



The Transom Review

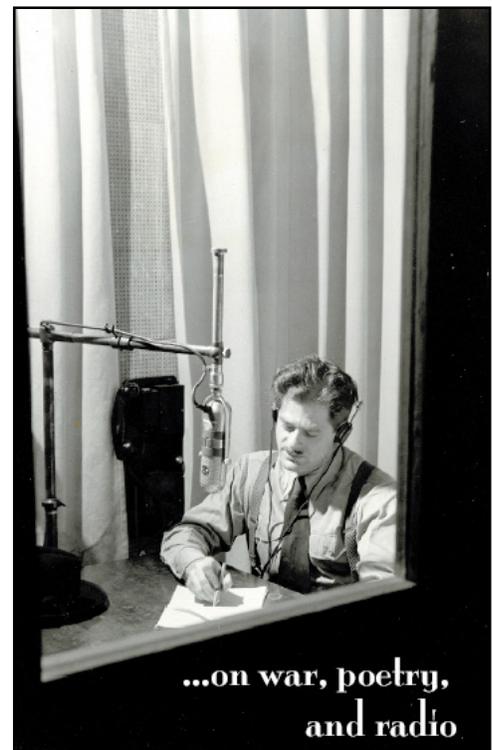
Vol. 1/Issue 14

Norman Corwin's Topic

About Norman Corwin

Writer/Director Norman Corwin, now 91, is considered by many observers to be the world's foremost writer in the Golden Age of Radio, where he rose to the pinnacle as he "survived ten years in radio without ever having or needing a sponsor." His prodigious contribution during World War 2 culminated in the classic radio drama "On a Note of Triumph" in May, 1945. He is the recipient of the One World Award, two Peabody Medals, an Oscar nomination, an Emmy, a Golden Globe, a DuPont-Columbia Award, and an induction into the Radio Hall of Fame.

Norman Corwin is the author of 17 books, five stage plays, and numerous movie and TV works. His professional and academic credits include visiting lectureship at five major universities. Currently, Mr. Corwin teaches at the University of Southern California. In 1995, a collection of his letters was published by Barricade Books, which includes correspondence with Edward R. Murrow, Orson Welles, Bette Davis, Groucho Marx, and Carl Sandburg. In January 2001, he completed writing/directing a series of dramatic specials for public radio, "More By Corwin," starring Walter Cronkite, Ed Asner, Hume Cronyn, Charles Durning, Martin Landau, Jack Lemmon, William Shatner, and Carl Reiner, among many others.



Norman Corwin Links

Norman Corwin's Website

www.normancorwin.org

Lost & Found Sound Feature “One World Flight”

www.npr.org/programs/lnfsound/stories/990813.stories.html

A Word From Jay Allison

November 13, 2001

Many of us were not yet conceived when Norman Corwin's words reverberated through the air, carrying the weight of their time, and hope for the future.

But they have echoed down to us. We who choose to work in radio are certain to encounter them along our way, and when we do, our very sentences may be altered, as perhaps this one has been.

His spoken poetry of wartime echoes especially loudly now, in the autumn of 2001.

"Post proofs that brotherhood is not so wild a dream as those who profit by postponing it pretend."

From Norman Corwin's Prayer from "On a Note of Triumph," 1945

Studs Terkel, who was our guest on Transom, said of Corwin:

"The great moment of radio writing came with Norman Corwin, in the late '30s, the '40s, and the early '50s. Norman Corwin elevated the word. He did scores of programs, one better than the other. But he wrote for the ear. And he was the master of it; I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Corwin as the Bard of Radio. He had a tremendous influence on my own work. The way he used words, the way they sounded."

Carol Wasserman, one of our Transom Editors, on hearing that Corwin had agreed to visit us and take our questions, said:

"I am still trying to recover from the dizzying idea of hosting Norman Corwin. Could there be a more historic convergence? He is virtually unknown, now, outside of the small circle of true believers, but this old warrior will be restored to legendary status once he is gone. And beyond the reach of all the young producers and writers who need to know what he did and how he performed such consistent miracles."

Norman Corwin on War, Poetry, and Radio

In Conversation with Tony Kahn – October, 2001

Just Promise

Norman Corwin

I believe in promise, just promise. Once we give up the sense of promise, we're finished. I think that the future beckons us, that there's a lot of work to be done. Right now, there's cleaning up to do. The business of purging this world of the menace of sneaky cowardly, vicious, savage terror. I'm talking about anthrax and all of the goodies that appeal to the terrorist. But any species that can weigh the very earth he's standing on, that can receive and analyze light coming from a galaxy a billion light years distant from us, any species that can produce a Beethoven and a Mozart and a Shakespeare, and the extraordinary accomplishments of our species, scientifically and in medicine and in the humanities, there's illimitable opportunity for promises to be delivered and met.

What Came to the Mic

Norman Corwin

My kind of radio is that which takes into account the intelligence of my audience. I do not believe in talking down. I also brought to the microphone my concerns; my feeling about society; my feeling about war and peace; my feeling about man as a species that is developing and for which we cherish hopes, frequently dashed, as they are at the moment. Certainly long delayed. We're speaking not too long after the terrible event of September 11, 2001.

A Good Occasion

Tony Kahn

Through your career you could say that war has been a steady beat. You've seen so many big and small. Has war been a good occasion for radio, in the sense that it's made radio grow?

