

Interview with Julie Shapiro, Executive Producer of Radiotopia from PRX

[00:00:00] This week we're looking at why audio storytelling has endured, and why it's been such a powerful storytelling forum over such a long period of time. Julie Shapiro joins us now. She's seen audio storytelling from a variety of perspectives. She's currently the executive producer at the podcast network Radiotopia from PRX. Before that, she held the same title at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and earlier in her career, she founded and ran an audio storytelling festival called Third Coast International Audio Festival. Julie, thanks for joining us today.

[00:00:31] Oh, it's totally my pleasure. This is like my favorite topic to talk about, so I am so ready for this conversation.

[00:00:38] Awesome. Compared to movies or video games, you could argue that audio is kind of a simpler form of storytelling and maybe not as appealing to modern audiences. But why do you think it's a storytelling form that's still so gripping for people?

[00:00:53] I think people are suckers for stories. We all know that. We've known that, you know, since, as they say, people sat around the campfire in the caves communicating with each other. I think audio storytelling has become particularly robust and multifaceted, partly because of how technology has evolved around it. But it's also had this enduring quality of voice, right there in your ears, speaking right to you. I'd find that I'm an avid reader, I love films, but audio for me is a closer, more intimate medium. And it's like literally when you have earbuds in or headphones on, you have one person talking right to you. And, you know, I think now eight months into a pandemic, I think about this a lot more about how audio storytelling has always brought a certain camaraderie to the listening act, and I feel like right now we are all desperate for company, and closeness, and personal interaction. So it has this like superpower. The superpower of audio is, in effect, even stronger than it ever has been.

[00:02:04] So let's break it down a little bit in terms of craft. What is it that sucks us in? Is it voice? Is it the writing? Is it the sound design? Is it all of it together?

[00:02:14] I think it's all of those things together, actually. It's the combination. Any one of those things isn't necessarily enough to reel you in and keep you on the edge of your eardrums. Does that work? But you know, the people who delve into audio storytelling as a craft, and I do think it can be an art form, it can be entertaining, it can be educational, it can be informative, and all those things, but for me, the through line or the thing that all great audio stories have in common is a combination of all those things. You have voice. You have scenes. You have great sprawling stories that can be told through certain perspectives. I think audio that uses the medium to its best effect is especially powerful. And sometimes the most powerful sound in stories is a lack of sound, or a pause, or a silence, or a cadence of the way we speak in person that you can't really get when you're reading print. You hear that in your mind, but you don't really know how it's intended to sound. So I think there's a musicality to audio storytelling that gives it also a little bit of an advantage over just watching something that has visuals and audio and also just reading something on the page.

[00:03:30] So storytelling has been around for a long time. What do you see as some of the impact of the storytelling forum?

[00:03:35] I have been amazed at seeing some of the response to some of the stories I'm involved with or the podcasts I'm involved with. And we see so much social media engagement with our shows to the point where people are telling us that hearing certain shows like changed their perspective on how they think and live. I'm involved with the show called Ear Hustle, which shares stories of daily life in San Quentin and post-incarceration, and there's a number of people who have come to that show expecting something about prison stories and have taken away a better understanding about humans. We just see this kind of one-to-one impact, so where all of the storytelling is opening up a broad and wide scale, we're also seeing the ways these thousands of stories out there really impact listeners one at a time and can really get them thinking about the world around them in different ways. And so I just have a lot of respect for both the listeners and the storytellers who are able to create this bond and seeing how it plays out day to day in the real world.

[00:04:41] Do you think there's something about the form that makes it easier to have that bond and have that psychological impact on people?

[00:04:48] Again, I think it feels just so personal, so we'll have people saying, you know, literally I saw a tweet earlier today that said, like, "I'm a Midwestern mama and now feel like I understand Black men in prison better now." And they both want to let us know how different they are from the people telling the stories that they're hearing, and also, I think it's remarkable for people to walk in other's shoes and hear their stories and understand something differently that challenges stereotypes or preconceptions that they think they had about certain communities or certain situations. So I give listeners a lot of credit for coming to those realizations themselves without being hit over the head with it and absorbing and understanding what those stories mean to their lives, even if they're completely different worlds that they're hearing about.

[00:05:40] In your career, you've probably listened to just an absurd amount of audio stories. What are some of the things that really, you know, pop and stand out to you, you know, as you're listening? Like what are some of the things that a great story has in common?

[00:05:53] Oh, yeah. Thousands of audio documentaries at this point, and now that we're into podcasting, you know, you have different forms. So sometimes these stories fold over multiple episodes or segments. But you know, the things that really pull me in, I'm always struck by voices that I've never heard and voices from people who I might never come across myself. When you have a blend of information and personal experience and you're hearing directly from someone, I think that is one of the most powerful ways to understand something happening in the world, and that's what we always talk about audio being able to do. It puts you in other people's shoes. I mean, any storytelling, really. But the advantage of the audio storytelling for me is that it's very visual, actually, but it really engages your imagination in a way that you're investing in the story that you're telling to root yourself in who's talking and what it looks like where they are. Now, the script helps with that, and the background audio cues help with that, and structure can even help with that. But there's a relationship between listener and story that I think is very collaborative and interactive. It goes back to camaraderie, maybe. You're like engaging with the story, with the storyteller, and I think that that's a very empowering thing for a listener to experience.

