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Profile 4: Following the Heard: How Jay Allison Went Searching for Sound and Inspired a Radio Revolution

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DEMOCRATIC VISTAS PROFILES

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FOLLOWING THE HEARD: HOW JAY ALLISON WENT SEARCHING FOR SOUND AND INSPIRED A RADIO REVOLUTION

by Lauren Cowen

WOODS HOLE IS AN EXCELLENT HIDING PLACE.

It is on the edge of the world, a couple hours from Boston on Cape Cod, sought out mostly by tourists who pass through it on their way to Martha's Vineyard. It is small—barely a thousand people. There is not much commerce, an arrested nightlife, and a library that is open on occasional weekdays. Its most celebrated residents are marine biologists and oceanographers who conduct business either under florescent lights or beneath the sea.

Lauren Cowen's profiles and essays have appeared in numerous newspapers and magazines. She is the author of three books, most recently Grandmothers (Stewart, Tabori, & Chang, 2005), and lives outside Chicago with her husband and two children.

The main road into town was once an Indian passage. It banks along the ocean's edge, past the bakery and ferries and then twists along pathways that lead to gravel roads and then to clapboard houses that are set in the coastal underbrush, along pathways that even the garbage men have a hard time finding.

This is the place where, in 1986, Jay Allison found himself setting up shop. At the time, Allison was a radio producer who approached the gathering and telling of stories not as a profession but as a calling. His radio documentaries had taken him around the globe and were heard nationally on public radio. As an early practitioner of citizen journalism, he handed out tape recorders, turning more control for the story over to the subject. And because he worked independently, gathering, writing, and producing his own stories, in theory he could work from anywhere.

His wife (now his former wife), Christina Egloff, also an acclaimed radio producer, had grown up in Woods Hole and descended from a family of renowned scientists, some of whom still lived there. Allison was drawn to it. It was a definable community and offered much needed family support for his wife, whose arthritis was often debilitating, and for their new baby.

There were downsides. Woods Hole was no media mecca. Without a local public radio station, Allison would have to drive just to hear his own stories broadcast on WBUR out of Boston. There was no internet or universal email, no virtual way of sharing information and transmitting audio stories.

But Allison's work, his life, and his aspirations were all built on a belief that the simple act of sharing stories

as *This I Believe*, that build on the promise of public radio and give more people the tools to tell their own stories.

But at the time he was talking to his father-in-law, Allison didn't feel like he was on the edge of a modest revolution.

He felt like he was at the edge of the world and couldn't help but wonder, if only for a moment, if an isolated place was destined to create an isolated man.

Jay Allison tells this story from a coffee shop in Woods Hole, on a grey-sky day when it's hard to tell where the sky ends and the water begins. He is a tall, lean man with a boyish face, a receding hairline, and a forehead vast enough for a navigation system. As he recalls his conversation with his father-in-law, his face

“THE COMMENT SENT A CHILL THROUGH ALLISON. HE'D STAKED EVERYTHING ON HIS FAITH IN THE SHARED STORY.”

could unite people who were divided by geography or demography or ideology.

This is what he had in mind one day when he fell into a conversation with his father-in-law, who happened to be a prominent psychiatrist. Allison had just returned from reporting a story halfway around the globe and wanted to convey the feel of his adventure, the place, his conversations with the people, their longings, and what he learned from them. But as he described the trip—or tried to—he could see that his efforts were falling short, that he wasn't transporting his father-in-law out of Woods Hole to this place or into the lives of the people he had just met.

His father-in-law offered an explanation:

Perhaps experiences can't be shared; perhaps each person is truly alone.

The comment sent a chill through Allison. He'd staked everything on his faith in the shared story—his devotion to storytelling, his determination to use radio to build community, his certainty that he could make his life and ambitions work in Woods Hole.

A decade later, he'd have something to show for his convictions: two new public radio stations, a website that brings new voices to public radio, a systemized way to get those voices on the air, and stories and projects, such

registers the story's emotion: hope, fear, disbelief, determination.

“It was such a dark, sober thought,” Allison says recalling the conversation. “He said, ‘did it ever occur to you that all of life is unshared experience?’ I thought, ‘No. No! It shall not be thus!’”

In the vignette is the ethos of Allison's work and life: where there is a life, there is a story, and a story told honestly and artfully has the power to connect people, to allow people to see themselves in others' lives. This is what Allison means when he says (only partly in jest) “that when you make other people's stories *your* stories there's a chance for world peace.”