Norman Corwin

A good occasion for radio is a good way of putting it. I think it has been a great occasion for radio. I really believe that had the great poets of yore been around today, or men of their caliber, they would opt for radio because radio is a medium that sets up the listener as a collaborator. Whereas television, which is by far the richer and more potent medium today, is very literal. Radio demands, requires the collaboration, just as a good book does: the collaboration being between the writer and the reader. Here it is between the writer and the listener.



Posting Proofs

Tony Kahn

Of all of the forms that you've worked with, is there any one in particular that you feel has been perhaps the greatest glory for radio during your career?

Norman Corwin

Yes, I think those forms which were rhetorical. In which there was an admixture of the colloquial with heightened language. By heightened I don't mean purple. I mean language which is completely understandable, because I certainly do not believe in obscurantism; language which is easily communicated and understood, but which has a care. And it deals with metaphor; it deals with poetic substances. One must be necessarily vague in describing one's approach to writing. I don't have that keen a memory for my own work, but I can give you a line or two, here and there. There was, in the coda of "On a Note of Triumph," a program I wrote for the day of victory in Europe, in World War Two [a line that was a] sort of a prayer, not a formal prayer, not a down-on-your-knees prayer, that closed the piece. One of the concluding lines was, "Post proofs that brotherhood is not so wild a dream as those who profit from postponing it pretend." Now, that line had some feedback, in that the late Eric Severeid in writing his autobiography used not so wild a dream, with accreditation as the title of his autobiography. It's had other compliments paid to it by usage in quotation. That is a line, packed with hope, with a wish, with a philosophy. Yet it's not obscure I think, I don't think it needs a translator.

Kidding and Sweating

Norman Corwin

I would like to disclaim the notion that I am at all times a serious and intense documentarian. I like to fool around, I like kidding, I like brash verse. In fact, the very first original program that I wrote for CBS was the, "The Plot to Overthrow Christmas." It was a piece that I wrote because that particular program fell on Christmas day. It's the only long piece of mine from which I remember the opening lines, which won't carry you very far, so don't go away: "Did you hear about The Plot to Overthrow Christmas? Well, gather ye now from Maine to the Isthmus of Panama. And listen to the story of the utter inglorious and gory goings-on in Hell. Now it happened in Hades, ladies and gentlemen, it happened down there that the thieves held a meeting. The thieves held a meeting for the purpose of defeating Christmas."

The Best Casting Agent

Tony Kahn

You, you are a scene setter. It seems to me that one of the secrets of radio, that you've mastered, and of storytelling, is that you give somebody something they are already imagining in their own mind, and inhabiting almost physically.



Norman Corwin

Well, I long ago convinced myself that the listener is the best casting agent, and casting director and wardrobe master in the world. He, on radio, dresses the set, he furnishes the face to the voice.

From Every Pore**Tony Kahn**

And it'll never be the wrong face to the wrong voice. It always seemed that this stuff just poured out of you. It seemed to be effortless in so many different styles, so many different levels of diction. Does this stuff just pour out of you?

Norman Corwin

It did pour out of me, but it wasn't effortless. It poured out of me because I was sweating from every pore. I would very often be up all night. You see, I committed myself. I find it difficult to turn down an offer to be heard. Whether it's on an anniversary, whether it's on the ending of a war, whatever the subject. I am ham enough to enjoy communicating to people, to an audience -- whether it be somebody sitting beside me, or listeners listening to this program. I was challenged in a way, not as a dare, but [in] an offer, to write, direct and produce twenty-six programs in twenty-six weeks. No program having anything to do with the program that preceded or would follow it (where sometimes you can rely on characters to carry you through on a continuing story). No, My pieces were as diverse as the occupations in the Yellow Pages.

Whatever Came Into My Head**Norman Corwin**

I came along at CBS at a time when its vice-president in charge of programs, and William S. Paley himself, who was at the helm, were out to invite people that they considered promising, and they believed in encouraging them. Let me tell you a little anecdote about that that illustrates this. When I proposed a certain program using poetic materials to a man named Bill Lewis, who was then head of programs for CBS, he liked it. He gave me a little budget to prepare a sample program and liked what he heard, and said, "How would you like to come on, Sundays, right after the Fellow Art Concerts?" I thought that would be great. (I was a freshman out of Boston, which is a fine city, but it's still provincial compared to New York.) He said, "Why don't we call it Words Without Music." I didn't think that was a very good title; it was a limiting title. But it was at least accurate because there was no budget for music. I said, "Oh, that's fine." Then he came up with a suggestion that no agent, had I been represented by one, would have dared to propose to him. He said, "Why don't we call this Norman Corwin's Words Without Music? That's a proprietary title and it was then unknown for any writer in radio. And here he was making that offer. That was, I later found out, because he believed in encouraging talent. He encouraged me by giving me an opportunity to put on the air, to write, direct, and produce whatever came into my head.

Tell Us, Tell Us, Tell Us

Norman Corwin

In the instance of the program that I cited earlier, "On a Note of Triumph," the one that I wrote at the end of the war in Europe, they simply asked me if I would drop the series that I was then doing to prepare for what then seemed the imminent end of that war in Europe, the defeat of the Nazis. At no time did they say, "Well, tell us what your approach will be. Tell us whom you'll cast. Tell us, what the budget will be. Let us see the first twenty minutes of it." The first they heard of that program was when it was broadcast. Now what network, or even large independent station, would operate that way today? There would be a committee. There would be five or six officials, looking it over, and editors, and program managers, and the marketing managers to make sure there would be nothing that would lose any listeners.

