

The Sound of Radiolab: Exploring the “Corwinesque” in 21st Century Public Radio

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Abstract

Editor’s Note: Today, radio scholar Alex Russo, author of *Points on the Dial: Golden Age Radio Beyond the Networks*, continues our summer series “Tune In to the Past,” which explores the life and legacy of radio broadcaster Norman Lewis Corwin, the “poet laureate of radio” who died last summer at the age of 101.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Aesthetics, American Studies, Article, History, Liveness



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Editor's Note: Today, radio scholar Alex Russo, author of [Points on the Dial: Golden Age Radio Beyond the Networks](#), continues our summer series “Tune In to the Past,” which explores the life and legacy of radio broadcaster Norman Lewis Corwin, the “poet laureate of radio” who died last summer at the age of 101. *Sounding Out!*’s three-part exploration of his legacy by radio scholars [Neil Verma](#) (June), [Shawn VanCour](#) (July), and Russo (August) not only gives Corwin’s work new life (and critique), but also speaks to the growing vitality of radio studies itself. And now, hey everyone, you are listening to . . . Alex Russo. Alright? Okay? Alright?—JSA

P.S. Look for a special bonus fall installment of the Corwin series in September!

Voice 1: *What if you were the best in the world at something...*

Multiple Voices: *[background] He is the greatest....most stupendous.... most thrilling...most inventive*

Voice 1: *and then your entire industry collapsed.*

Voice 2: *[continuing and fading out] Radio[?] Writer.*

Voice 1: *But you kept on working?*

SFX: *Typewriter, continuing until coming to a dead stop when return bell rings and the carriage returns with a clunk on “pass away”*

Voice 1: *Outliving all your peers, until, 77 years later, you pass away?*

Voice 3: *Norman Corwin? Never heard of him. He defined a generation’s engagement with sound?*

Voice 1: *And there is no one left to eulogize you? What is your legacy?*

This post is the third in a series that engages with the legacy of Norman Corwin, a – perhaps *the* – preeminent radio writer and producer of the late 1930s and 1940s. Specifically, it picks up on Neil Verma’s challenge back in June to consider the legacy of the “[Corwin-esque](#).” Verma devotes considerable space to mapping the aesthetic style of Corwin in his post and his incredibly insightful and astute book, [Theater of the Mind](#).

The analysis that follows leans on Verma’s argument with a caveat. The question of legacy stems in part from Verma’s assertion that Corwin lived for so long, few were left to speak for his legacy.

Corwin may not have the name recognition that he should within the broader public, but for radio practitioners, he is regarded with considerable reverence. In this sense, the Corwinesque style lives on by inspiring contemporary radio producers, especially, I will argue, in the aural style of the syndicated WNYC public radio program *Radiolab*, hosted by Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich. *Radiolab* describes itself as “a show about curiosity. Where sound illuminates ideas, and the boundaries blur between science, philosophy, and human experience.” While ostensibly a science program, designed to make complicated scientific phenomena comprehensible to a general audience, the show engages in fundamental questions about nature, being, and experience in creative ways.



Certainly, Abumrad and Krulwich regard Corwin as an inspiration, such as when Krulwich responded to a claim by *This American Life*'s Ira Glass that the turn of the 21st century is the true Golden Age of Radio, by describing Corwin as “Homer in a modern form. . .a lyrical reporter who wrote and spoke like he was wearing a toga and sometimes was so spectacular you’d get dizzy listening and sometimes seems a little too old fashioned and oratorical.” In his earlier post, Verma defines Corwin’s aesthetic style through a number of formal elements, including what he describes as a kind of “overworked literary calisthenics.” Putting their own spin on Corwin’s dizzy oratory, Abumrad and Krulwich mark *Radiolab* with complicated and intentionally convoluted speech patterns. The program features Abumrad and Krulwich in rapid fire banter – far faster than typical public radio fare. Often, this onslaught of language crowds and overlaps, producing a highly staged simulation of conversational flow. Often, Abumrad is a voice of enthusiastic discovery, while Krulwich plays the role of skeptic, particularly in the early seasons. Abumrad’s voice is more nasal, higher pitched and, notably, recognizably younger than that of grizzled veteran Krulwich, creating a contrapuntal effect.



Radiolab Producers/Hosts Robert Krulwich (l) and Jad Abumrad (r), Image by Flickr User ThirdCoast Festival

These voices usually interact with a third voice, what typically radio documentary calls the “actuality.” However, instead of than separating “the real” from the narration’s voice of authority, *Radiolab* juxtaposes sentence fragments from all the voices (analysis, counter-argument, evidence) to create a conversation that proceeds dialectically, on parallel parts that intersect at points to lead to a thematic conclusion. While *Radiolab*’s dialogic style has been explored by other radio scholars, like [Andrew Bottomley](#) and [Eleanor Patterson](#), its link to Corwin’s model of radio drama deserves more attention. While not exactly the same as Corwin’s signature “choral” vocal style, with voices chiming in from all directions, it performs a similar function, aurally representing a multiplicity of viewpoints.