Underlying this ethos is an unassuming ego that longs for connectedness as much as it longs to be heard. His perspective is rooted in that same *it shall not be thus* determination, a sometimes desperation borne of a soul that sees little distinction between the principles that inspire his work and the rationale for his life.

“You talk about drive,” he exclaims, “I think one part of the drive is, you know, make damn sure this works and this succeeds and it is a legitimate organizing principle for your life because if it's not, you're out of luck! You're sunk! You gambled on the wrong horse!”

If he couldn't hear his own stories in Woods Hole,

then he'd create new stations there. The challenge was to build an audio community in Massachusetts out of Cape Cod, the South Coast, Nantucket, and Martha's Vineyard, an area that stretches over two islands, the coastal mainland and a fragmented seventy-mile long peninsula, each with distinct identities. Allison began airing "sonic IDs"—audio snapshots that convey the sounds of, say, a woman hanging laundry in a breeze or a fisherman gathering scallops. The local glimpses, so simple in construction, fed Allison's more complicated intent: to give people a sense of place, a stake in their community, but also a sense of place in the more global sense.

"We're as parochial as any place, and each place, each island, thinks it's special in some way. But the great thing about radio is that it doesn't respect boundaries. You hear a voice of a fisherman telling a funny story and you find that you're laughing at the story. And then at the end you hear that the guy is from Nantucket. You're from Martha's Vineyard and you have a feeling of people from over there as being inferior. But you've just laughed at his story and thought of him as someone from here."

With the stations in place, Allison saw in the intersection of radio and the internet the chance to create "communities of affinity." He launched Transom.org, an online master class where newcomers to radio production found training and help in putting together a story and getting it onto the air. Today, the website features storytellers like Studs Terkel and Sarah Vowell who offer insight and advice, as well as technical advice and the chance to get feedback on works in progress. It's a place that links the novice and the expert, the subjects of documentaries with those who made them, creating what Allison describes as "street-level access to national air."

To bring innovative stories to a wider audience, Allison envisioned a marketplace where radio programmers from around the country could find fresh stories from new voices. That idea inspired Tom Thomas and Terry Clifford from The Station Resource Group to join him in creating the Public Radio Exchange (PRX). By gathering untapped stories and reaching out to programmers across the country, PRX became the cutting edge of radio and technology.

"He's not just about getting more voices onto the air," notes Joe Richman, the award-winning independ-

ent producer of *Radio Diaries* who calls Allison the "father" of independent producers. "He's also changing the infrastructure to let that happen."

Traditionally, independent producers had limited options when it came to telling noncommercial stories on radio. They could work on staff for NPR or at a station or as work-for-hire, explains Richman. Efforts like Transom and PRX opened new pathways and offered newcomers as well as veterans of the industry a way to exchange ideas and tools and share the economic burdens of production.

"Jay built this infrastructure that didn't exist, this systematic way to involve people in public radio," Richman says. "A lot of us aren't even aware of how much we've benefited because of his community-building in the last decade, how much that has shaped what we do and how well we do it."

Allison is uncomfortable with those sorts of comments. He has a demure authority that learns as readily from the novice as the veteran and sees himself "as a radio Tom Sawyer, getting other people to paint the fence." He delights in "the show," in creating something out of nothing, which he did first in theater, then with

"UNDERLYING THIS ETHOS IS AN UNASSUMING EGO THAT LONGS FOR CONNECTEDNESS AS MUCH AS IT LONGS TO BE HEARD."

radio stories and eventually by creating venues for other people to tell their stories. Almost from the time he held his first tape recorder, Allison began experimenting with eyewitness audio accounts. In the 1980s, he launched *Life Stories*, a project that handed out tape recorders to subjects so they could record themselves, and then helped shape their recorded experiences in a way that elevated the material to an art form. He joined his friends The Kitchen Sisters in creating *Lost and Found Sound*, an award-winning public radio series, and *The Sonic Memorial Project* and other programs which eventually earned him five Peabody Awards, the Public Radio News Director's Award for lasting commitment to public radio journalism, and the public radio industry's highest honor, the Corporation for Public

Broadcasting's Edward R. Murrow Award.

The results brought him a reputation as a radio man's radio man, someone whose voice is not widely known, but whose influence is felt far from the shores of Woods Hole.