The Dinosaur Lives

Norman Corwin

Some day I hope that there will be enough of an audience so that radio, as you and I know it, can be revitalized, can return. It exists in small measure now. That kind of radio has retreated to the high ground, [in] work that is done by dramatists who are broadcast by NPR, by PRI. Public radio is the high ground. My last six programs, done with the help and inspiration of Mary Beth Kirchner, were broadcast nationally and they enjoyed the kind of freedom that I had in the days of Bill Paley and Bill Lewis. They had pretty good audiences. I was surprised by the number of people who spent money to acquire cassettes of some of those programs. So it is not as though we're talking about an extinct form of broadcasting.

Pontificating Miasma

Norman Corwin

What we didn't hear before was the extent to which talk radio has become a miasma. I'm thinking now of Limbaugh, of Howard Stern, of [the] self-appointed oracles who pontificate. I'm thinking of the newscasters who no longer are just newscasters but speak editorially. That we didn't have, or when we had it, it was properly labeled. Edward R. Murrow properly labeled his programs; he wasn't deceiving anybody. Today there's a plethora of a kind of radio that is very inexpensive to produce, talking heads. We are not commemorating and celebrating the great events. Our own history is full of enough great events to have celebrations several times a year. By celebrations I mean program[s] with some kind of poetic potency.

Lucky Norman

Norman Corwin

I have to say that one of the programs that was very productive in my career - good for me, and also recognized as good for CBS, and good for radio - was on the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the ratification of the American Bill of Rights. That happened in 1941. It was a program that had been suggested to the four networks by President Roosevelt. He said, "Why don't you people get together, simultaneously broadcast a commemoration of that day?" The networks had never combined before. I was lucky enough to be invited to write, produce and direct it. It was accidental, an accident of the calendar. But what drama surrounded that, because the date of the anniversary was December 15, 1941. That followed, by only eight days, the attack on Pearl Harbor.

More Important Than Ever

Norman Corwin

The program wasn't finished. I was on a train going from New York to Los Angeles, where a big cast, a stupendous cast of stars, of the order of Jimmy Stewart and Orson Welles were already locked into the production. They had been invited and they accepted. When the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred, I wasn't sure whether the program would be canceled. During the train trip across the country, on the Sunday of Pearl Harbor, I learned that we were at war. When the train reached Kansas City, there was a forty-five minute stopover, which is routine then. I went to a telephone to try to contact my people in Washington, to ask if [the program] was still on. Of course, I couldn't get through on the telephone; the lines were tied up. I sent a telegram. The next morning, when the train reached Albuquerque, I was paged. There was a telegram for me from Washington. They had asked the president, "Is this program... should we cancel it?" The president said, "No, that program is now more important than ever. Go ahead with it."

The Most Agreeable Form of Deception

Tony Kahn

I wonder if what we're looking for, if what we can hope to have from radio at a time like this, is some of the poetry, and a reminder of some of the principle of being an American, that you were able to put into radio. How do we do it? If somebody using the language of radio nowadays were to come to you and say, "Norman, how do we do a memorable program that remains poetry and not rhetoric, that is about principle, but not ideology?" What would you advise them to do?

Norman Corwin

I'd advise them to come to me. It's a good idea to begin with. And I would break the remaining unbroken arm to do a good job, to fill that. You know, Mary Beth, who is so close to my recent work, took note of something that I wrote at the request of Studs Terkel recently. He's doing a book on hope. If it's not an imposition, maybe the couple of minutes that it would take to speak this, might be partly answering, or wholly answering your question:

Hope may at times be deceitful. But if so, it's the most agreeable form of deception. Even if it serves only as an emollient, hope does us a big favor. Ask anybody who suffers chronic pain whether anodyne is among the respectables of life.

There are many gradations and forms of hope, many missions assigned to it, all quoting a benefit of some kind. The invalid hopes for health, the beggar for wealth, the captive for freedom, the investor for dividends, the student for honors.

Hope has been called meager in medicine. Called the poor man's bread. But its spore can be found in palaces, too, especially on heads that wear crowns uneasily.

Not every thinker trusts hope. Benjamin Franklin believes that anyone who lives on hope will die fasting. Lincoln called hope a pathological belief in the occurrence of the impossible. But we don't have to buy those reservations. It's sounder to go to poets for their slant. Hope almost always involves a reaching out. And to this point Robert Browning wrote, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" Then, a poet closer to our time, Carl Sandburg, went to the heart of it:

*"... Hope is a heartspun word
The evening star, inviolable over the coal mines
The ten cent crocus bulb, blooming in a used car salesroom
The horseshoe over the door, the luckpiece in the pocket... "*

But hoping and wishing sometimes get confused. Hope is long-term, it can last a lifetime. Whereas wishes tend to be short order: blow out the candle and make a wish. I wish they'd turn down the noise in this joint. I'm driving on the 101, wish me luck.

In the context of a world in which a day in September has now been permanently stained and terror has joined the posse of the apocalyptic horsemen, pestilence, war, famine and death, hope becomes dearer than ever.

It's risky to moan and wring hands over the threat of terror, because that means surrendering to the foulest and most insidious enemy of us all, demoralization.

Even if hope at times is a delusion, it sure as hell beats despair.

Stranger things have happened than that hope may be the seed and nursery of a tree, of a peace whose shade will one day spread wider than the shadow of war.

Responding to Radio

Tony Kahn

You could go off the road just being absorbed in the language and the poetry. Radio that makes you respond. Any advice to young people on how to make radio that makes their listeners respond?

Norman Corwin

Yes. I would urge them to become involved. Not simply to be listeners to radio, but contributors to it.

Roots, Dignity, Respect**Tony Kahn**

More and more the stories that we do hear on public radio are not of people who are bigger than life, but of average people who are having the kinds of experiences we all can understand and connect with.

