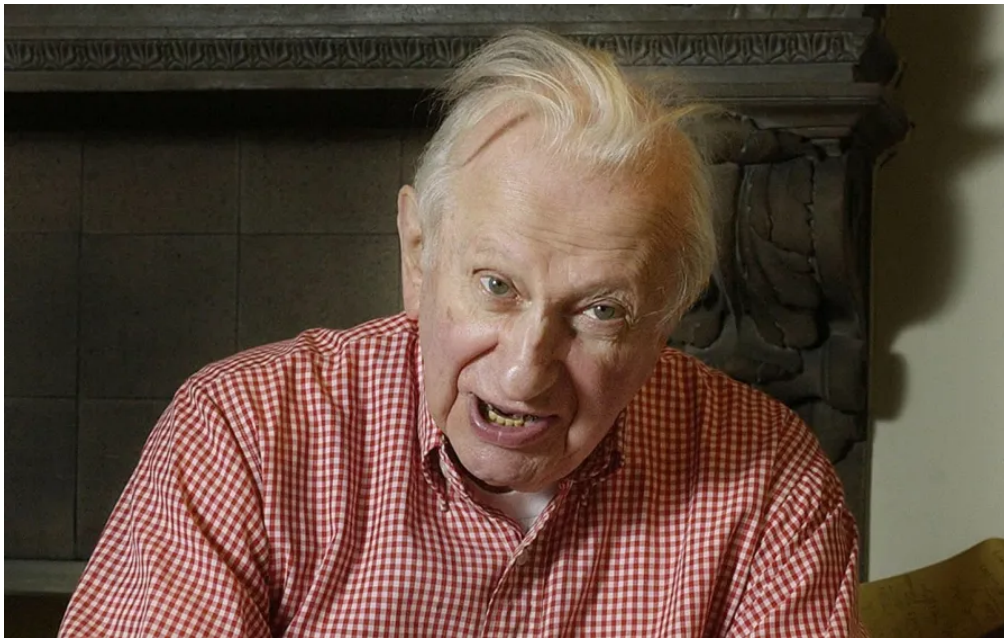


Studs Terkel Made Oral History

Ten years after his death, Terkel's voice is still a vivid part of our shared experience.

By Peter Dreier

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Studs Terkel, speaking about his book *Hope Dies Last* at his home in Chicago, in 2003. (AP Photo / Aynsley Floyd)

There will never be another radio-talk-show host, oral historian, raconteur, or colorful character like Studs Terkel, who died 10 years ago, on October 31, 2008. Today, organizers, activists, and academics emphasize the importance of people “telling their stories” in order to insert a human element in political battles and to “shape the

narrative” of how we look at social movements. Terkel reinvented the study of history and contemporary politics by giving ordinary people an opportunity to tell their stories. He described himself as “an eclectic disk jockey, a radio soap opera gangster, a sports and political commentator; a jazz critic; a pioneer in TV, Chicago style; an oral historian and a gadfly.”

He was born Louis Terkel in 1912 in New York City, but he will always be associated with Chicago, where his family moved in 1922 when he was 10 years old. A sickly and asthmatic child, he was the youngest of three boys born to Sam and Annie Terkel, Jews who had emigrated to New York from the Russian-Polish border. In New York, Sam was a tailor and Annie a seamstress in a factory.

In Chicago, his parents ran a 50-room boarding house, the Wells-Grand Hotel, whose guests included railroad firemen, seafarers, secretaries, Wobblies, and the occasional prostitute. Terkel recalled, “That hotel was far more of an education to me than the University of Chicago was.”

As a teenager, Terkel was riveted to political debates on the radio. During the 1930s, his political awareness was further nurtured at Bughouse Square, a free-speech area of a local park where an assortment of Socialists, Communists, vegetarians, Christian fundamentalists, and others would mount soapboxes and hold forth. After graduating from McKinley High School in 1928, he attended the University of Chicago, earning a law degree in 1934. But he spent more time at the movies and listening to the blues than studying legal matters.