Furthemore, Abumrad and Krulwich work hard to create a feeling of liveness and connection with *Radiolab*’s listeners, much like Corwin did. *Radiolab* is certainly not a live program, but we must also remember that much of Corwin’s work was also developed to be recorded and sold—as [Shawn VanCour](#) discussed in [his offering to this series](#). Although violating typical news protocols, mangled sentences, mis-matched vocal levels, and cross-talk are not removed during *Radiolab*’s editing process; rather they are left in to create the feeling of spontaneity. Krulwich and Abumrad as quite conscious of this effect, with the latter noting in a *New York Times* profile, “[It’s a funny thing, when you find yourselves laboring for weeks to create what you felt at that first moment.](#)”



Abumrad and Krulwich, performing a live version of Radiolab, Image by Flickr's User Jared Kelly

A final connection, Abumrad and Krulwich blend two aural styles, “intimate” and “kaleidosonic,” descriptors Verma coins in [Theater of the Mind](#) as the hallmark of Corwin’s formal mastery. Verma defines broadcast intimacy through radio’s address to the listener as an individual, its placement of a program’s “audioposition” alongside the narrator, as well as its emphasis on place-centered narratives. Kaleidosonic style addresses the listener as a public, uses a multiplicity of auditing positions, and creates a broad model of engagement with narratives centered on events (70). A wonderful representative example of this combination of styles on *Radiolab* can be heard at several points in season two’s episode, [“Detective Stories.”](#) First, the end of the opening beat features the stylized repetition of a New York Sanitation official describing the Fresh Kills sump as a “time capsule.” As the phrase “time capsule” echoes eight times, Krulwich begins to chant “time capsule” in a lightly mocking and metallic sounding tone. Abumrad tells him, “You can stop that now.”

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/radiolab-clip-1.mp3>

Later in that episode, a segment entitled “Goat on a Cow,” follows Laura Starcheski across the country as she investigates the twelve-year story behind of a box of old letters found by the side of the road.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/radiolab-clip-2.mp3>

This segment takes place at different locations, a hallmark of the intimate style. At the same time, it also uses elements of the kaleidosonic style because the narrative turns on particular events, moments where new evidence is found and new theories of the story of Ella Chase, the letters’

recipient. Throughout this segment Starcheski’s voice fades in and around those of her actualities. When she intervenes to provide context, the other voices are not stopped, they continue, telling their story under hers until at specific moment both voices say an identical phrase. This juxtaposition suggests that the letters hold different meanings for the individuals who come in contact with them: For Starcheski they are a reminder of her childhood desire to invent life stories of strangers; For Erick Gordon, an English teacher who found the letters, they are a great mystery on which he can project his own imagined histories and build a teaching curriculum; Finally, for Robert Chase, they represent a relief that he is no longer the archivist of his grandmother’s life. Like Corwin’s work, “Goat on a Cow” combines intimate and kaleidosonic styles, creating pleasures that are linked not to narrative closure but to the process of sonically representing investigation and theorization.



Letters, by Flickr user aroid

In allowing the pleasures of aural storytelling to enable the show’s narrative, Radiolab’s Corwin connection expands conceptions of the imagination. Like Corwin (and radio writers of the network-era), Abumrad [sees radio](#) as both an act of “co-authorship” and “co-imagining” between the writer/performer and the listener. However, he also sees his “job” as “put[ting] certain images and feelings in your head.” This link to discourses of the imagination is clear in the series’ opening episode, “[Who Am I?](#)” One segment in this episode, “The Story of Me,” suggests that what defines humanity is “introspective consciousness,” the ability to abstract images or events into a story of self.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/radiolab-clip-3.mp3>

Citing neuroscientist Dr. V. S. Ramachandran, Krulwich notes: “Only humans can take images from the real world, pull them into their heads, divide them into parts, and take those parts and turn them into abstractions.” To demonstrate, Krulwich leads Abramrad through an example where the latter conjures the image purple striped red canary in his head. Ramachandran follows, noting that only humans can rearrange and manipulate “tokens” of “bird,” “striped,” and “red” to “imagine” something that doesn’t exist. The “peculiar human muscle” is that “ability to experience things and abstract them into a story. This definition is telling, while ostensibly it is about human consciousness, I would argue it could just as easily be seen as a description of the job of radio writing, taking recognizable symbolic tokens, manipulating them, and turning them into story. By equating human consciousness with radio, Krulwich and Abramrad exemplify a final theme that Verma attributes to network-era radio drama, its evolution “from being a theater *in* the mind to being a theater *about* the mind” (3).

Indeed, the segment of “The Story of Me” finishes by noting that neural actions can only be understood in a group: “Even the thought ‘I am a one’ springs from a hundred million cells connecting through a trillion synapses and that all of this multiple activity paradoxically creates the you of this moment. You are always plural.” I imagine that Corwin, no stranger to celebrations of plurality, would completely agree.

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Featured Image by Flickr User Jared Kelly

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