That's not on a very grand scale in terms of the language or the appeal, but is that important radio to be making? Because I think a lot of people listening to and reading this are going to think that's the kind of radio that maybe they can produce.

Norman Corwin

Good suss to them. I think it important to feel inspired to even attempt something of that order. I think it's what I tried to express earlier. We should not neglect our roots. Among the things not to be neglected are the expressions that have been forthright and persistent in American history, expressions in which the common person is recognized; Walt Whitman's sense of the importance of the individual. He's got a poem in "Leaves of Grass," the sense of which is: the president is there in the White House for you, not you here for him. It's a poem that expresses the value and the almost sacred obligation to recognize, to give dignity to the individual. After all, nature does. Nature respects us. There are billions of people on this globe. Think of it. No two of them have the same thumbprint.

Let's Eat!**Tony Kahn**

There was one e-mail about your upcoming appearance there that really touched me. I won't identify the writer, but she wrote, "He is virtually unknown, now, outside of the small circle of true believers, but this old warrior will be restored to legendary status once he is gone. And beyond the reach of all the young producers and writers who need to know what he did and how he performed such consistent miracles." So I'm wondering if you have a short answer for this person?

Norman Corwin

Yes, my short answer is: what is she doing for dinner tonight?

Questions From the Transom Community

Cascades of memory

Jackson Braider - November 13, 2001 - #11

Having listened to Tony Kahn's interview with Norman Corwin, the Lost and Found piece, and the Prayer, I found myself undergoing a cascade of memory. I only know of World Federalism as something my father was involved with after the war, but listening to Mary Beth Kirchner's piece, Mr. Corwin's prayer, and the comments in the interview, I can *feel* the power behind the idea. I can *feel* what it was about World Federalism that appealed to my father so much.

Mr. Corwin, do you think we might be able to use in this day and age the kind of imagery -- verbal, audio -- that you used in "One World"? I am loathe to speak of its being dated. Even the music, though out of fashion, moves the listener forward with the text. There is something profoundly timeless suggested here which moves me to the quick.

A Treasure and His Balm

Dan Gediman - November 15, 2001 - #12

Thank you for everything Norman. What a joy to have stumbled upon this little patch of cyberspace and hear (and see) your words posted above. I am an ardent admirer of yours in the first degree. To have had the opportunity to work with you on projects in the mid-90s I consider the absolute apex of my professional career and, most certainly, one of the highest points of my entire life. The poetry of your writing (and even of your speaking) is a balm to my soul whenever I encounter it. You are such a treasure. I am so grateful to know you.

I encourage those of you are new to Norman's work to explore it deeply -- the radio shows as well as his books, articles and other published works. In addition, seek out his biography, written by Leroy Bannerman (I hope I have his name correct) as well as a volume of his collected letters. They both make for enthralling reading.

Bring Us More Juice

Viki Merrick - November 15, 2001 - #13

I feel somewhat awkward speaking so soon, having been the editor of this interview. Certainly the two most honorable and near-daunting tasks in my work (aside from working with Jay Allison) have been the privilege of being the editor for your interview on Transom and Studs Terkel's, just a few months prior. Both of you in one year!

Tidying up your conversation with Tony Kahn, so that it would work equally well in print, carried with it a feeling of trepidation even in the cutting of a moment's hesitation - the sound of thinking: How dare you cut the sound of Norman Corwin thinking! That sort of thing.

Unlike anything ephemeral - sand that blows away or paper crumbling to the touch- your work, specifically "On a Note of Triumph," has a staying, a timelessness which struck me when I had occasion to listen to The Prayer, shortly after September 11.

I first listened to "On a Note of Triumph" this summer (me born in 1954) and I was pretty weepy, transported to the pain and disarray of war, and the longing and anticipation of imminent peace; of a time I never knew, need I add. Listening again this fall, recording The Prayer for your appearance in LA for Lost and Found Sound - there I was again in an emotionally watery state not only for the uncanny relevance it has on today ("Lord God of trajectory and blast") - but for the foreshadowing it bears ("Lord God of fresh bread and tranquil mornings - tokens of orange juice and a whole egg appear now before the hungry children").

(By the way, thank you so much for quoting from it - I wish you would have read the whole prayer... another time perhaps?)

It also confirms a particularly irritating saying: History repeats itself. History is important to you. History has always been background to me. Not anymore. Are we captives of a recurring plot line that merely changes costumes like a Star Trek series? Can creating radio productions that celebrate historical human victory have any bearing on history as it unfolds? What about the production you did for the anniversary for the Bill of Rights - airing in the dawn of WW2? What was the effect?

In spite of dozens of meaningful works about the Holocaust, there has been ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Albania, Palestinians penned in, women withering in Afghanistan, Kurds being erased off the map. If it is a moral responsibility, how do radio producers learn to use the traditional tools in a world whose relationship to patriotism has greatly changed, how to update/upgrade the fervor for decency and humanity that your work inspired while the country is caught in the morass? Please, if you will, inspire us, just a little more.

Blessed Sonority

Michael Joly - November 18, 2001 - #14

First, I have to say Norman Corwin's words, and the way they sound, not separate, but a blessed sonority joined together with meaning, are so powerful that my first response was silent awe for days. As an active listener, that's often my most heartfelt response.

When I recovered, gradually, by first re reading Mr. Corwin's text, then by hearing his voice, I was immediately connected with a certain Yankee sound and sensibility (and I mean that with all respect), that I don't really hear any more. (am I wrong or do my ears deceive me?) A pacing, a subtle disregard for the "r" that is really inconsequential when one speaks of the poetry of radio and probably enhances authority if you can pull it off without feigning.