[00:07:13] Now, we've seen a lot of changes in the storytelling forms over the years. What do you think some of the biggest ones have been?

[00:07:22] Well, I feel like the form has opened up, which makes me really happy. I've always been a supporter of work that pushes boundaries and sounds a little bit different from things that you hear day to day. Although I think with every form you have to have basics of storytelling down before you go off, you know, completely experimenting. But I do think the form has loosened up a bit. I think we're hearing many different voices that we weren't hearing 20 years ago. I think storytelling has become very personal. It used to seem like what you heard on the radio was kind of news-based and information-based. For all of the news reports you hear, you often get a personal take on what you're hearing, as well, and it's this combination of getting to know someone, experiencing something, while you're also hearing statistics, and numbers, and what the laws are behind that that gives you ... you're better armed as a listener to understand something going on. So I've seen more of that trust in letting the personal story carry the weight of something very serious and heavy.

[00:08:24] We've seen, I think, audio stories now have the advantage of often being attached to other components, like social media made by creators. Listeners can reach out to producers and find out more about things. Often podcasts at least have websites where you can go and get additional information after you listen. So there's an interesting way that the accompanying technologies have allowed listeners to go even deeper on the stories that they come across that they like.

[00:08:56] I do think technology is also changing the form of storytelling. Some of the things I'm experiencing in podcasting, at least, we're conforming to the format a bit. So you have stories that maybe don't need to be eight episodes worth, maybe four or five would do that. But because the contract says eight episodes, things get stretched, and we have ads coming in and breaking

up production or breaks if you're listening to public radio, for instance. Or pretty much anything you're listening to is probably going to butt in at some point and say "support for this comes from that" or "here's a commercial." So stories appear in segments now more. They used to just be straight through. And so we're used to kind of pausing our story brain, taking in or ignoring, or skipping through the ads. Don't skip the ads because they support the stories we love. But, you know, I think we listen, we're a little bit more flexible as listeners, too. We understand that's how a lot of modern storytelling takes place, at least through your ears, so that seems like a kind of a significant change. Yeah.

[00:09:58] So what do you see as the big strengths of audio storytelling? Because, you know, right now there are so many different ways you could tell a story. You know, with multimedia and all the different technological platforms that are now available, why do audio?

[00:10:12] Well, I think audio has fewer barriers than some of the more expensive media to make, for one thing. The technology has gotten more intuitive, more affordable. There is so much information online about how to use recording devices and how to interview. I mean, there are wonderful resources online that can teach you so much. You don't have to spend a lot of money going to get a degree in journalism to become a storyteller. Now, if you're able to do that, all the better because you're surrounded by a community of people interested in that, and you can learn from people with expertise. And that's always very helpful, of course. But there's always been a sort of democratization of the storytelling through audio because anyone could go out and get a recorder and a microphone, and now anyone can make a podcast and publish it. So that's one thing. I think it's very accessible right now both to listen to and to make stories.

[00:11:09] I think there are more institutions out there training people how to do this, so that's a great benefit compared to when I first got into the field, 20-plus years ago. I think audio is portable, so you can take it with you and you don't have to devote, you know, multitasking is something we probably all do all the time anymore. So the fact that you can bring audio with you, and it can make a chore seem...I think we...My husband and I kind of fight over the dishes because we both want to catch up on our podcast at the end of the day. So, you know, there's that flexibility, and it just seems to me like a very nimble medium. Like, you can pause. You can stop. You can come back to it. You can listen again. I think all of these things give listeners a lot of agency over how they listen, and what they listen to, and what they choose to listen to.

[00:12:01] And then there's the wonderful synchronicity or spontaneity of, you know, or serendipity of turning on the radio and hearing what you hear, which I think is also a really valuable experience that I hope we'll always have the opportunity to have even as podcasting and audio on-demand become so much more popular.

[00:12:19] What are you seeing with the cutting edge of audio storytelling these days?

[00:12:25] I think there are some audio stories that are becoming more interactive with people, so you can respond. Stories that have Twitter accounts from fictional characters that you can follow along with. I just heard the first episode of a podcast called Imaginary Advice, doing a series called The Golden Hour, and their protagonist is also on Twitter, a fictional person. And so they're dropping clues in the episode, so you can then try to follow along and solve the mystery as you're listening. We saw some early versions of that, but I'm seeing more of that kind of thing now.