But he is at heart a storyteller. Narratives organize his life, a process so instinctive that he can sometimes hear an inner narration as his life is unfolding, "placing the present tense immediately in the past." In conversation, he positions himself as a most generous listener, the one who conveys value in what you haven't yet said. He crafts any narrative—a radio story, a proposal, an homage to a friend—with an instinct that feeds the listener's intuition more than the teller's ego, serving with equal deference the reader, the writer, and the subject. When talking with strangers, he relates as an old friend, reflecting their emotions in the changing weather of his face. Even his considerable height seems mutable, so that when talking to someone a foot shorter than him, he's always eye-to-eye. But his most dominant feature may be that as he gravitates from his role as producer to boss

radio signals and bandwidths in place of apples. Those who work for him talk of his "outward embrace," a belief that the telling of a story leads inexorably to empathy which leads inevitably to greater understanding, which in turn leads to more inclusive, more democratic societies.

But he is also an insider who knows the language and cues of the privileged world in which he grew up, who is at home in the institutions that underwrite and broadcast his work. He knows how to raise money, how to converse with corporations, how to engage the public broadcasting executive who worries about the size of his audience while reminding him of the mission that created the station in the first place.

"He's the noisy screw in the side of public broadcasting, letting people tell their own stories, making sure that the aspect of public radio that is about citizens and democracy is something that people don't forget," says Richman.

His down-home, conversational style of talking makes the obscure and complicated seem obvious and

"HE'S THE NOISY SCREW IN THE SIDE OF PUBLIC BROADCASTING, LETTING PEOPLE TELL THEIR OWN STORIES, MAKING SURE THAT THE ASPECT OF PUBLIC RADIO THAT IS ABOUT CITIZENS AND DEMOCRACY IS SOMETHING THAT PEOPLE DON'T FORGET, SAYS RICHMAN."

to storyteller to editor to pitchman, to father, he is utterly the same person.

"If you look at Jay on paper, he looks like six people," says longtime friend and acclaimed photographer Nubar Alexanian. The two share passions for fishing, technology, and the mysteries of fatherhood. "But he's really just this very whole person who plays all the octaves, someone who transitions really well, who loves a difficult situation. It was Davia (referring to Davia Nelson, a fellow radio producer) who said that Jay has a destiny with the world, and I think you get a sense of that when you're with him."

IN GENERAL, ALLISON'S SYMPATHY IS WITH THE LITTLE GUY, the independent, the outsider who turns up the new and the unexpected. His is an idealism of a Johnny Appleseed, only with

deceptively easy. Nearly any friend or colleague can recall some moment when Allison proffered a venture that no one in their right mind would pursue. In thinking about the lack of public radio on the Cape, Allison emailed a friend, "I was at a party tonight and a group of people are interested in starting a small community radio station....They asked my advice and I realize I didn't know diddly."

The path from that email to radio stations followed the typical Allisonian evolution: a seemingly preposterous idea is framed in a simple, declarative question, which draws responses from like-minded souls who support and help advance a project, the success of which spawns ever-expanding experiments and innovations, many of which have never been tried before but all of which ultimately feed a governing drive to expand people's ability to listen to each other and find common

ground.

“There’s something about the ridiculousness of his missions that is pure Jay,” says Ira Glass, the iconic host of *This American Life*. “With Transom, you have the very most experienced people mixing it up with beginners...and then, I mean, *start a radio station?* Who *does* that?”

Underlying all these efforts is a man who, like the country he lives in, is built on an enduring contradiction: his need to be independent and his need for community. His determination, often his desperation, to wrestle this contradiction is at the core of seemingly all that he creates.

“You know, I think anybody who works in public radio and preaches about community the way that I do is a little nuts because we’re not really there. It’s virtual. We’re detached, disembodied. It’s almost a purely idealistic notion without all the mess of the corporeal presence. Because if you want to go on the air and talk in the darkness and not look into the eyes of the person you’re talking to...that suggests a certain maladjustment. They’ve described psychiatry as a detachment with intimacy and I think radio is like that, too.... I need the isolating chamber with the outgoing pipe. I’m a hypersocial antisocial person and I don’t pretend to understand all that yet.”

ALLISON GREW UP SKILLED at the observer’s art of distinguishing the distance between the way things appear and the way they are. His father was a stockbroker and Allison was raised in a suburban Delaware home that was happy but insulated from the conflicts and turmoil that defined life in American cities in the 1960s. He was a loner, a kid who could have fit into any group but belonged to none. He collected reptiles, played guitar, found comfort even then in the radio, in a connection that was both intimate and anonymous.

