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**A conversation with John Biewen**

Editor, with Alexa Dilworth, of *Reality Radio: Telling True Stories in Sound*

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**Q: Why are radio documentaries important? Why should we listen to them?**

**A:** Radio is the closest thing we have, among the modern media, to the original form of human storytelling: stories told "in the dark," as I like to say, from mouth to ear, with the pictures formed in the imagination of the listener. It's a singularly powerful medium for storytelling, and that includes true stories. True stories told through the intimacy of radio transport us into the lives of other people; they touch us and broaden our minds. They have the potential, at least, to bring out the best in us.

**Q: How did you get the idea for this collection?**

**A:** As someone who is teaching radio as well as making it, I was keenly aware of the lack of published writing about documentary radio, especially the terrific audio work being done in our own time. Several years ago my colleagues at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University were developing plans for a series of books on documentary work, and I was asked if I'd like to develop a book on radio. My reaction was: Why not? Someone needs to do it! Very quickly we decided that the richest and most varied approach would be a collection of personal, detailed essays by radio makers themselves, taking us inside their work and inside their heads. In shaping the book and working with these essayists, I had the distinct pleasure of working closely with my co-editor, Alexa Dilworth.

**Q: Who do you hope will read *Reality Radio* and what do you want them to get from it?**

**A:** *Reality Radio* is designed for two audiences, and they overlap. The first audience is people learning to make radio (and, of course, their teachers), whether in traditional academic programs or not. The second audience, and potentially the larger one, is the public radio audience itself. People who love radio tend to *really* love it, and I think many fans would enjoy reading essays by the talented and creative radio makers whose work they've come to treasure. In either case, I would expect the book's readers to come away with a new appreciation of the thoughts, decisions, and artistry that go into the crafting of a radio documentary. This book will, so to speak, sharpen your ears.

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## 2-2-2 Reality Radio

**Q: What is your background with radio? What drew you to this form of media?**

**A:** My background as a public radio journalist and documentary maker goes back to 1983, when I started as a cub reporter at the Minnesota Public Radio station in Moorhead, Minnesota. (That's just across the Red River from Fargo, N.D.) I worked for MPR for many years, and then went off to cover the Rocky Mountain West for NPR News. I then returned to Minnesota, becoming a correspondent for MPR's national documentary unit, American RadioWorks, in 1998. I produced programs for American RadioWorks for eight years before joining the Center for Documentary Studies a few years ago. Like most people in public radio, I fell into it while thinking about doing something else. (I was planning to be a philosophy professor.) I was drawn to two things above all: the enormous privilege of roaming the world with a tape recorder and talking to extraordinary, ordinary people; and the absolute *fun* of crafting radio pieces. Twenty-five years on, I haven't begun to get tired of those things.

**Q: What is so special about radio? What are its strengths and its weaknesses and how do radio documentaries play to these qualities?**

**A:** We live in a highly visual culture, and clearly that's radio's big weakness: no pictures! But that weakness is also radio's strength. Radio is a close cousin to the written word in the way it demands our involvement, our participation in the formation of the images. (Some radio people, in fact, like to claim that "radio has the best pictures.") But radio does something that words on the page can't do; it carries the *sound* of the voice, the sounds of the world and of life happening. Sound has extraordinary power that we don't often acknowledge. It's a power linked to memory, to music, to emotion. Many of the essayists in *Reality Radio* write about this power in beautiful ways, and illustrate how they use it. As Jay Allison puts it in his essay, "A voice can sneak in, bypass the brain, and touch the heart."

**Q: Briefly, what is the history of the evolution of the radio documentary?**

**A:** The radio documentary had an early shining moment that coincided with the golden age of radio—that is, the time before television "took over." Back then, of course, the best broadcast journalists and nonfiction storytellers worked in radio, people like Edward R. Murrow and Norman Corwin. Given the heft of field recorders in those days, however, most "documentaries" were made in the studio, relying heavily on dramatic re-enactments. After the advent of TV, the radio documentary, at least in the United States, went dormant until public radio as we know it emerged in about 1970. By then, recorders were much more portable, inspiring producers to take them into the world and to tell increasingly intimate stories.

Over these four decades, public radio documentary makers have often flourished but have also struggled for funding and airtime as the public radio networks, led by NPR, took fewer risks and ran shorter, newsier stories. *Reality Radio* argues that we're in a new golden age of documentary radio, led by station-based and independent producers such as Ira Glass, The Kitchen Sisters, Jad Abumrad, and others who wrote essays for the book.