[00:13:04] There was another series from the BBC called Forest 404, and what they did is they created a fictional world that prized now-extinct sounds from before like an apocalyptic event. And then they had ride along episodes that just featured on-sound design and field recordings. So you got story, and then you've got the next episode that would dive right into like a deeper history of the sounds they explored in the story. And I thought, like, that's a really clever way to go deeper. You know, not in the middle of their fictional story, but to also offer the experience of the sound. It was form and function all in one, and I see more playfulness like that. I mean, with, you know, with breaking news or investigative journalism, you don't want much of that. Right? You kind of want to trust the people bringing that to you. But I think in some of the fiction, and the fact-and-fiction hybrid stories, and even some of the more feature-based storytelling, you just find a lot of casualness. Hosts are becoming bolder at being themselves and not conforming to like a certain way of telling a story, and I think the best hosts out there sort of forged their own path to

create their own genre of hosting, even. And then people try to emulate them. But there aren't a lot of rules around audio storytelling that I hear, anymore, adhere to sort of strictly, and that's exciting. And I think one thing that's really changed is that you used to be able to identify some of the same scoring songs across lots of different shows. I called it the "Era of Yo La Tengo and Brian Eno" scoring. And, you know, partly because of rights issues, which has been a great constraint that we've all pushed against, and now we commission work from musicians and friends. And it's sort of a more supportive environment for all the artists, you know, gathering around a project, so that also gives shows and storytellers a way to more personally define the sounds of the stories that they're telling. So that's been really exciting, too.

[00:15:07] So where do you think audio is headed?

[00:15:10] Well, I think we're going to hear more of everything because as we talked about, it's way more accessible. And from my vantage point, I have talked to so many people interested in getting into this field, and it makes me so excited to see more diverse voices and different communities forming media organizations to tell their own stories. So I think we're going to see a lot more diversity in audio storytelling, much needed.

[00:15:38] I think we're going to see more celebrities getting into it because that seems to be very popular right now. So there's a lot of money being spent to bring people who already have followings into the podcasting fold, at least. I think we're going to see a lot more expensive storytelling being made because, again, like the industry is really, I think, bananas. It's not the technical term, but it feels very manic and excited, and there's lots of people rushing into this space. I think there'll be more entertainment stories. I think that's really like where people are starting to flock to.

[00:16:19] Fiction is blowing up, whereas it was really slow to catch on in a big way, I think, for podcasting at least. We're also going to see more niche-based storytelling, where there's people looking for stories of all stripes now that you can find them and you can make them yourself. I think we'll see bigger and more expensive productions, and we'll see a steady influx of specific, small, niche-based stories being told.

[00:16:48] So for the students of this class who are interested in storytelling and interested in journalism. What advice would you give if they're interested in pursuing audio as their medium?

[00:16:58] Do it! I would say do it. It's such a rewarding and generous medium to be part of. I would say, listen, listen, listen to as much as you can get your ears on. That's how I learned so much, was simply by taking in all kinds of stories and pushing myself to find stories that I wouldn't necessarily gravitate toward, and then trying to articulate what it was about those stories that worked or didn't work, getting beyond that binary of liking something, or not liking something. It's good or it's bad. It's boring or it's exciting. Like really developing a vocabulary to express how you feel about what you hear is really important.

[00:17:36] There's wonderful community. I think audio producers are just like top-notch human beings, and I would say find your community wherever you are and engage with it. There are listening series all over. We don't do as many public, well, we don't do any public events right now. But before the pandemic, there was actually a lot of eventing going on around audio storytelling, and that's something I've always been a fan of. We did that with the Third Coast Festival all along. Listening in a group setting or on a group Zoom call, it's just a wonderful way to experience something you usually do by yourself, with other people. So I would say, find your community, and if you're getting involved with a project, I would say partner up. You don't want to do this alone. It's really hard, hard work, and a couple of extra ears and brains on any project helps. Remain open to new forms. Don't just try to emulate the things you love. Maybe start there, but then, you know, give yourself an opportunity to explore around the margins of what you love and see where that takes you. And then again, like I said earlier, there's just so much information out there that you can avail yourself to. I'll plug the Third Coast Festival because we had a conference annually, and all of those sessions are online. You can hear about writing and interviewing and recording from some of the most talented people who've been working in the field for a long time, and so I think for anyone motivated to really get into this, all of the tools and

the opportunities are out there awaiting you. I hope that you will pursue those because ideas, those dreams, audio dreams.

[00:19:16] Julie, thank you so much for your time today. Thank you for sharing your expertise with everybody. Appreciate it.

[00:19:22] Oh, it's been a pleasure. Anytime.

[00:19:24] And you mentioned a couple of resources. Where can folks hear your work and check out The Third Coast materials?

[00:19:29] Oh, right. So Radiotopia.fm has all of the podcasts in the Radiotopia network, so you can start there and dive into those. ThirdCoastFestival.org has a link to all of those conference sessions I mentioned. One other wonderful resource is transom.org for tools and manifestoes about audio storytelling and really hearing from some of the great thinkers out there. And those three sites should be more than enough to get you going.

[00:19:58] Great. Definitely check those out. They're really good sites. Thanks again, Julie.

[00:20:02] My pleasure.