“I was a poor team player looking for a good team. I think I got really comfortable in the uncomfortable position of being an outsider and maybe it’s the friction of the conflict of feeling isolated and liking isolation and wanting connection and having trouble getting connected. The Martha Graham quote about artists—‘the restless dissatisfaction’... I’m probably misquoting, but I have that feeling all the time, every morning.”

As a freshman at Trinity College, he studied engineering—math came easily to him. But after accompa-

nying a friend to an audition, he turned to theater. He reveled in the organizing force of storytelling, in the power of drama to translate life’s chaos into something that had meaning and order.

He was working with a storefront theater in Washington, D.C., trying to invent himself just as public

“LIKE THE COUNTRY HE LIVES IN, [ALLISON] IS BUILT ON AN ENDURING CONTRADICTION: HIS NEED TO BE INDEPENDENT AND HIS NEED FOR COMMUNITY.”

radio was doing the same. In 1977, journalism was still a field for generalists and Allison’s theatrical training in scene setting, character development, and the rhythms of storytelling turned out to be the perfect primer for radio. He first went to the offices of NPR to visit a friend. It was a place that drew together creative, curious people and Susan Stamberg, then the host of *All Things Considered*, remembers being struck almost immediately by Allison’s vision.

With nothing but a tape recorder, his voice, and a sophisticated sense of theatrics and story, he’d invent ways to get listeners inside the most ordinary of subjects. In a story about velcro, he made up a velcro “orchestra.” “He was one of the early voices saying, ‘I can use sound in a different way and I can make it belong to the people’ and now he’s launched this whole movement,” says Stamberg. “What he’s doing up in Martha’s Vineyard is the same thing he was doing when he started here—making an impact in the most brilliant way.”

Those early days had a profound, almost religious effect on Allison. He felt for the first time that he’d found a framework to organize his passions and ambitions, one that satisfied his peripatetic mind. “When I started out, it was much more a selfish voyage of discovery...an excuse to cover the world and to satisfy curiosity and encounter people I never would have dreamt of speaking to if I didn’t have that passport of a microphone. I think I had a sense of not really knowing what my voice was. And bit by bit I’ve been discovering that through other people’s voices.”

His favored subjects were almost always difficult ones—stories of child sexual abuse or street gangs—and his aim was to build on radio’s power of immediacy and

intimacy. By handing out tape recorders, he was taking out the reporter as the questioner and interpreter of answers, connecting the listener more immediately to the material. His role as editor was to shape the first-hand accounts so that the subject and story were front and center, building resonance so that listeners could see some part of themselves in the subject's life.

So when an adult son of concentration camp survivors joined his parents on their first visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., he had a tape recorder in hand as his parents for the first time talked

against anxieties about his professional ones. He brought with him his idealism, his missionary-like zeal and a remarkable ease with transitions of thought and place. But it's a short line from determination to desperation. Allison wasn't on salary, which meant that he was paid only after producing and selling his stories. He'd have to travel to get those stories, an inconvenient though certainly not impossible prospect from the Cape. More difficult was the pull of his personal life. His wife was undergoing surgery, and not long after arriving, his 18-month-old daughter Lillie came down with a bout

“...BUT FOR ALLISON, ALONE IN HIS BASEMENT, DESPERATE FOR INFORMATION THAT WOULD HELP HIS DAUGHTER, THE BULLETIN BOARD BECAME A LIFELINE.”

about their experiences in Auschwitz. His moment of discovery became the listener's discovery as well. When a young woman revisited a hospital where she nearly died from anorexia as a way to come to terms with her past, the audience was with her in an unmediated experience.

“A lot of radio stories come down to this idea of empathy and the shared story and, you know, once you let them into your eardrum, it's hard to let them out again. I see a lot of my work in that subterfuge way, sneaking past the fences, an ambush of sorts, this notion that you don't have ear lids, the hope being that you can get someone to change their perception through a help-less moment of empathy.”

A story that drives home that point is of Vietnam veteran Mike Baronowski, who had taped his wartime experiences before dying in Vietnam. The tapes came to National Public Radio as part of a request for lost or forgotten recordings for the series *Lost and Found Sound*. Allison and his former wife shaped the recordings into a radio documentary that aired on NPR and drew extraordinary praise.