I had to keep scrolling back up to the top of the page to see what this man looked like. What an inspiration. To sound so vital and true, and be speaking from the body of one who has seen many days. Norman Corwin tells me that radio, by removing the body, allows the soul to inform the brain and be heard as voice. Immortal.

And, that RCA 44. Dude, that mic rocks..... an RCA 44! Amen.

The Past is Present

Jake Warga - November 20, 2001 - #15

Sir-

I am studying in London at the moment (Anthropology) at a school that also has a radio journalism masters. I've started attending the lectures and, I hope this is flattery - your name comes up on occasion. I think it's a fantastic thing to be reading about, hearing about and lastly to be talking with someone with historic, and contemporary, caliber. Thank you for contributing to radio's past-and its present. I enjoyed reading (thank you to whoever transcribed the interview) about how you got your start - finding someone who encouraged talent. I see the same efforts in Transom. I keep re-reading your tale of Pearl Harbor, finding relevance in it today. I've always been told that history repeats itself, but I never believed it till I watched/heard it happen.

I am 29 and have only recently discovered the wonderful world of radio. I've always consumed it - loosing popularity among my peers in high school - but have recently started to produce radio after doing away with television. I thank you for solidifying many of my thoughts about approaching radio - how the audience is "the best casting agent, casting director and wardrobe master in the world."

I've embraced the respect NPR has for its New Yorker-reading audience (I found a news stand here that sells them) - and "the listener as collaborator."

I will do my part under your, and many other's, influence to keep that respect of audience going, to work towards the radio revitalization you discuss in anything I produce in the future. I feel a crisis of media approaching: when people will realize the bad taste in their mouth is the saccharine of television - a media dictated by images and sensationalism that can never look back to the past, only to the present and graphics about the future. "it is not as though we're talking about an extinct form of broadcasting."

So I thank you in advance for all that I will learn about you in classes and on this discussion, for the smooth curves and shapes you gave a malleable medium in its prime. With eager ears, I turn to the past to allow my reporting of the present be significant - knowing that anything I produce will exist in the past for much longer than it will in the brief light of "today."

Still Hungry

Andy Knight - November 20, 2001 - #16

Re: Dinner and, "Yes, my short answer is: what is she doing for dinner tonight? What's the long answer?"

WMRP-Making Radio Potent **jonathan menjivar - November 26, 2001 - #17**

There's no good way to begin, as I'm sure there will be no good way to end. When someone speaks with as much knowledge and wisdom as you have it can be intimidating to come forward and say anything. Questions can come off as silly or naive. Comments and praise mere gushing. Or perhaps not. Either way, risking embarrassment is worth it. This is an opportunity too good to pass up.

Thanks for making good radio. Grand radio, even. And for being here to share and discuss that work with us. I haven't heard much of it, but what I have has been inspiring. Claims of inspiration are not something I throw around lightly.

"We are not commemorating and celebrating the great events. Our own history is full of enough great events to have celebrations several times a year. By celebrations I mean a program with some kind of poetic potency."

Obviously public radio's role in documenting whatever state of being or great event we're in now is essential. I've heard more than one station urge its listeners during pledge drive time to give at a time when radio has become more important than ever. Is that true? Is radio really more important now? What as makers of radio can we do to ensure that we live up to that responsibility?

I really like your idea of radio potentially having a poetic potency. And how maybe a celebration doesn't have to be a celebration in the traditional sense. What's so great about The Prayer from "A Note on Triumph" is how measured it is. At a time when it feels like too many Americans can't see through the holes of Brokaw's "Greatest Generation" it's comforting to hear something that celebrates tentatively. Acknowledges how fragile triumph can really be. As someone dealing with living in a culture of war for the first time, I'm interested in your no doubt well-informed take on today. Does it feel different than it did nearly 60 years ago? Has radio's role as commemorator and celebrator changed? What can you share - what secrets can you divulge about celebrating tentatively as well as making grand statements without being cliché?

Hope beats despair. Amen to that. Thanks for being here.

Fittin' To Endure **Jay Allison - November 28, 2001 - #19**

You were given the freedom to create on the radio during wartime. You used it to express a kind of patriotism, but mixed with a common humanity. This let the work fit its time, and also endure beyond it.

What about now? Do you listen to the radio now... to public radio? How do you like it? What's missing? If you were given the charge of helping to direct the resources of public radio now, during this war, what would you call for and how would you deploy resources to ensure it happened?

Shuffleboard, Anyone?

Jake Warga - November 28, 2001 - #20

Sir-

You did not see the birth of radio, but shaped its early years, molded it during critical moments of growth. Do you feel it has reached a maturity? When? Mid-life crisis? Keeping with the anthropomorphism, at what stage is radio in its life now? Do you see it retiring to Florida and watching TV till someone pulls the plug? What do you want to see have happen to the young witness you help explain the world to?

Or Bingo

Jay Allison - November 28, 2001 - #21

Bingo...

at what stage is radio in its life now? Do you see it retiring to Florida and watching TV till someone pulls the plug?

The Oral Tradition

Cyril Ibe - December 5, 2001 - #22

I'm a radio host in Chicago of African heritage. I'm wondering, from your vantage position in the history of radio development in America, how best can radio be used for the development of societies where storytelling/storysharing still sticks to the oral tradition, as opposed the kind of sharing that can be done on the airwave? Thanks for all your many contributions to the medium I love!

