

Career of Recording For Theater of the Mind

By KATE STONE LOMBARDI

LISTEN. For just a moment, tune in to all the sounds around you. Do you hear a lawn mower in the distance? The neighbor's dog? The paper rattling? The refrigerator humming? The dimly imagined sounds of these words forming in your head?

Jim Metzner, a radio producer and sound recording artist, would have you be aware of all of these "levels of listening." He maintains that most people are in the habit of tuning out familiar sounds and operating on a kind of automatic pilot in the audio world. It is a habit he is in the business of helping people break.

Mr. Metzner is the producer of "Pulse of the Planet," a daily radio series, which has more than 1.5 million listeners. The environmental program, which he produces from his home here, is nearly the opposite of talk radio. The short, two-minute format features the pulsing, dripping, barking, whistling, cooing, chanting and banging sounds of the natural world. Mr.

Metzner uses distinctive, ambient sounds to illustrate the wildly divergent subjects he covers, and in doing so manages to make the ordinary noise of life seem extraordinary. "Pulse of the Planet" is heard on more than 200 stations in 20 countries around the world.

Listeners in the last several months have heard eclectic recordings like 20,000 garter snakes mating in limestone snake pits in Manitoba, the chants and singing of a Greek Orthodox congregation celebrating Easter at a midnight Mass in Astoria, Queens, a Turkish wedding ceremony, which began in a courtyard but soon spilled into the street; Egyptian worshipers on a pilgrimage to Mecca and the dulcet tones of the mating calls of male prairie chickens in Kansas.

Mr. Metzner says there is something mysterious about the power of sound and each recording possesses a quality that eludes description. He eschews the word "capture" when he refers to recording a rare moment, preferring to view the sounds as a gift.

"Sound is so magical," Mr. Metzner said,

Continued on Page 12



Lucy Pemoni for The New York Times

Jim Metzner of Yorktown, producer of "Pulse of the Planet," a radio series, thinks people should be more attuned to what they hear.

A Career of Recording Sounds

Continued From Page 1

adding, "You can go out to listen and have a moment that is absolutely yours. It is positively unique, and it will never be the same. These are not generic sounds — you hear this particular meadowlark at this particular moment."

"Pulse of the Planet," which is sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History, covers subjects that are remarkably specific, given Mr. Metzner's enormous beat — the natural world and the human world. Topics are tied to the time of year. For instance, in February, listeners heard the process of sap becoming syrup in New England. In March, the distinctive ribbits of Pacific male tree frogs trying to attract females were featured during their mating season.

The show, which is nationally syndicated, is not simply sound recordings. The program generally begins with a specific sound, and then the rich, mellifluous voice of Mr. Metzner identifying what is being broadcast, introducing the show and then providing it with a context — usually a brief interview with a scientist or another expert, who explains whatever phenomenon is being heard.

"If I've done my job right, there's a balance," Mr. Metzner said. "I'm telling you enough to get you intrigued and not to just be a tacit listener. I want you to be really focused on this, so I have to prime the pump a little, but I don't want to say too much either. You want to leave room. That's another amazing thing about sound — you have room to percolate, for you to come to your own conclusions. That's why they call radio the 'theater of the mind.'"

Mr. Metzner was speaking from his studio, which is crowded with a collection of old chemistry sets, an assortment of musical instruments, digital mixing equipment, computers, multiple shelves filled with cassette tapes of some 3,000 programs and a number of awards and statuettes, which he has gathered over his 20-year career as an independent radio producer.

He has worked for both public and commercial radio — "Pulse of the

Planet" is heard on both. His studio, which also includes a voice room, is a brief walk across a courtyard from his home here. He lives with his wife, Dolores, an artist and photographer, and their two children, Sarah, 8, and Lucas, 3. With his associate producer, Amy Standen, Mr. Metzner puts together 260 programs a year.

With a journalist's enthusiasm for new stories, Mr. Metzner has a seemingly endless fascination with the world around him. He excuses himself to take a phone call from the Woods Hole Observatory and returns to explain that he was making plans to record from a submarine the volcanic activity on the ocean floor. He then interrupts himself to describe another program he is working on.

"Oh, this is a great story!" Mr. Metzner said. "We've got a guy who

A treasury of tapes of clacking typewriters and old cable cars.

analyzes bug splats on windshields. Literally. Did you know that if there's a blotch of blood it was probably female? It's like urban archeology. We share the planet with between one and three million species of insects, for crying out loud. Now ants, they play a really important role. That's another thing we could talk about."

Mr. Metzner, who is tall, bearded and quick to smile, began his career in theater. After growing up in Long Beach on Long Island, he graduated from the Yale Drama School. He became enamored with experimental theater and worked as an actor and then as a folk singer for several years. Eventually, he returned to the University of Massachusetts to study music and anthropology. There, he became mesmerized with sound recordings.

"The first time I put on a pair of earphones and a tape recorder, I thought, 'What an amazing coincidence, that at the moment I turn on

the tape recorder, that all this stuff actually starts to happen at the same time,'" Mr. Metzner said. "It's partly focus and partly amplification. It's a little bit like putting a stethoscope onto something — it's being reminded that we are in a world of sound."

He began his radio career producing "You're Hearing Boston," for a CBS affiliate in 1979, which had a similar format to "Pulse of the Planet." For instance, to cover the Boston Marathon, he not only spoke to runners but also recorded the sound of pounding feet on the pavement, the sound of breathing and the sound of the crowd. He then produced "You're Hearing San Francisco" for an NBC station. Mr. Metzner said he has sounds on tape from those programs that will never be heard again — the clacking of typewriters at The Boston Globe, the sounds of the old cable cars in San Francisco.

When he produced the programs, Mr. Metzner did all the recording himself, but for his later programs, which include "The Sounds of Science" and "You're Hearing America" as well as "Pulse of the Planet," he uses independent radio producers from around the world as well as his own recordings. Mr. Metzner has also produced dozens of features for public radio, including pieces for National Public Radio's "Morning Edition," "Weekend Edition," "All Things Considered" and Public Radio International's "The World."

"What I do now has a sound component and a strong informational component," Mr. Metzner said. "You know you have two minutes, so it's not an epic poem. This isn't 'The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner,' it's a little like a haiku. But this is about something that's usually pretty important. If it's the environment or the planet, you want to respect that. If you're talking to a scientist, this may be the representation of this person's life work, so I better be a good listener. There's a responsibility. I don't want to sound too grandiose and say, 'I'm here on behalf of the planet.' But in a sense, I'm here on behalf of the planet."

"Pulse of the Planet" can be heard on WNYC (820 AM), WABC (770 AM) and WNYE (91.5 FM). Times are given on a Web site at: www.pulseplanet.com. ■