His first job was as a fingerprint classifier for the FBI. He was soon let go. Only years later, after requesting his FBI file, did he discover why. A University of Chicago professor had told the agency, “I remember [Terkel]. Slovenly, didn’t care much, a low-class Jew. He is not one of our type of boys.” J. Edgar Hoover himself sent a note to take Terkel off the payroll.

He became involved with the Chicago Repertory Theater Group, performing in union halls. There was another man named Louis in the group, so to avoid confusion, Terkel took the moniker “Studs,” after Studs Lonigan, the protagonist in James T. Farrell’s novels about Chicago’s tough Irish neighborhoods.

He found work with the radio division of the New Deal’s Federal Writers Project. He was soon performing in radio soap operas, other stage performances, and the news show. He described his voice as “low, husky, menacing,” which made him a natural to play heavies. “I would always say the same thing and either get killed or sent to Sing Sing,” he recalled.

In his spare time, he helped raise funds for the Soviet American Friendship Committee and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee. In 1942, before Terkel went into the air force, the Chicago Repertory group held a farewell party for him. Billie Holiday dropped by and sang “Strange Fruit,” the hypnotic anti-lynching song, at his request. The incident made it into his file, kept by US Army Intelligence.

In the Air Force, he hosted a popular radio show that included music and antifascist news, but he was discharged within a year because of a perforated ear drum.

Terkel's first big professional break came in 1944 when he was hired by the Meyerhoff advertising agency to do radio commercials and then a sports show. It soon created his own show, *The Wax Museum*. Terkel, the disc jockey, played an eclectic assortment of his favorite old records, including folk music, opera, jazz, and blues. He introduced his audience to performers like folksinger Woody Guthrie and African-American gospel singer Mahalia Jackson.

When Henry Wallace ran for president in 1948 on the Progressive Party ticket, Terkel enthusiastically jumped on board. Terkel and musicologist Alan Lomax produced a program for Wallace during the last week of the campaign, to be aired on ABC. Along with Wallace, the program featured Paul Robeson. Terkel advised Wallace, "Make believe you're addressing one person: that old farmer having a hard time, or that lost young family in a big city who don't know where to turn. Be very intimate."

Terkel became a well-known personality beginning in late 1949, when *Studs Place* first aired as a 15-minute segment of NBC's *Saturday Square*. It was originally set in a tavern, but the following year it became a half-hour series set in a greasy-spoon diner, with Terkel as its proprietor. An unscripted drama, the show featured ordinary people facing life's challenges, which gave Terkel, the show's star, an excuse to interview fascinating people, some of them famous or soon-to-be-famous, as in an early episode with Mahalia Jackson.

But in 1951, NBC suddenly wanted to yank the popular program. NBC executives told Terkel that he could clear his record by saying he had been duped into signing petitions

the previous decade for groups such as the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee and the Committee for Civil Rights. As Terkel recalled in *Touch and Go*, a memoir he wrote when he was 94, the network sent an inquisitor to Chicago who asked if he knew there were Communists behind the petitions.

“Suppose Communists come out against cancer?” Terkel replied. “Do we have to automatically come out for cancer?”

That was vintage Terkel: mixing progressive politics with a strong shot of humor. But the show was canceled and Terkel was blacklisted from commercial television and radio.

Fortunately, his wife, Ida, had steady work as a social worker at a racially integrated childcare center. In 1952 Terkel began what would become a 45-year relationship (until 1997) with WFMT radio. For his first show, *Sounds of the City*, Terkel would roam the city at night with a microphone and tape recorder, uncovering all kinds of funny and moving stories.

That show morphed into *The Studs Terkel Program*, a daily one-hour radio show. At first, he mostly played music, but slowly began adding his own commentary and interviews with both famous and unknown people. Terkel had the knack of asking the right questions and getting interviewees to relax. As a result, his subjects—who included many political activists and writers not often heard or seen on radio or TV—talked candidly and in rich detail about their lives, feelings, and ideas. Terkel made his listeners feel as if they were eavesdropping on an interesting conversation.