“People responded across the spectrum—people who were for the war, people who were against, people who weren't born yet—all because of a guy's voice and the way you could feel him, you could be with him,” Allison says.

Moving to Woods Hole in the 1980s, Allison was balancing his need to serve his private relationships

of croup that quickly turned life threatening.

At night, from his basement office, he began tapping into “The Well,” a pioneering online community where, for the first time, anyone with a telephone line, computer and the technological know-how could connect to a bulletin board and leave messages or join in an ongoing conversation. This was a far cry from spontaneous back-and-forth conversations that a decade later became the online norm, but for Allison, alone in his basement, desperate for information that would help his daughter, the bulletin board became a lifeline.

“Everybody's used to it now. But then, it was astonishing. I had the feeling: this is *really* powerful. This isn't *nothing* here. And we'd talk about our children and I'd learn huge amounts just in these conversations with strangers. Practical support, emotional support, and it was incredible. I think that was a turning point in my life to try and bring my world and radio together.”

The experience led Allison to create a discussion board for independent producers that led to the “AIR Daily Email List,” a resource used by producers around the world. For the first time, freelance producers could trade stories and ideas, could talk with others who know how hard it can be to work on your own, to create stories without knowing if or where they would run, to then sell them and retain some control over the finished product. Allison began to envision the way computers could eventually become a democratizing tool, making public radio truly public. What if there were places that

catered not just to professionals, but to anyone who wanted to tell a story? What if there was an easy, accessible way to create stories for radio and then transmit them cheaply?

“I set up this mailing list and then bit by bit the web became real and then images and then sound and then you think, ‘Oh my God.’”

ALLISON’S BID TO START NEW RADIO STATIONS showed him to be an idealist in the most optimistic sense of the word: someone committed to an outcome despite considerable evidence to the contrary. He envisioned setting the stations in a dilapidated building in a weed-choked lot, a feat of imagination that Alexanian, now president of Atlantic Public Media’s board, couldn’t muster. “I thought he was out of his mind,” he recalls.

Never mind the bureaucratic wrangling, the red tape, the battles over the physical and bandwidth space that the new stations would occupy. Along with infighting among competing interest groups who wanted their share of air time, the process would drag on for nine long years, so long that Allison became reluctant to go into town, telling the *New York Times*, “I was afraid I’d forever be known as the guy who was starting a public

WHAT KEPT ALLISON IN THE FIGHT

was his certainty that a small town sitting on the edge of the country, where winters could be dark and the nights especially long, deserved a place where people could always find company.

“In a bitter, foggy February, at the end of the earth here, late at night, it can be very dark,” Allison said. “I held to the idea of a radio station as one place in town where the lights would still be burning...a hedge against the dark and the cold.”

On March 15, 2000, the static that was 91.1 FM gave way to a hush and then Allison uttering one word: “Listen.”

Allison had anticipated that moment for nine years. He knew what he wanted to say. He’d written the words that launched the station. But standing in the station that morning, in that moment when nothing gave way to something, Allison heard his voice, and felt a shot straight to his heart.

“Our purpose is community,” he said in that first broadcast. “A sane and respectful place to talk. An ear on the rest of the world. A crossroads in our daily paths where we can meet and gather and even create change. This is perhaps a lofty goal for a mere radio signal, but a radio signal has the singular ability to proclaim all our

“ALLISON BEGAN TO ENVISION THE WAY COMPUTERS COULD EVENTUALLY BECOME A DEMOCRATIZING TOOL, MAKING PUBLIC RADIO TRULY PUBLIC. WHAT IF THERE WERE PLACES THAT CATERED NOT JUST TO PROFESSIONALS, BUT TO ANYONE WHO WANTED TO TELL A STORY?”

radio station that you couldn’t hear.”

Just getting together the nonprofit group that would become Atlantic Public Media took a year. The group procured a grant and licenses to use the last available noncommercial frequencies in the area. But thereafter came battles with private interest groups and religious organizations over details of zoning and transmitters and radio. Eventually, Atlantic Public Media found a partner in WGBH, Boston’s distinguished public radio, which built the stations and manages them; local station staff is responsible for the daily choices and decisions.

separate identities, while it also spans our boundaries to bring us together.”