And They All Wore Spectacles

cw - December 5, 2001 - #23

Mr Corwin:

Has anyone ever told you that your writing in "Prayer" sounds like Allen Ginsberg? Or, rather, that some of his poetry sounds like your writing (which would be the more correct chronological order.)

This was an odd moment for me in listening to your beautiful piece. To hear Ginsberg echoing in it. Maybe it was just the turn of a particular phrase or maybe it is the bible in both of you? Or the political meetings he attended as a child during the depression?

Ginsberg was also greatly influenced by Whitman (would you say you were as well?). Also Ginsberg's father Louis was a poet, not sure who his influences were.

.... from Ginsburg's "Supermarket in California": *Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?...*

Ginsberg had to have heard you on the radio.

More questions:

Who are some of your favorite poets? Past/present/future?

Who are some of your favorite novelists, non-fiction, or other prose writers? Writers whose writing you would consider to be lyrical, that is.

Are there any particular musicians whose writing you like?

Have you personally mentored any print writers/radio writers whose work you now admire that you would suggest we read/hear?

Thank you, thank you.

To Lofty Freedom

cw - December 5, 2001 - #24

do you think the irony-overladen/glib pop culture we live in is affecting radio, writing, and poetry

And, if so, how?

I bring this up b/c, besides a poet, I'm trying to imagine an American on the radio today who would feel free to experiment/adopt/assume/write/think in such a beautiful, lofty tone as you have in Prayer.

Even the word "lofty" has a bad connotation today.

Raisin Toast at 8:00?

Michael Joly - December 6, 2001 - #26

Mr. Corwin, I'm wondering if you could describe your craft of making radio as you might have experienced on a typical day. What would you have for breakfast? (Thanks, Studs Terkel) What time did you get to the studio? How was your time divided between reading, writing, editing, rewriting and speaking into the mic?

Calling All Radio Drama

chelsea merz - December 9, 2001 - #27

Dear Norman Corwin,

I am thrilled to learn that you have completed a series of dramatic specials for public radio. Some of the best drama in the world is drama that occurs "off-stage" and in some ways all of radio is "off-stage." So why is radio drama so hard to find these days? How do you feel about its absence? (or if I'm completely off where should I be looking?)

Norman Corwin Q & A w/ Mary Beth Kirchner

Edited by Sydney Lewis – Dec 13, 2001

Unaffected Yankee

Norman Corwin

This is in response to Michael Joly's letter [#14] of the series that were written in reply to my interview with Tony Kahn.

Thank you very much, Mr. Joly. I like very much your phrase "blessed sonority." That's a very fine phrase, and very heartening, and one that can stand on its own. You ask whether I am guilty of a Yankee sound, and the answer is yes. I was born in Boston and have no apologies to make for that. I have a little anecdote to go along with this. One day I was standing with Martin Gable [the voice of "The Prayer" in *On a Note of Triumph*]. He was a very eminent radio actor, with much of the quality of Orson Welles. We were both at the Stork Club in New York, that dates us both. He had a powerful, resonant voice, and had a kind of refined accent. We were talking, and a woman standing by, an eavesdropper, intruded and said, "Excuse me, but I couldn't avoid overhearing your speech, sir. Are you by any means British?" And he said, "No, madam, just affected." Well, my accent is Yankee and not affected. I'm afraid it's congenital and I have to live with it. But you have a good, keen ear to have detected that. Thanks for writing. I appreciated hearing from you.

A Cooler Light

This is in reply to Jake Warga [#15]. Thank you very much for writing. I am delighted to find somebody of your young age, twenty-nine, who has discovered merits in the medium of radio. You say that you've always consumed it and that you're now starting to produce radio. I am heartened by that because radio is now in a state of permanent eclipse. Television being the more profitable medium means that it will always overshadow radio when it comes to the position on stage it'll be front and center, always. If there were a new play to be discovered by Shakespeare, what medium do you suppose would have first crack at it? The profitable medium. It would be done on camera before it was done for the ear alone. That is not to say that radio is *passee*, that radio is defunct. Certainly in commercial terms, it's very lively today.

Never Say Never

I hear doomsayers predict that radio drama will never come back to the kind of puissance that it had, the popularity that it enjoyed, and the budgets that it was able to acquire in the days before television. Never is a very long time. Who can tell? There have been so many surprises in the last century, and there will be an increasing number of them, both agreeable and disagreeable, discomfiting and expensive. And edifying and terrifying events and technologies even. So who can predict? There may be a time when education reaches such efficiency that the majority of viewers who stick to the tube and watch football

game, after football game, after football game, and wrestling matches, will tire of it. With increased sensitivity and educational opportunities, it's entirely possible that in some future generation, maybe in the two thousand and four hundreds, people will get back to the basics of radio. After all, sound is a medium that existed and flourished and achieved dominance long before the image arrived. I'm speaking now of music, which is, after all, sound. We have music going back to ancient times. We have periods of music, great Olympian ranges of music in the hands of the masters, whom we cherish today.

Calling All Poet Warriors

I am not at all ready to surrender, to say radio is done and gone as a medium for heightened language and ambitious writing. Were Shakespeare alive today, were Keats and Shelley and Byron, around today, they would be attracted to the medium. Indeed, in the forties, before the war ended and television came roaring in, it was attractive to American poets, to English poets. Dylan Thomas's first play was a radio piece. He reached fame from that one radio piece: *Under Milkwood*. Archibald MacLeish, a distinguished American poet, Pulitzer prize-winner, chose radio. He wrote "Fall of the City." Stephen Vincent Benet was attracted to radio. So it's entirely conceivable that a future generation of poets will be attracted to the medium. Thank you again for your letter. You are kind and generous in your estimation of my ability to have given you something to learn about. I wish you all success in your adventures in radio.