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### 3-3-3 Reality Radio

**Q: How did you choose which radio professionals to feature?**

**A:** Some of the choices were easy; people who know public radio will recognize the names of some of the best-known and most influential radio producers of our generation. But the idea was not to canonize them. The intent was to invite a representative sample of radio makers whose work covers a broad spectrum in style, subject matter, and approach. A number of the book's contributors are less well-known—a couple are not professional radio makers at all—but they've produced work that's strikingly original and says something distinctive about the possibilities of this documentary medium.

*Reality Radio* also features essays from four English-language producers working outside the U.S., in Australia, Canada, and the U.K. These people dramatically broaden the scope of the book because their work is overtly artistic in a way that very little nonfiction radio is in the United States.

**Q: These radio producers describe themselves in many ways. What are some of the names they give themselves and what do these descriptions say about what these producers are trying to accomplish?**

**A:** Some of our contributors proudly call themselves journalists. Others insist that they're not in the business of journalism—they're not primarily out to inform—but of storytelling. Still others see themselves as audio artists, concerned first and foremost with using documentary elements to compose an impressionistic soundscape. In fact, of course, these are not discreet camps. One can break journalistic ground while simultaneously telling a story and crafting a work of sonic art—and virtually all of these radio makers do all three things in varying degrees. But they do have different emphases in their goals and motivations. *Reality Radio* constitutes a lively conversation among them.

**Q: What drew these producers to the field? How did they get involved in radio?**

**A:** It happened in all kinds of ways, but I think it's fair to say that none of these people grew up planning to be radio documentarians! Maybe there's a child out there today who dreams of being the next Dmae Roberts or Scott Carrier, but the *Reality Radio* essayists tended to stumble into a field that is decidedly quiet and outside the mainstream, not to mention unucrative. Many dreamed of careers in other arts—music, theater, film—or were educated in the humanities. They heard something on the radio, or found themselves volunteering at the local community station, and they caught the bug.

**Q: You mention differences between American and non-American radio documentaries in the book. What are these differences and what do they say about American audiences and American culture in comparison to other parts of the world?**

**A:** In the United States, historically, the radio documentary—like most documentary work, come to think of it—sprang from a journalistic impulse. And, given the nature of our public radio system, much of the best documentary work is still heard on news

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#### 4-4-4 Reality Radio

programs such as NPR's *All Things Considered*. Our radio documentary work, then, has tended to come in the form of richly produced news documentaries or narrative docs that could be classified, in news terms, as "human interest" stories. Given that tradition, Ira Glass's creation in the 1990's of *This American Life (TAL)*, a high-profile show dedicated mostly to stories about everyday life as opposed to public policy issues, constituted a breakthrough. Still, in its presentation *TAL* is quite straightforward and linear.

In Europe, Canada, and Australia, there's a much longer and more fully developed tradition of nonfiction radio as art. For decades, the public radio networks in those countries—the BBC, CBC, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, etc.—have dedicated airtime to what's known as the radio "feature." Features, in this sense of the word, are often extremely elliptical and impressionistic, not to mention breathtaking. For American readers not familiar with this kind of work, *Reality Radio* provides an introduction through essayists Sherre DeLys, Alan Hall, Natalie Kestecher, and Chris Brookes.

**Q: In your introduction, you mention the concept of "truth" in reporting. What are these producers trying to accomplish in terms of truth in their radio programs and how does this distinguish their programs from conventional news programs?**

**A:** Virtually all of the essayists talk about reaching for the truth, but for most of them it means something more than simply finding facts and transmitting them to the listener. In journalism and in all kinds of documentary work in recent decades, there's been an increasing embrace of the subjective. The producers featured in *Reality Radio*, who occupy the more creative wing of the field, embrace subjectivity in a variety of ways. They appear as characters in their stories. Or they leave themselves out and allow their subjects to be their own narrators. They edit the words of others aggressively, not to manipulate the factual meaning but to create a kind of music or poetry. In all kinds of ways, these producers set out to create an auditory *experience* in the belief that an experience will move listeners in a way that mere facts cannot.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: A conversation with John Biewen, editor, with Alexa Dilworth, of *Reality Radio: Telling True Stories in Sound* (University of North Carolina Press, Spring 2010). The text of this interview is available at [www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/biewen/](http://www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/biewen/).

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## **5-5-5 Reality Radio**

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