

Radio Documentaries Take Listeners Into Dark Corners

David Isay is the founder of Sound Portraits Productions. Its radio documentaries profile the lives of men, women and children living in communities often neglected or misunderstood. During the past 13 years, Isay's work has won nearly every award in broadcasting, including three Peabody Awards, two Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards, and two Livingston Awards for Young Journalists. He was recently awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. Included among Sound Portraits' documentary work is "Ghetto Life 101," "Witness to an Execution," "The Jewish Giant," "The Sunshine Hotel," and "The Executive Tapes." Isay was interviewed by Nieman Reports editor, Melissa Ludtke.

Melissa Ludtke: Can you describe why you chose the radio documentary as a way to tell the stories and reflect on social issues?

David Isay: Well, I didn't choose it. It was a series of strange circumstances and twists of fate that kind of led me into making radio documentaries when I was 22 years old and headed to medical school. It totally kind of exploded my life and sent me in a whole new direction. So I wasn't drawn to the radio documentary; it just kind of happened.... I wasn't a journalist.

I'd never taken a journalism class. I never listened to public radio. I mean, I knew nothing. And I certainly could have ended up going in different directions in radio, or leaving radio and going to some other form of storytelling.... And it just so happens that it was the medium that was perfect for telling the kind of stories that I love to tell about. Radio is a wonderful medium to tell emotional stories. That interests me. It's a great medium for

getting into dark corners of this country and telling stories that can't be told on film.

ML: Why is it a great medium for telling the kind of stories you want to tell?

Isay: Well, it's cheap. And a lot of the stories that interest me are about people who are living on the margins. Our mission is to tell stories of people who are outside of the mainstream. A lot of times people don't want photographs, don't want their faces shown. Many times they communicate best through talking.

ML: You've spoken about finding a place where the concentric circles of what you do well come together. Could you share what you feel are the ingredients of those intersecting circles?

Isay: It's everything from technically—it is not rocket science to use audio equipment, and technically I enjoyed doing it. It was just the right amount of technical stuff so that it didn't distract me. I like asking questions. And I love editing. I love hearing

tapes. I mean, making these programs is all about finding tape that's on fire and stringing it together in a cohesive way. So that was great. And doing the interviews when you're talking about the kind of stories that I'm drawn to, it's kind of a cross between, I don't know what it is. I'm uncomfortable kind of labeling. But, it's sort of part journalism, part like social work. When you're doing an interview, it can be this very intense sort of verbal exchange. I come from a family of therapists. And that's enjoyable to me.

ML: What's the part of it that you think relates to journalism?

Isay: That it tells the truth. The kind of radio stuff that I do is close to narrative journalism. It's about a kind of total immersion in a topic and bringing you into a place. If you look at something like the Sunshine Hotel, it's a matter of going into a dark place and doing a lot of recording and then creating this space through audio where people can step into this other world.

ML: A journalist who goes into the Sunshine Hotel and does interviews might ask the same questions you do, or might not. Might get similar answers to what you get. But, if that person was doing this as part of a news story on radio, then there'd be other components and responsibilities. To the best of their ability, they would have to check out the story that they were told, to see what was true and what might not be true.

Isay: And that's sort of a fallacy about the work. Of course we do that, the kind of research that goes into doing a story like this, even though there's never

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Witness to an Execution
Recorded in Huntsville, Texas.
Premiered October 20, 2000, on *All Things Considered*

Witness to an Execution tells the stories of the men and women involved with the execution of death-row inmates at the Walls Unit in Huntsville, Texas. Narrated by Warden Jim Willett, who oversees all Texas executions. *Witness to an Execution* documents, in minute-by-minute detail, the process of carrying out an execution by lethal injection. Most of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice employees interviewed have witnessed over one hundred inmates be put to death.

The voices in *Witness to an Execution* tell a rare story. Major Kenneth Dean, a member of the "tear-down" team, describes the act of walking an inmate from his cell to the death chamber. Jim Brazell, a death house chaplain who has witnessed 114 executions, remembers inmates' last words to him. Former corrections officer Fred Allen discusses his own mental breakdown, caused, he says, by participating in one too many executions.

One-third of all executions in the US have taken place in Texas, since the death penalty was reintroduced in 1977.