WFMT has collected a growing archive of more than 1,200 of Terkel’s programs, called “The Art of Conversation.” You can listen to Terkel interview musicians, singers, lyricists,

composers of jazz, opera, and folk, writers, actors, and political activists, including Louis Armstrong, Judy Collins, Bob Dylan, Carl Sandburg, his close friend Nelson Algren, Marlon Brando, Michael Harrington, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Nadine Gordimer, Toni Morrison, Dorothy Parker, Carl Sandburg, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Leonard Bernstein, Mort Sahl, Tennessee Williams, Jean Shepherd, Big Bill Broonzy, and Mike Royko. He would occasionally invite musicians or composers to perform their music.

Terkel's first book, *Giants of Jazz*, published in 1957, profiled thirteen jazz musicians based in part on his interviews with such artists as Armstrong, Holiday, John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, and Charlie Parker. But Terkel didn't become a famous best-selling author until André Schiffrin, an editor at Pantheon Books, approached him in 1965 about writing a book that would capture the story of Chicago at that moment in time—the civil rights movement, the rise of automation, and the nuclear arms race. The result was *Division Street: America*, an oral history published in 1967. Terkel edited the transcripts of his conversations with 70 people from a cross-section of Chicago—cops, teachers, cab drivers, nuns, CEOs, and others. They ranged in age from 15 to 90, and spoke from diverse political and religious perspectives.

Division Street: America was a success with both the critics and the public. It was the first of many books by Terkel with a similar format, showcasing the voices and views of ordinary Americans. Next came *Hard Times* (1970) about the Great Depression, and then *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (1974), followed by *Race: What Blacks and Whites Think and*

Feel About the American Obsession (1992), *Coming of Age: Growing Up in the 20th Century* (1995), and *My American Century* (1995). Working was made into a Broadway play in 1978. He won a Pulitzer Prize for his book on World War II, “*The Good War*” (1984).

Terkel was not the first oral historian, but he transformed the genre into a popular literary form. His books reflected Terkel’s genius for interviewing people and eliciting vivid and fascinating stories from everyday persons, a skill honed over the years on his radio program. He drew people out, creating a tapestry of conversation that revealed insights into the American character. Terkel made people comfortable by being respectful, really listening to them, and by what he called his own “ineptitude” and “slovenliness.”

He believed that most people had something to say worth hearing.

“The ordinary person feels not only as good a being as I am; rather he feels somewhat superior,” he wrote. “The average American has an indigenous intelligence, a native wit. It’s only a question of piquing that intelligence.”

In addition to his radio show and books, Terkel was a frequent master of ceremonies and speaker at progressive political events, and an occasional writer for magazines (including *The Nation*—publisher emeritus Victor Navasky and current editor and publisher Katrina vanden Heuvel each spoke at Terkel’s memorial service). At age 76, he resumed his acting career, appearing as a sportswriter in John Sayles’s 1988 film *Eight Men Out*, about the 1919 Chicago baseball scandal.

Throughout his public life, Terkel wore the same wardrobe—a red-checked shirt, a loosened red tie, a blue blazer, and gray trousers. He spoke in a unique, easily identifiable, deep, gravelly voice that sounded a bit like actor Edward G. Robinson, who often played gangsters in the movies. But there was nothing gangster-like about Terkel. He was a warm, effervescent, upbeat character, a sharp observer, a superb listener, a critic of hypocrisy, and an eternal optimist.

He signed off his radio program with his favorite line, “Take it easy, but take it,” from the last stanza of “Talking Union,” a song written by Pete Seeger when he was a member of the Almanac Singers:

*If you don't let red-baiting break you up,
And if you don't let stoolpigeons break you up,
And if you don't let vigilantes break you up,
And if you don't let race hatred break you up,
You'll win. What I mean, take it easy, but take it!*

His final book, *P.S.: Further Thoughts from a Lifetime of Listening*, was released in November 2008, a few weeks after he died at the age of 96. His ashes were scattered in Bughouse Square.

“Curiosity never killed this cat,” Terkel once said. “That’s what I’d like as my epitaph.” **N**

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