Remember Well

This is a response to Andy Knight [#16], who quotes a woman who said that I will be restored to legendary status once I'm gone, and adds that writers will need to know what I did and how I performed "such consistent miracles," is her term. Well, I'm glad she thought they were consistent and miraculous. My short answer was, "What is this lady doing for dinner tonight." My long answer is not much longer than my short answer. I hope that I am indeed remembered when I'm gone, and that I'll be remembered in a favorable context. What more can I hope for?

Sound Embellishment

Response to Jonathan Menjivar, [#17]. Thank you for your letter, which is full of substance. I'll try to make as cogent and practical an answer as I can manage. You say that public radio's role in documenting whatever state of being or great event we're now in is essential. Yes, it is essential. But it is no more essential than is documentation by journalism and by television. What radio has the capacity to offer is an embellishment, is thoughtfulness, is an opportunity to express concepts, to witness a war, to comment upon its ramifications, its progress, its justice or injustice, its horror, its goals, in something approaching dignified language. I don't mean that in the sense of starchy or high falutin,' but something that is not gutter, something that is more than a gut reaction.

The Forget-ability of the Terrible

There were many instances in the history of poetry, before radio, where events were the subject of comment and celebration. There's a poem by the English poet Robert Southey about a great battle and the discovery of some skulls in a field. The poet says, there must have been a great war here, but so long ago, it's forgotten. The forget-ability of terrible, convulsive, earth-shaking events that killed millions, and maimed other millions. They can be forgotten. I have students who are pretty hazy about World War One - these are young men and women, in their early twenties. They're not quite sure of the geography and the cast of characters and the nations in World War One. And it's all mixed up with the Spanish American War, and the Boer War, and the Thirty Years War, and this war and that war. You pile them together in history and they make a terrible compost of actual horror. H.G. Welles once made the comment that civilization is a race between education and catastrophe. At times, one becomes concerned that catastrophe is winning out, will arrive sooner and will destroy what civilization we do have.

The Task At Hand

In short, radio is a great medium for poetry. It invites language; it invites the collaboration of the mind of the listener, not simply his eye. Thank you for writing. I wish I could answer more sharply your concluding question: what can you share, what secrets can you divulge about celebrating tentatively as well as making grand statements without being cliché. That's a task that lies before every writer, poet, or non-poet.

Phone the Poets

This is a response to Jay Allison [#19] who asks: Do I listen to public radio now? Do I like it? Is anything missing? If I were given the charge of helping to direct the resources of public radio now, during this war, what would I call for and how would I deploy resources to insure it happened? That's a big order and I'm afraid that I could not properly address this until such time as I was in that role. Otherwise it's rank speculation and hypothesis. But what I would do is to pick up a telephone and call certain writers around this country, some of the poets. I would ask our poet laureate, I would ask the ex-laureate, Mr. Pinsky, to address this, to come up with something. I would ask them to make a statement. Interviewers come up all the time and ask politicians, and artists, and actors, and painters, and sculptors, and musicians for their view, and it is usually forthcoming. I know that whenever I have been asked or invited to make a statement in radio form, I've been happy to try my hand at it. I'm encouraged by some of the response to this Transom occasion, that there are that many people interested in and articulate about radio. Thank you for writing.

Writers Unborn

A response to Jake Warga [#20] who credits me with having helped to shape radio's early years, and having molded it during critical moments in its growth. Do I feel that it has reached maturity? Radio was about to reach maturity. I think that the last big program that I undertook for a full network, before the CBS network of four hundred plus stations was reduced to something like eight or twelve - I don't know, but it's a small number - was "On a Note of Triumph." Many of you have been kind enough to recall and mention that program, written on the occasion of the victory in Europe, World War Two.

Certainly, in my dealings with the medium, this was the most mature program, I think, I had written, directed, and produced. I do not believe that was the end of the line. I think radio, having reached a certain point, can go beyond it. Given an opportunity, given the modest commission that radio requires as against the visual media - where you have to spend half a million dollars to build a set for a pilot that may never be shown - I think that radio's future is not behind it; that there are unlimited opportunities; that there are writers unborn who can bring to this medium excitement, and color, and poetry, and art.

This is in response to Jay Allison [#21, quoting Jake Warga #20] who writes a two-sentence letter asking at what stage radio is now in its life, and whether I see it retiring to Florida and watching TV until someone pulls the plug? Well, I do not have x-ray vision, and I ask this question in chorus with your self. I, however, believe that it is not going to retire to Florida or any other state. It's a national medium if ever there was one, indeed, an international medium. It's potential future is as exciting as the entrepreneurs and the men who handle the money. The sponsors and the advocates will make it possible. Whether they're interested, whether the public will be interested, these are intangibles, and I do not have a crystal ball - mine is in the repair shop. But I'm not pessimistic about it. I think that the medium will endure, it will have its ups and downs, it will have its poets and its Howard Sterns, but it'll get along. It will not fade into the wallpaper or the woodwork.

A response to Cyril Ibe, [#22], who is a radio host in Chicago of African heritage. In answer to your question of how radio can best be used for the development of societies, where story-telling and story-sharing still sticks to the oral tradition as opposed to the kind of sharing that can be done on the airwaves, I don't see there's a difference between the two. Story-telling and story-sharing can indeed be done on the airwaves and has been done, and I'd like to think that I've done some of it. So I'm a little puzzled by the question. Perhaps I haven't understood it properly.

