

LEISURE & ARTS

Radio: A Sound Man With a Stethoscope

Jim Metzner's 'Pulse of the Planet'
Finds a Kind of Aural Poetry
In the Noises of the Universe

By VALERIE GLADSTONE

JIM METZNER'S two-minute program "Pulse of the Planet," broadcast daily on public and commercial radio, could change your life. Not just listening to him but listening to what he offers, which is nothing less than a cornucopia of sounds from the natural and human worlds. It might be the giant roar of a tornado, the song of a Greek shepherd, the bells of a donkey caravan in Nepal, the booming sands of the Nevada desert, a Turkish muezzin's plaintive call to prayer or the swoosh of pulsars rotating in the sky. In January, listeners will get an aural picture of a black hole. It's a first, created by MIT astronomer Edward Morgan, who translated X-ray emissions from a black hole into sound just for "Pulse of the Planet."

"Three years ago," Mr. Metzner says, "I took Sarah, my seven-year-old daughter, to Great Gull Island in Long Island Sound, one of the few breeding grounds of terns. I wanted to record the sound of the birds. At one point, Helen Hays, head researcher there from the American Museum of Natural History, took us to a nest where a bird was going to give birth. When Sarah saw the egg hatch—the little hole and then the beak appearing—she showed such unbridled astonishment in her voice that the sound of her excitement became the best part of the show."

To this remarkably passionate 51-year-old radio producer and sound-recording artist, every sound conveys something intriguing, instructive and deserving of investigation. Now going into its 12th year, his program attracts more than one million listeners daily on more than 300 stations in 30 countries. It's also carried on the Armed Forces Radio and Voice of America and on streaming audio on the Web at www.nationalgeographic.com/pulseplanet/. A Spanish-language version, financed by the National Science Foundation, will begin airing early next year. "I feel I'm working on behalf of the planet," says Mr. Metzner. "On a daily basis, the show is meant to be a gentle reminder that beneath the cynicism, the violence and the relentless senselessness of the news, there is something else—something akin to a pulse."

Mr. Metzner creates his show—2,300 of them so far—in his cozy, state-of-the-art broadcast studio, steps away from the 200-year-old farmhouse in Yorktown, N.Y. that he shares with his photographer wife,



Dolores Metzner

Jim Metzner listens to the sound of a tern chick on Great Gull Island, N.Y. "I feel I'm working on behalf of the planet," he says.

Dolores, his son Lucas and Sarah. Not only does he broadcast unusual sounds, he also gives them a scientific or cultural context. Usually the show opens with the sound, followed by his introduction and an appropriate scientist or another expert explaining what's been heard. Like haiku, it can have the impact of a tsunami.

For instance, after playing a birdsong from the Brazilian rain forest, an ornithologist working in the region discussed the bird's cry. Mr. Metzner himself recorded a whale rescue on Cape Cod, taping the sad vocalizing of the beasts as they lay beached on the shore. He does many of his own on-site recordings—but he also gets material from a team of scientists and highly skilled reporters and sound recorders whom he has nurtured over the years. A broadcast a day would keep most people fully occupied; yet he also regularly contributes features to the weekly show "Savvy Traveler," distributed by Minnesota Public Radio, and National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" and "Morn-

ing Edition with Scott Simon."

One October afternoon, with the sound of rain lashing against his studio windows,

Mr. Metzner relates his personal history. Since his father was chairman of the department of biology at the Bronx High School of Science in the 1950s, he grew up surrounded by science in the family's Lido Beach, N.Y. home. "My father never threw a football with me," he says, "but he did take me on nature walks and salamander hunts. In my house, there were lots of animals and chemistry sets."

An iconoclast, Mr. Metzner also wanted to act and entered Yale Drama School after high school. Upon finishing, he set off for Poland to study with Jerzy Grotowski, an author, teacher and founder of the influential Theater Laboratory in Wroclaw, Poland. Unfortunately, Grotowski didn't want an

acolyte, and Mr. Metzner headed to London in search of work as an actor—a futile search, as it turned out, because he couldn't join the requisite union. Undaunted, he began singing and playing guitar on the street, becoming so popular as a folk singer that he not only made it into pubs but got a record deal and opened for Three Dog Night and Pink Floyd when they played Hyde Park. But when he returned to New York, the only gigs he could get were in bars. Discouraged, he decided to reconfigure his life and enrolled in the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. "There I discovered a field that blended my passions for music and anthropology—ethnomusicology." In 1979, he got his first break in radio, producing "You're Hearing Boston" for a CBS affiliate, a program quite similar to "Pulse of the Planet." On it, you heard the panting of runners in the Boston marathon as well as other signature sounds of Boston.

"From then on," Mr. Metzner says, "I've been following the bread-crumbs trail