Producers: Stacy Abramson and David Isay / Production Assistant: David Miller / Narrator: Jim Willett / Editor: Gary Cozzino / Supervising engineer: Carl W. Gable / Music: Bob Mellman / Music Coordinator: Henry Sapoznik / Executive Producer for *All Things Considered*: Elton Weiss / Special thanks to: Lorne Fitzgerald and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice / Photographs: Andrew Lichtenstein / Open Society Institute / Funding provided by the Rockefeller Foundation, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Open Society Institute.

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On soundportraits.org, visitors can learn about David Isay's work.

been an expert in a piece that we've done in nine years. When we do a story, we've got cubic inches of information. Every expert that could be talked to has been talked to. I mean, it's like jazz in the sense that you can't improvise until you've got the basics down. So when we go in we do the basic journalistic work, the research, the background, the digging, talking to people, getting to know them, and checking their stories as best we can.

ML: But that's not transparent in the work you do.

Isay: Absolutely. But, hopefully, when people hear the work they'll hear a solidity to it. And if it's on public radio, they'll understand that it's not done lightly. If this had been done as a straight reported news piece, the research that would have gone into it, on any of these pieces, is much less than what we end up doing. We spend a long, long time doing these pieces. And that involves checking it backwards and forwards and upside down. I think it's very similar to the long-form New Yorker sort of journalism or any other sort of immersion journalism. It's just that the narration is usually in the hands of someone who is in the place that we're working. That's what makes it different. And that's part of what differentiates radio from print.

ML: Your work often airs without a narrator's voice per se.

Isay: It always has a narrator, because it's impossible to tell a story without a narrator. And that's great if you didn't realize that someone was narrating. There's always a narrator. But the narrator is not us. The narrator is someone who is from the place where this documentary is taking place. In the documentary about the executions in Texas, the narrator is the warden. In "The Sunshine Hotel," the narrator is the guy who runs the flophouse.

ML: He's also a character in it in some ways, too, isn't he?

Isay: Yeah, he is.

ML: Where there is another overlap with the role that the journalist plays in reporting a story is in the fact that you're making obvious editing decisions about what voices to include, what sounds to make prominent, and the order in which the story will be told.

Isay: Sure, absolutely. The bottom line is that hopefully I can look the people with whom I've worked in the eye and not feel embarrassed about what we've done together.... I like to think that these are places that are important for people who don't live in [them] to experience. And for people to meet people living these lives that are different than theirs. Because the eight million listeners to public radio are typically middle class, upper middle class, you know, people driving to or from work. I mean, that's who you're playing to. My goal always is to kind of sneak up behind people and almost like quietly lift them up into this story. And I try to carry them for 22 minutes without them even knowing it. Not give them the chance to turn off the radio, if it's successful. And then 22 minutes later quietly put them down and walk away. That's sort of the image in my head of what I'm trying to do.

ML: You want to have left them at that point with an emotional experience primarily, or with an experience that could be defined as one that increases their knowledge?

Isay: It's an experience where they've gone some place they wouldn't otherwise have gone. And if it's emotional for them, that's great; if it's not, that's fine. Whatever that experience is. But it's a matter of leading them into a world that they would not otherwise know of or experience, and letting them meet people who they otherwise wouldn't have met.

ML: And is there a purpose in your mind beyond the transporting of someone to a different place?

Isay: Yeah, because I like all the people that I do stories about, and it's

about seeing the humanity in others. Again, it's hard because it's so easy to get kind of clichéd. But, that's what it is. The guys who do the executions in Texas, you know, they're decent people. The kids who live in the ghetto or the guys in the flophouse—whatever. I do stories about people that I like, who are for the most part probably either ignored or misunderstood or not thought about. It's just about humanity. It's just about introducing people to people. And again it's corny, but just seeing that everybody is sort of the same.

ML: I'd like to go to your experiences, particularly looking on death row, where you've spent a lot of time, whether it was in the jails of Louisiana or more recently bringing to light the tapes from the death chamber in Georgia. There's been a lot of reporting examining the death penalty from a lot of different angles, whether it's the racial fairness angle or the question of whether there should be a death penalty. What do you think your work illuminates that isn't part of the traditional or mainstream journalistic coverage of the death penalty story?

