance were supported, but she recalls they found only "moderate" success in brokering corporate trades. Holiday Inn, the site of the conference, came on board, but no airlines wanted to participate. Corporations also shied away from giving support.

Foundations, however, proved more enthusiastic, and WBEZ's first boost came from a $100,000 challenge grant from the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, a Chicago neighbor.

"It was such an unusual project, and it was being shepherded by very smart people," states Sunny Fischer, the foundation's executive director. "There hadn't been a

place for individual radio documentarians to meet for a very, very long time." Driehaus also places a premium on funding competitions, especially in architecture, so the Third Coast's promise to recognize outstanding documentaries held special appeal.

Because the foundation has supported public radio for years, its board needed little persuasion, Fischer says. "Public radio provides in-depth coverage of subjects that you rarely hear about other places," she adds, noting that the medium is often ahead of the curve when it comes to identifying trends and hot-button issues. "Sometimes the first time you hear about an issue is on public radio, and then you start reading about it a couple of months later in the traditional press."

"We tend to like entrepreneurial efforts," she says. "It wasn't a hard sell at all."

WBEZ found another receptive donor in the Rockefeller Foundation, which gave $25,000. "When the project came in, it was one of those things where you say to yourself, 'Why hasn't this happened before?'" recalls Joan Shigekawa, associate director of the foundation's Creativity and Culture Program.

Like Fischer, Shigekawa appreciates public radio for its ability to introduce new ideas into public discourse, and she likes documentaries for their commitment to shunning celebrities and politicos in favor of finding authentic stories. "They give voice to the voiceless," she says. "Independent documentaries strive to have people tell their stories in their own words. They defy generic formats."

Unfortunately for independent producers, Driehaus and Rockefeller are unusual. Only a handful of foundations support audio documentaries, and as a result many independent radio producers rely on grants from the Corporation from Public Broadcasting, the National Endowment for the Arts, state arts councils and other

wellsprings of government funds. Independent producer Jay Allison says many documentarians have approached foundations and come away empty-handed.

"'We don't fund media' is a cliched, mournful sentence in the forefront of the minds of so many independent producers," says Allison, executive producer of the Third Coast Festival's Gold Award winner, "The Vietnam Tapes of Lance Corporal Michael A. Baronowski."

"The question is actually a larger question," Shigekawa suggests. "It's, ‘why have independent media producers in *all* media had such limited support from foundations?’ In the main, we are much more likely to support nineteenth-century arts—theatre, music, dance."

Foundations shy from funding radio documentaries for several reasons, according to Allison and Shigekawa. "Evaluating media proposals is problematic for a great many foundations," Shigekawa says. "You have to be able to read a treatment and analyze a budget, and have some knowledge of the producer's or director's prior work, or the ability to evaluate a work sample. That knowledge is widely available in the United States, but not necessarily on foundation staff. So then the question becomes, who will evaluate this proposal?" (See page X for tips on evaluating media proposals.)

She and Allison also acknowledge that media, entrenched as it is in the public square, has the potential of stirring controversy that funders might rather avoid. "The flip side of having more and more people know about what you do is, people are going to know about what you do," Allison says. "And the public is an unruly thing."

The other major issue is one of access. Regardless of a producer's talent, there's no guarantee of landing a story on the air. "It's hard for them to self-broadcast," adds

Shigekawa. "A filmmaker can take their film or video and have it seen at the Film Forum or Sundance. But where are you going to broadcast your audio piece?"

Now, Allison says, the Internet offers an opportunity to change that, possibly giving foundations a greater incentive to fund documentaries. You can see his efforts online at his Web site, **www.transom.org**, which is described as "a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout."

The idea for www.transom.org came from journalist Bill McKibben, who, like Allison, craved a more diverse selection of stories on public radio, and the name comes from the old practice of throwing unsolicited submissions to a magazine or newspaper "over the transom." Today, the site gathers and posts audio files of documentaries from undiscovered independent producers, who talk about their work and get feedback from a widely scattered community of fellow producers, some established, others also trying to break through. It's one part of what has become a personal mission for Allison--to funnel fresh voices into a public radio system that he says is often too insular.

"Unless you propose a weekly or daily hour-long show, public radio doesn't want to hear from you," he reports. "And that kills creativity—especially among young people with no budget and a fiery gleam. That's what we need now."

Allison puts pieces from the site on two Cape Cod radio stations he operates, and some have even made it to national programs. The site itself has proved popular, garnering about 33,000 pageviews in December 2001, almost double the traffic six months earlier. Allison has now joined with the Station Resource Group, a public radio consultant's group, to develop another idea that might bring even more independently produced pieces to a wider audience: The Radio Exchange (**www.radioexchange.org**).

The Radio Exchange, currently in development, will be an online clearinghouse for works from independent producers. Contributors will encode their pieces in MP3 digital audio format and upload them to a database. Staffers at public radio stations will then visit the site, read synopses and reviews of the uploaded works, and download them for broadcast on a locally produced show. The Radio Exchange will "move the center" of the public radio system, Allison says, and begin making a truly decentralized network of producers and stations.

"If the mechanism were in place so that the real diversity of program material could get to the air, and stations committed the time, we could have a whole different range of voices on the air," he says. "Once that exists I think support [from foundations] would be a much more attractive option."

If the Third Coast Festival was any indication, Allison's idea would have a growing number of contributors eager to be heard. More than 300 producers entered work in the competition, and 260 attended the event, including a group of teenaged reporters who, with their irrepressible irreverence, became the most talked-about attraction.

"It had been a long time since there was any gathering of the tribe, and the most exciting thing was to see that the tribe had gotten younger," Allison says. "There were lots of people there I'd never seen before, and so that created the corollary feeling of hope that goes along with having younger people around."

The three-hour broadcast of award-winning works aired on 150 public radio stations around the country, and even as far afield as Australia, where the country's public broadcasting service aired several winners. Third Coast's Web site is still running today and features new pieces on a regular basis. It had 15,300 hits in December 2001. Zorn

hopes to add discussion boards to the site this summer when WBEZ can afford the necessary software.

Without hestitating, Zorn and her funders agree that the Third Coast Festival was a success. Fischer says her foundation is considering funding this year's event. "We were delighted to have done it," she attests.

"With the kind of response that they had, not only from participants but from stations that took the broadcast, it's quite clear to me that new relationships were built and that people were hungry to share their knowledge and expertise at this event," Shigekawa says. "It is a very sound investment, because for a very modest grant you can reach many more people in terms of radio with a message, whether it's storytelling from a wide range of ethnic communities, youth, or underrepresented voices."

Shigekawa and others acknowledge that the festival's ripples will be difficult to measure until several years from now, as the recurring event gathers momentum and raises the profile of radio documentaries even higher.

"It's my hope that the genre will break through and come to dominate and become a format of its own," Shigekawa concludes. "Real stories from real people."

Sounds like a readymade tagline.

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