AT FIRST GLANCE, the building that houses stations WCAI and WNAN and the newly added WZAI is a low-key affair, a renovated clapboard building you might overlook on the way to the library or the town’s main street. Inside, the renovated space opens to state-of-the-art recording studios and editing offices where Allison and a handful of staff members juggle projects

for the local stations, as well as Transom, PRX, and other projects. The place feels like a dorm-like think tank with few outward signs of the traditional reporter-editor-producer broadcast hierarchy. Workspace is oriented to foster a rich interior life and to encourage the sharing of ideas.

On one floor is the studio. Up a narrow wooden staircase is a room crowded with simple desks that are layered with papers and post-its and where Viki Merrick, associate director of Atlantic Public Media, and any part-time staffers or interns or visiting artists are likely to be working on a story.

Merrick met Allison when the stations were still just an idea. She'd moved to Woods Hole from Italy and was looking for a job that tapped her journalistic experience and interest in broadcasting. A friend had heard that a new station was in the works and directed her to Allison who was then working out of a rented office in his father-in-law's house.

The place was crowded with papers and tapes and a

“ON MARCH 15, 2000, THE STATIC THAT WAS 91.1 FM GAVE WAY TO A HUSH AND THEN ALLISON UTTERING ONE WORD: ‘LISTEN.’”

pinball machine and guitar and music—so many piles that he had to move aside a stack or two so she could have a place to sit.

Then he described his vision. “In two seconds,” Merrick recalls, “I had this sense of how dynamic, how vibrant, how crazy he was. It wasn't what he said in particular. It was the synergy, this larger vision that seemed so feasible to me and so crazy at the same time—this vision of opening doorways of communication to everybody. It wasn't just about the station. It was that the station would be a training ground and people would come to Woods Hole and there would be an international sound festival and he would give tape recorders to everybody.”

It was a place from which he could launch projects such as *This I Believe*, the revival of Edward R. Murrow's program aired on NPR. Allison proposed the series after his colleague, Dan Gediman, came to him with the idea.

In writing the proposal, Allison seized on the program as the perfect antidote to a time of deep divisions. “Sound bites replace convictions; cheap caricature trumps reasoned analysis,” Allison wrote. “Our goal is not to persuade Americans to agree on the same beliefs; our goal is to encourage Americans to begin the much more difficult task of developing sensitivity to beliefs different than their own.”

This I Believe premiered on *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition* in 2005 and has become one of public radio's most successful series, generating some 10,000 submissions that make their way to Woods Hole.

These days the pieces that began as experimental structures—Transom.org as an online classroom, PRX as a gathering and distribution center, the stations as a democratizing experiment with radio—have evolved and spawned new, more ambitious projects. The “sonic IDs,” those small audio postcards that instantly convey a sense of place and belonging, can be heard on local stations in the Southwest and Northeast and Midwest. In Woods Hole, there are dedicated phone lines where area residents can call in their own ideas for the spots.

In inviting listeners to submit “sonic IDs,” Allison proposed bridging not just islands, but continents, by exchanging audio with Gobi-wave, a radio station in Mongolia's Gobi Desert: “Can we extend neighborliness that far? We wonder. And we're going to try. Partly because we believe that such exchanges might have a soothing effect in a frightened world and partly because it seems like fun.” Though Gobi-wave recently lost its internet connection, the effort produced some remarkable audio; in one exchange, listeners in the desert heard wave heard fisherman gathering scallops while the Cape Cod stations played the cries of baby camels who were separated from their mothers.

TRANSOM WAS THE FIRST WEBSITE OF ITS KIND to be honored with a Peabody Award and is now being developed as a radio show. Through PRX, Allison proposed creating “curators” assigned to individual stations whose job it would be to find new voices and experiment with ways to individualize stations, to give each station a distinctive voice.

“I'm trying to bring all these pieces work together, like a bunch of tunnels boring into the center,” Allison

says. “I’m not sure where that center is exactly, but it’s somewhere. So that we could take *This I Believe* and pilot it at our local stations and take the best new work and premiere it on Transom and take the whole series and have it appear on PRX and have all the stations creating their own material and then take it and put it all on *Morning Edition*.”

THOUGH IT’S NINE IN THE MORNING,

Allison is already restless. He is working from his home, less than a mile from the stations. His lawn is clipped and flowers are planted courtesy of his neighbors who share Allison’s communal spirit; they know he won’t get to it so they do. Behind his house is a hammock, an Airstream-turned-guesthouse and a small cottage that is crowded with radio engineering equipment and where there is often a young producer or friend or newcomer who has come to edit a piece.

