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Jim Metzner takes listeners on tour of US via '3-D' radio

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Boston

In 1954 the celebrated broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow prophesied, "In order to progress, radio need only go backward." Thirty years later, a disciple seems to have emerged.

He looks like an unlikely candidate — lanky of build and unruly of coiffure — but this of course doesn't matter in the realm of radio. What does matter, and what Jim Metzner embodies, is a strong faith in the magic of radio — and a rich, mellifluous voice.

Already more than 1 million pairs of American ears tune

in daily to what Mr. Metzner calls his "theater of the ears," but what listeners recognize as "You're Hearing America." It is a new radio series of two-minute "audio vignettes" — "sound snapshots," really — created and produced by Metzner using high-fidelity sound, dialogue, and narration.

Radio producers, announcers, and audiences are already likening the series to such other high-quality radio programs as "A Prairie Home Companion," "King Biscuit Flour Hour," and National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." Observers say "You're Hearing America" is further proof that a significant revival of listening — truly listening — to the radio is on the rebound. "Radio is getting back to the basics," says one producer, "and in radio, sounds are the basics."

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"Hello. This is Jim Metzner and 'You're Hearing America.'" The voice is as mysterious and beckoning as "The Twilight Zone's" Rod Serling. Five days a week, on 50 selected radio stations across the country, this sonorous announcement clues in listeners that another "sound snapshot" of America is about to be taken — a sort of "Candid Camera" of the radio waves.

Since its inception in mid-1981, "You're Hearing America" has captured on tape such diverse bits of Americana as baseball umpires, hoboes, sheep shearers, the Chicago Options Exchange, and Texas shoeshiner Elzie Lee Bennett. Each program combines the actual sounds of the event going on, dialogue or comments from spectators or participants, maybe some music, and a little descriptive commentary by Metzner. While the new series can be lumped under the general heading of "radio feature programming," Metzner's format has been labeled by some as pioneering. Taken as a whole, it sounds like an oral version of Charles Kuralt's "On the Road." But where those television segments dwell on the folksy *look* of quaint corners of the country, Metzner's series focuses on their sound.

"The series is trying to create a visual picture with sound,



Jim Metzner

By Barth Falkenberg, staff photographer

Wants to 'create a visual picture with sound'

Metzner explains. "But we're nonlisteners by nature. We're all into the image of things. But sound really carries emotional content.

"Television gives you everything and becomes a passive medium. Radio is a listener's medium, where the listener can really be included. I am interested in rediscovering the experience of listening. I simply allow the listener to have the experience himself." And with a pleased-as-punch grin crossing his slightly elfin-looking features, Metzner flips on a tape of the Coney Island Polar Bear Club.

Suddenly, gulls are screeching in stereo. It sounds lifelike, dramatic, and immediate — a profound change from the monophonic traffic reports and weather updates one usually snatches from the radio waves. Metzner nods in agreement.

Metzner

Continued from Page B5

"Keep listening." And right on cue, waves build in the distance and grow louder. They sound as if they are actually coming closer.

Then, through the headphones, a voice leaps out right under the listener's right ear: "Eh, I tell you that feels good. Arghhh," says a masculine voice dripping with a New York accent. There are some stereophonic sounds of water splashing in the background. "OK, are we ready to go in?" the voice hollers, still in the right ear. And then the voice starts to do an amazing thing — it seems to move around from the listener's right ear over to the left before receding to where the sound of the waves is coming from. Everything is in motion. Close your eyes and you'd think you were on the beach with the Bears. "Yo-ho," a little song starts up over the lap-lap of waves. "The Polar Bears of Coney Island, they love the snow and coldness of the sea. Come swim with them, yo-ho." Fade to surf sounds.

Metzner is smiling and nodding at the listener's amazement. "Ambient sound. That's called ambient sound or the dimensionality of sound. And that's the whole point of the program. In fact, that's what radio is all about, and we've lost touch with that. We're trying to go back and let the sounds tell the story."

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To hear Metzner tell it, the origin of his program had a lot to do with the sound of horse hoofs hitting the streets of Boston and how he chased after those hoofs with a \$100 microphone — just to get the sound right. That was back in 1979. It was just the inspiration the Yale-educated drama graduate and former folk singer needed to launch his first radio series, "You're Hearing Boston." Previously, Metzner had recorded an unusual series of "sound images," record albums of Greece and Brazil complete with photographs. They lost him his shirt, he says, but also taught him a lot about recording and the evocative power of sound.

After that he dabbled in public radio, but it wasn't until "You're Hearing Boston" took off on a Boston commercial radio station and won a Gabriel Award along the way that Metzner felt he had found his calling — resurrecting the old standards of creative radio for commercial radio today. ("You're Hearing San Francisco" existed briefly before "You're Hearing America" debuted in 1981.)

