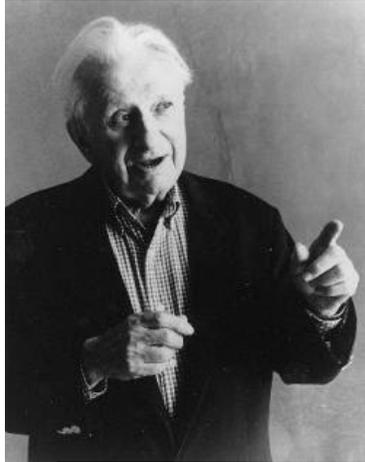


Studs Terkel Interview with James Baldwin (Sept. 29, 1962)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Studs Terkel



James Baldwin

To many Americans, the name Studs Terkel (1912-2008) is synonymous with oral history. Via his books, his work on television and, of course, his long-enduring, Chicago-based radio program, Terkel forged an artform he could rightly call his own. Transcripts of his oral histories have been fashioned into books that are bone fide classics: “Working” (1974), his reportage on labor in America; “The Good War” (1984), his Pulitzer-winning work on World War II; and “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” (2001), his meditation on faith.

But even with his books and well-used tape recorder tucked under his arm, it is on radio, that Terkel conducted some of his greatest interviews and engaged his most thought-provoking guests. His program, “The Studs Terkel Show,” aired daily over WFMT in Chicago from 1952 to 1998. During his legendary tenure, Terkel had conversations with a who’s who of the 20th century. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Tennessee Williams, Marlon Brando, Louis Armstrong, Mohammed Ali, Leonard Bernstein, Rosa Parks, Pete Seeger, and Bob Dylan, among others, were all his guests.

Louis Terkel was born in 1912 in New York City to working-class parents. Around age 11, he moved with his parents to Chicago and would call that city home for the remainder of his life. In his youth, his parents ran a transient hotel. It is there, Terkel would recall years later, that he developed his interest in people and their stories. A cross-section of America came through the doors of that hotel and recited their stories and espoused their political views. Terkel listened to them all.

Terkel graduated from McKinley High School in 1928 and would attend Crane Community College and the University of Chicago. He graduated from the latter with a Ph.B. in 1932. He earned a law degree from the U. of Chicago in 1934. He also around this time acquired his life-long nickname; Terkel got the moniker from being a fan of James T. Farrell’s “Studs Lonigan” novels.

Though trained in the law, Terkel grew disillusioned with the practice while still in school. After graduation, he turned his back on the bar and pursued other opportunities including government work (in Omaha, Nebraska) and acting and producing for local theater. It was through his involvement with the theatre and the Federal Writers Projects, that Terkel first entered radio. Back in the Windy City, he went to work as an actor and writer for WGN radio, performing roles on daily soaps like “Ma Perkins” and “Road of Life” and writing original programs. By the early 1940s, Terkel was a familiar voice on the Chicago airwaves as both a highly knowledgeable disc jockey and news commentator.

Eventually, Terkel began creating radio shows tailored to his own talents and interests. These included “Wax Museum” and “Studs Terkel Almanac.” Terkel even tackled television. His program “Studs’ Place,” set at a fictional watering hole in downtown Chicago, began on TV in 1949. It was one of early TV’s most interesting programs as it was almost completely improvised with its core cast of actors—which included Terkel playing himself—ad-libbing all their dialogue. The program aired nationally over NBC from ‘49 to ‘50 and then over ABC from 1951-1952. Today, “Studs’ Place” represents one of the most important examples of the “Chicago School of Television.”

It was in 1952 that Terkel would launch his namesake radio show, an interview program where the only predicate was that one had to be interesting. Getting politicians, authors, artists and others to appear was not usually difficult for Terkel and his producers. Terkel was a good and considerate interviewer: he always did his homework, always asked thoughtful questions and always listened to his guests’ answers. He was also always far more interested in his subjects’ work than their personal life. Terkel always showed respect to his subjects as well—whether they were a working man off the street or a head of state.

Certainly all of these qualities can be found in his 1962 over-the-air interview with African-American writer James Baldwin.

Baldwin (1924-1987) was, by 1962, already the acclaimed American-born expatriate author of “Go Tell It On The Mountain” (published, 1953) and the essay collection “Notes of a Native Son” (1955). Via his bold and often experimental writings—in various genres including poetry and plays—Baldwin had established himself as one of the English-speaking world’s most interesting artists and one of its most eloquent voices on civil rights and the then so-called “life of the Negro.”

By the time he sat down with Terkel, Baldwin was on the cusp of publishing his latest work of fiction, “Another Country.” His interview with Terkel, though relatively short, is surprisingly far-reaching and cogent on a variety of topics: Bessie Smith, living abroad, language, education, racism and the (abnormal) nature of shame.

Baldwin states at one point:

I’m not mad at this country any more; I’m very worried about it. I’m not worried about the Negroes in the country as much as I am about the country.... The country doesn’t know what it has done to Negroes. The country has no notion whatever--and this is disastrous—[in] what it has done to itself. They have yet to access the price they have paid, North and South, in keeping the Negro in his place. And from my point of view, it shows in every single level of our lives.

Terkel is unintrusive throughout the discussion; unnecessary when talking to someone as erudite and eloquent as Baldwin. But Terkel smoothly steers the dialogue when necessary and his carefully metered-out questions and interruptions reveals him to be an interviewer happy to shine the spotlight only on his guest.

The interesting Terkel-Baldwin conversation is but one of the thousands that Terkel conducted during his life. Along with his daily radio program, Terkel also found time to author various books. Along with those mentioned above, Terkel also wrote and published “Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression in America” (1970); “Coming of Age: The Story of Our Century by Those Who’ve Lived It” (1995); and “And They All Sang: Adventures of an Eclectic Disc Jockey” (2006). Additionally, Terkel worked occasionally as an actor (he can be seen in the 1988 film “Eight Men Out”) and remained active in politics and social issues. As late as 2004, at the age of 92, Terkel, a life-long liberal, filed, along with many others, a lawsuit against AT&T to prevent their proposed turnover of customer information to a US government agency. That same year, he also published a dissenting editorial on the viability of a Ralph Nader presidential candidacy.

In early 2008, Terkel published his autobiography, "Touch and Go." Terkel passed away in October of that same year. He was 96.

His recorded legacy, however, endures. His work, for radio and in oral history (some 7,000 tapes strong), has been donated to the Chicago Historical Society and the Library of Congress.

Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).