He moves as a conductor amid the everyday audible: his laptop humming, cell phone ringing, his cockatiel squawking, his attention darting from a young radio producer seeking his advice about a story, to a station manager who doesn’t want to air a controversial piece. No matter the time or day, he is juggling multiple projects and roles, racing between a flurry of phone calls and e-mails and conference calls, from his home to the studio to FedEx and back, spinning all the plates he has in the air along the way. All of it contributes to the impression that he doesn’t sleep, which he usually doesn’t.

“I think honestly that one fear I have is just stopping, the idea of retiring or not contributing or just nap-

The convictions that took root in the early days at public radio have only been strengthened with each successive project. “I don’t know if everyone looks for some organizing principle in their life. Sometimes it’s family, sometimes faith, sometimes work. For me, I feel so fortunate that I’ve found this work that allows me to cast about in so many directions and feel like I fit exactly, to fashion a life into something that makes sense. You do get an almost religious feeling about it.”

He tried finding the same passion by shooting documentaries for television. He bought a camera at a department store and carried it into worlds in the way he carried his tape recorder, creating works that Ted Koppel liked enough to air on *Nightline*. “As much as I loved working with images, in terms of the ‘democracy’ thing, I thought for a while, well, I’ll carry my flag here and do the solo crew stuff, the picture, the sound, the interviewing, the producing. It’s true that you can get access to national media with a camera from a department store. But you find out pretty quickly that there’s not as much a job for a missionary in commercial television. That’s a career world and people didn’t really care about bringing in new people to do their jobs. They just as soon you sit down and shut up. I didn’t have a platform, a soapbox.”

Public broadcasting, by contrast, is built, at least in part, on a moral claim and the tools of radio are cheap and transportable, a fine match for a mind that wants to create a story (or two or a dozen) in the morning and recruit storytellers in the afternoon and still have enough pennies and scotch tape to put together a new

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ping,” he says. “I think I’m at war with my own inherent laziness, which is real. I am essentially lazy. And there’s a part of me that has a frantic wish not to be. I mean I haven’t been diagnosed with ADD but some days I really feel like I’m flying around on my own back and I’m not in control of my wings; my consciousness is riding on the back of a hummingbird and I’m just going along. I have the feeling of loving that energy and being a little spooked by it.”

proposal at night.

But the struggle for money is constant, no matter his years of success and the walls filled with awards. His daughter, Lillie, is nearly ready for college; his son Walker is beginning high school and his youngest, Hope, is eight. One afternoon, heading out to buy groceries to make dinner for his kids, he discovered that his ATM was empty—he’d paid out of pocket for members of his staff to go to the Peabody ceremonies in New

York to pick up Transom's award. "Sometimes I think that struggle can be healthy, when you need to get the piece done because you have to pay the rent. . . . *But this grant getting . . .*"—he moves his glasses to his forehead, and there are faint signs of strain in the lines on his face. He considered Transom and its translation to radio.

"Let me read you what I wrote last night." The worry lines fade; his face and voice become animated. "In its few years of existence, Transom.org has been a catalyzing force in public radio. It has bridged the gap between listener and maker, consumer and contributor. New talent has been ushered onto the air and listeners are using the site to create their own work. Transom is helping make public radio more truly public. Atlantic Public Media intends to continue doing the work at Transom by expanding the website to include a broadcast outlet, the Transom Radio Hour..." New ideas keep coming.

He is not a man of moderation but living a life at full tilt, waving the flag from his post where the individual gives way to something beyond himself. He has succeeded not by defying detachment but by seizing it as the perfect conduit to community. Woods Hole, it turns out, is by its very remoteness, a perfect place to amplify humanity, the isolated place breeding the connected man.

"I labor here, in Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket and Cape Cod, in just this little corner of the world," he says. "Through the internet, through public radio, we can get our sensibility and reality out nationally and then internationally. You have this astonishing feeling of connectedness from this little room."

Just beyond that room is a road that that banks downward, a main route into and out of town. Throughout the day, it offers up a steady parade, sounds of people and cars. At nighttime, the pace slows and what is audible outside is life at a distance—the far-away ferry horn, the bark of a dog, geese in a ragged V, their calls fading into the dark. Inside, life is immediate and intimate and what is audible is the human voice with its singular, resonating sound. *