Isay: Again, I'm not consciously thinking like "What story can I tell that nobody else has told?" or "How can I do something different?" I was in a situation in which I was doing a story, and it just kind of occurred to me, "What is it like for these guys who do these executions?" And I didn't know if it was going to turn into a five-minute piece or a no piece. And it just kind of opened up. It was just being curious and then following the path and seeing where it leads. And these guys who we interviewed, for the most part, had never been asked these questions before. The warden hadn't. None of the people who worked in the prison had been asked what's it like to do these executions.... Again, it's as much as possible trying to be the vehicle through which people can tell their stories. That's what we're trying to do, trying to be the translator to the larger world of some kind of insular group or whatever, some group of people, and to

help them use this medium to tell their story in a way that they feel is true.... I'm in a really fortunate circumstance of getting independent funding, and being able to do whatever I feel passionate about, and then slamming it onto the air whichever way I can...it's about not letting stories be watered down.

ML: Your work, like any work, is a product of its time. The way that you approach your subjects, and the way you approach the telling of stories has something to do with the times in which we are in, with the progression or change of style in terms of how the documentary is used. In the past, there seemed to be a particular sort of style and purpose to the documentary that might have changed over time in terms of the way that we, as Americans, or we, as an audience, take information in. You may be a product of a different era in terms of how you go about presenting stories. If you were doing "Harvest of Shame" today what you might do is have the migrant workers be the only voice, as opposed to literally be standing in the field, were you Edward R. Murrow. It's just a different style.

Isay: Absolutely. But there were always people doing oral histories. I do think that doing the kind of hard hitting journalistic stuff, I mean, certainly the investigative stuff is a little bit apples and oranges with this kind of documentary work, because usually these pieces are about kind of talking to people who haven't been talked to before to reveal the humanity that's there, as opposed to uncovering hard news. It does uncover injustice, but in a more roundabout way. I mean, as opposed to investigating some actual single wrong that has been done. And with the execution tapes, that was more similar because it's uncovering documents that have been withheld or getting into a place that's been routinely kept from the American public. So that would be more in that tradition.

ML: National Public Radio [NPR] declined to broadcasting those tapes from the Georgia execution chamber

that you so much wanted to bring out and use as documents. Instead, you brought this consortium of stations together to air this, which you thought was very important for people to hear.

Isay: I still do. I think it's the only document we'll ever have of modern-day American executions.

ML: And why do you think it's important for Americans to hear?

Isay: Because this is an act that's being done in the name of American citizens. And I think people have a right to know what's going on....

ML: In terms of building this new consortium of public radio stations, do you think that experience will lead to any new ways in which documentary radio producers can have their stories aired? Or was this sort of a one-time situation?

Isay: I think that the radio documentary is vastly underutilized. A lot of people should be making a lot of documentaries. And there should be a lot of ways to get them out there. With NPR, it's kind of a complicated story the way this happened with the decision not to broadcast the Georgia execution tapes. But I think that as much good stuff should be able to get out there in any way that it possibly can. All I really care about is that good stuff gets on the air and gets heard by as many people as possible. And whatever way that needs to be done is good with me. I think it's more an issue of making more people understand what a great medium radio is to tell stories in and getting more great stories, as opposed to there being all these great stories that are somehow being kept from the public. I see more that there aren't enough. And there are a lot of reasons. Because it's hard to make a living. But you know, that's changing, because I think we have entered this little renaissance for radio documentaries.

ML: Why do you say this?

Isay: I think a lot has to do with

"This American Life." Letting people see what radio could be, can be. And maybe some of the work we've done. But it's totally changed. The New York Times is reviewing radio documentaries. They regularly review radio now. We couldn't get an intern six years ago, and now we have the best and the brightest coming out of the best Ivy League schools, lining up to do this stuff. People are seeing what a powerful medium this is. It's a very exciting time technologically, too, because anyone can take a \$700 i-Mac computer and have an incredibly powerful editing system. You can download free software, and you can be at a console which is a thousand times more powerful than the fanciest studio was six years ago. And you can buy a mini-disk player for \$197, and a microphone for \$100 bucks, and you are a walking, 35mm film production studio. I mean, you can't do better than that. The potential is limitless. So the dream is a lot of people start picking up tape recorders and interviewing people and playing around and adding music, and doing all kinds of cool stuff. That would be the dream.... I think there's nothing wrong with having a lot of great radio journalism documentary stuff happening. I think that would be the best thing that could ever happen.

ML: Because we are living in an era where, at least, when one talks to media specialists they say, "Short is better. People's attention spans aren't there." Yet this advice runs counter to what you are saying.

Isay: I think you can have a half-hour piece that seems like one minute and a two-minute piece that seems like seven hours. It's about doing good work. And certainly if the stuff can sustain, then people will listen and appreciate it. It's all about doing good stuff. ■