"Some of the best radio today is being done on public radio," Metzner says. "That's simply the nature of the beast. But I am very happy to be on commercial radio. Instead of wringing my hands and moaning about the quality of commercial radio, I hope I will have an influence on it." Metzner's syndication service has already hit upon the newly FCC-approved AM-stereo as its best market.

"So much of radio today all sounds the same," Metzner continues. "Just traffic reports, sports, news — and it's all

local, local, local. Why does it have to be this way? Well, we've sort of broken that mold. Listeners respond, we've got a sponsor, we're successful, and in a sense we are having an influence on commercial radio." (That sponsor is the Maxell Corporation, which gets a 10-second mini-commercial mention at the end of Metzner's program. Metzner calls this hybrid form an "info-mercial." Maxell calls it a public relations effort, not advertising.)

Listeners apparently approve of the new breed. Despite the program's unusual format, which makes it difficult to market, over 30 of the top 50 radio markets have chosen to air the five-day-a-week series, which has already garnered one international and two national broadcast awards this year. Station managers, program directors, and announcers have

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labeled the program "sensational," "dynamite," and "superb." One station in Texas liked the program so much it ran it 49 times a week. David Freudberg, editor of *Airwaves*, a publication for independent radio producers, calls Metzner "a superb craftsman, truly someone who has innovated the medium."

Innovating the medium has a lot to do with a special kind of microphone that resembles a brace of root beer barrel candies stuck comfortably in Metzner's ears and joined by a thin black cord snaking into a lightweight battery pack. It's a binaural microphone, and it "records exactly what I hear with my own two ears," Metzner says. This creates the 3-D sound effect.

He is happy to illustrate. Slipping the binaural microphone into the ears of the interviewer, he snaps on the recorder and begins to move around the room: "First I'm over here, and now I'm over here, and then I'm in the corner." When played back, the effect is like standing blindfolded in a room full of people talking: You can hear perfectly where everyone is, but can see nothing and your imagination is forced to work overtime. That's the beauty of radio, according to Metzner.

The rest of what he does is pure hard work. "People think they can waltz in, flip on the recorder, and in two minutes turn it off and they've got it. I wish it could be so easy." Metzner estimates that for every two-minute program he needs two hours of taping, two hours of note-taking, an hour of script writing, and three hours of mixing and combining tapes on his multitrack editing system — a sort of electronic overlap procedure that does not involve splicing. (Splicing, he says, is too old-fashioned for what he does.) In other words, a two-minute radio snippet heard by millions is an eight-hour-a-day job for the producer.

"Jim does with ears what a photographer does with his eyes," explains Stuart Goldberg, Metzner's syndicator. "He frames the sound and gathers it from place to place and then distills it all into two-minute segments that is the radio equivalent of *cinéma vérité*. A sort of *radio vérité*." For example, for a program on the Boston Marathon, Metzner recorded not people talking about the marathon, but the sound of running feet, the sound of breathing, and the sound of the crowd. "You listen to that tape and you feel like you've actually run the Boston Marathon," he says.

While he is happy to have carved out his own two-minute program — "radio stations see anything longer than 60 seconds and they think you're coming at them with 'Gone With the Wind'" — he is just as happy to share the limelight with other independent radio producers who regularly contribute to his series. In his two previous shows, "You're Hearing Boston" and "You're Hearing San Francisco," Metzner did all the recording and producing himself. "I would just take my tape recorder and go out for a walk and see what would happen, like investigate the sounds of Golden Gate Park."

While he still does as much of his own recording as he can, the demands of "You're Hearing America" require him to use several dozen independent radio producers scattered across the country. Metzner works closely with his free-lancers, exchanging program ideas and techniques of recording and interviewing. He also gives them a credit at the end of those particular programs.

"They are a force in radio that deserve to be heard," Metzner insists. "They are creating the kind of quality radio we generally associate with public radio, but now they're being heard on commercial radio."

Metzner still does all the mixing and producing of his programs on \$40,000 worth of editing equipment he keeps in his San Francisco apartment. But he insists that anyone can record good-quality sounds with as little as a \$100 microphone and \$300 recorder.

In between recording trips that have taken him as far afield as Nepal and Japan, where "You're Hearing America" is being translated for Japanese radio, Metzner dreams the dreams of a true radio man: a greatest-hits tape of his show, an expanded version ("You're Hearing the World"), a national museum of sound, more radio drama. If nothing else, Metzner says, "I would love someone to say, 'Here's an hour. Do what you want with it.'" ■