In any case, I do think that radio is important to the development of society, it's important in every phase of society: for children, for adolescents, for mature people, for the older generations. It's important for us all. It's a medium that is with us in our homes. It's with us if we have a Walkman, it's on the street, it's everywhere. I listen to radio. I have a radio in bed with me every night. I happen to opt for classical music, but I'll certainly listen to poetry if it comes along, and to a program simply of words and thoughts and ideas. The medium is a great one. It's persevered for many years, and I hope will continue on that course.

The Ginsberg Poets

A reply to cw [#23]. I've not been aware of my sounding like Allen Ginsberg. I consider that a compliment, because he certainly wrote with great power and made a mark. I agree that I was influenced by Whitman. I was not aware that Ginsberg also was, and I thank you for enlightening me on that. You mention Allen Ginsberg's father. By coincidence, I did know him. I don't think I ever met him, but when I first broke into New York radio on a local station, it was W2XR, which is now WQXR and owned by the "New York Times." I did a program on poetry called "Poetic License," and poets contributed to it. I had a correspondence with Louis Ginsberg, who was a poet himself. You quote Ginsberg, who says, "Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour." I'm glad that you like what you heard of my stuff.

The Woods Are Full

You ask who are some of my favorite poets, past, present, and future. The English greats, beginning with the top man, William S. of Stratford. You ask are there any particular musicians whose writing I like. Indeed, there are, the woods are full of them ...the woodwinds are full of them. One of them was Benjamin Britten, who scored a series that I did in England, called "An American in England." This was carried by CBS and the BBC in 1942. He was a young composer, not yet of world renown, but certainly in the making. As for print and radio writers whose work I admire, the answer to that is legion. I feel very lucky to be in a period when there's a lot of good writing being done, here in the States and abroad. I hope you share the profits that I derive from reading those poets and the contemporary writers. A lot of good people, a lot of good ones, and may that continue indefinitely.

Transient Pop

This is in response to cw [#24]. I do not think that the irony over-laden/glib pop culture that we live in is seriously affecting radio writing and poetry. It has an affect to be sure. But I think it's temporary, it's transient. Audiences will soon want to tune into more substantial material, at least cultivated audiences will. As far as imagining an American on radio today who would feel free to experiment/adopt/assume/write/think in a high tone, there are plenty of them who would like to do that and are capable of doing it, if the gatekeepers let them. There is no particular mysterious formula in the process of engaging these people. You simply find the time and scrape together a budget and invite them to turn out material. There are lots of good writers. My God, go to any poetry convention, read the few publications that publish literature that respects language and ideas. They're all around. There are people, certainly in my generation, who would be happy to guide, to transmit whatever of value they have to the young and upcoming writers for this medium. Indeed, I'm doing it at an advanced age on a regular basis at the University of Southern California here on the West Coast.

We Like Lofty

You think the word lofty has a bad connotation today? Well, too bad for those for whom it has a bad connotation. Those people have a bad connotation for me.

Not All Pellagra

chelsea merz [#27]. Radio drama is hard to find these days, yes, that's true. But that is because there are limited sources for the funding of radio drama. There has been recently on the air a series that was produced by Mary Beth Kirchner and heard over NPR and other facilities. That was made possible by a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. That could happen again and I hope it does, I hope it keeps happening down the years. You say that you're completely off where you should be looking. I don't think so. It's nowhere to be found except what emanates from the high ground of public radio, and then intermittently. There are good programs.

Every year there is something from radio that is up for an award. The Columbia DuPont Award is one of them, and they have no trouble finding candidates for that award, and awardees. It's not all pellagra out there. Radio can be resuscitated from its present coma, if you wish to think of it as such. It can be reawakened. The talent is here. It comes down to the willingness of entities which can afford it, to commission the work, to make it possible. Just as there are automobile manufacturers who will manufacture an electric car if enough people are interested in buying it.

About Transom



What We're Trying To Do

Here's the short form: Transom.org is an experiment in channeling new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and for discussing that work, and encouraging more. We've designed Transom.org as a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to create a worthy Internet site and make public radio better.

Submissions can be stories, essays, home recordings, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere -- by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We contract with Special Guests to come write about work here. We like this idea, because it 1) keeps the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) lets us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) fosters a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing.

Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over. Occasionally, we award a Transom.org t-shirt to especially helpful users, and/or invite them to become Special Guests.

Staff

Producer/Editor - Jay Allison

Web Director/Designer - Joshua Barlow

Editors - Viki Merrick, Sydney Lewis, Jeff Towne, Helen Woodward, Chelsea Merz

Web Developers - Josef Verbanac, Barrett Golding

Advisors

Scott Carrier, Nikki Silva, Davia Nelson, Ira Glass, Doug Mitchell, Larry Massett, Sara Vowell, Skip Pizzi, Susan Stamberg, Flawn Williams, Paul Tough, Bruce Drake, Bill McKibben, Bob Lyons, Tony Kahn, Ellin O'Leary, Marita Rivero, Alex Chadwick, Claire Holman, Larry Josephson, Dmae Roberts, Dave Isay, Stacy Abramson, Gregg McVicar, Ellen Weiss, Ellen McDonnell, Robin White, Joe Richman, Steve Rowland, Johanna Zorn, Elizabeth Meister



ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA

Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM is also the founding group for *WCAI & WNAN*, a new public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket under the management of *WGBH*-Boston.

This project has received lead funding from the Florence and John Schumann Foundation. We get technical support from ReallImpact.



ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA