



AJR's Thomas Kunkel turns the tables and asks the questions in a conversation with **TERRY GROSS**, host of NPR's "Fresh Air."

Interviewing

THE

Interviewer

Every day, millions of National Public Radio listeners metaphorically open their windows to take in another deep breath of "Fresh Air," the nationally syndicated program about the arts, culture and society hosted by Terry Gross.

Gross began her career back in Buffalo, New York, almost by accident. "I stumbled into radio after failing as a teacher," she says with the hearty laugh that is one of her aural signatures. In 1975 she moved to Philadelphia's WHYY, which produces "Fresh Air," and began hosting a three-hour local version of the program. "Fresh Air" went national as a half-hour, once-a-week show in 1985, and moved to its familiar hour-long daily format in 1987.

Along the way, Gross established herself as a cultural force. Movie studios and record labels angle to get their new releases featured on "Fresh Air," just as the publishing industry knows the show can significantly boost the sales of a book. And in an age when artists and celebrities are inclined to reveal less of themselves, Gross has an uncanny knack for getting them to tell us more.

One reason why is because she is one of the most effective interviewers working today in any medium, as comfortable asking Dolly Parton about her rhinestone wardrobe as she is Nancy Reagan about her White House influence. Gross' conversational interviews are marked by intelligence, preparation and a diplomatic but firm probing of what makes people tick. The results are anything but the standard sound-bite fare. "We're not an infomercial," she says.

Relaxing in her Philadelphia studios, Gross talked about her program and the art of the interview.

AJR: Let me start by asking if you consider yourself a journalist.

TG: Yes, though maybe not the same kind of journalist as someone who is out in the field, whether in a war zone or at city hall or even on a movie set. I'm not reporting on what I see and hear. For most print journalists the interview is the raw material for the piece, along with everything else the reporter has seen and heard in researching the story. For me, the interview *is* the piece. The only time I stand back and "report" is in my brief introduction, which is usually very neutral—just a setup for the interview.

But I *am* a journalist in the sense that I follow a journalistic code. I have to make sure that statements are as accurate as they can be. I can't fact-check everything everybody tells me. But I'm sensitive, and so are all the

PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL CRAMER

producers here, to assertions that don't sound right—better check that out before we put it on the air. I also have to think about accuracy and fairness whenever I look at a book to decide whether the author should be on the show in the first place. The producers have to make the same kind of assessment when they review materials, and when they conduct a pre-interview: Is the interviewee fair, accurate, concise? Does he or she communicate clearly?

AJR: I'd call you a cultural journalist.

TG: To me, books and movies and music are some of the things that make life worth living. I mean, I think life would be very boring and all but unintelligible without the reflections of our experiences that we find in the best books, movies and songs.

AJR: How do you decide what to put on the show—this movie, this writer, this piece of music?

TG: Well, it's a process that is both all-consuming and incredibly imprecise, because there's so much coming out right now in books and in music and with all the new TV stations and all the new independent movies, plus the Internet. We can no longer even pretend that we're truly keeping up with everything. So we go through Publishers Weekly and order books from that. We're able to get advanced copies of some of the movies coming out or to set up screenings of them. Plus, I try to see a movie every weekend.

Keeping up with music is hard. I'm very interested in jazz singing and particularly in a lot of singers who aren't living anymore. So in the time that I have to listen for myself, I often want to go backwards. It makes it more difficult to keep up with what's new. But the producers are keeping up with new CDs and books and movies, as well as what's in the newspapers and magazines. Thursday nights I take home one or two crates of materials they have given me, so I can evaluate the potential guests and decide, with the producers, who will be on the show. And I always worry that I'm not doing justice to some authors and musicians and so on, because there's just not enough time.

AJR: What's your process for choosing a guest?

TG: The way it works is like this, and I'm talking about the arts now. We have to believe that someone has a gift, or has the ability to analyze their art, or can at least tell some good anecdotes. Being famous isn't good enough. Some listeners think we're enamored of celebrity. But it's not about that. Those of us who work on the show love movies, books, music. And some great performers and writers become celebrities, and they end up being on the show, if we can get them. But it's not about being attracted to fame. In fact, fame tends to make people much more guarded and difficult to interview. We've turned down a lot of very famous people, either because we didn't think they were very talented or because we were convinced they had absolutely nothing to say.

AJR: You can throw out some names here if you want.

TG: (Laughing) I'd just as soon not.

AJR: Well, let's say you've decided on somebody. This morning you interviewed the actor Colin Firth.

TG: OK, a good example. I hadn't really seen him in that much. Monique Nazareth, one of our producers, is this huge fan of his. My attitude was, convince me. And she did. I mean, she queued up clips of scenes of three of his movies that I hadn't seen. She had read "Bridget Jones' Diary" and was a big fan of that. I had not. And she made a really good case. Then I read a bunch of clips about him and I thought, yeah, he's intelligent too. He's going to have something to say.

AJR: So would you devise a list of questions?

TG: Absolutely. I don't write them out word for word. But

I try to write them out in a kind of pleasing narrative, because I don't think an interview should be like a random questionnaire. For it to work best—because the interview is my final and only product, so to speak—it has to have a kind of narrative of its own. Yes, the producers, when they're editing the tape, can rearrange things. But they don't have all that much time; our turnaround is pretty quick. And I like to go into an interview with an idea of what the story line is going to be, what shape the interview might have. You don't want to force that shape onto the interview because hopefully you're going to be learning new things about the person. But you'll always have a structure to return to that way.

AJR: You're not afraid to improvise if you get an interesting opening.

TG: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. And you certainly hope you're going to be surprised by things that you hear.

AJR: Given the technical clarity of your interviews, most people would assume that all your guests are sitting right across the table from you. But I read that in 19 cases out of 20, they're actually in studios in other cities.

TG: Yes.

AJR: Isn't that terribly difficult? I mean, part of the appeal of "Fresh Air" is that these really do come across as intimate conversations. But it's hard to have an intimate conversation when you don't have the person there to react to facial expressions or moods or nuances. Yet clearly you overcome that.

TG: Well, the good thing about not being able to react to facial expressions is that they would only be going on between me and the guest. The audience wouldn't be in on it. So this way if there's anything the guests want to communicate to me, they can't do it with a facial expression. They have to convey it in words or in the tone of those words. And likewise for me, I can't just kind of smile and let them know that I'm enthusiastic about what they're saying. I have to convey that through my voice. And when things are working well, that means that maybe there's a little more getting conveyed on the air.

I've gotten to the point where I'm kind of almost distracted by the person's presence. When I'm interviewing somebody and I'm looking at my notes, I feel like the person I'm talking to thinks I'm ignoring them or that I'm distracted, and I'm not. I mean, I *need* those notes. My memory isn't that good. So if I look at the notes, I feel like I'm losing the person. And if I don't look at my notes, I feel like I'm losing my structure.

Often when I *am* in the room with somebody, I really enjoy it and I think, "Why would I want to do a long-distance interview?" But I *have* to do a long-distance interview because most of our guests are not going to come to Philly.

AJR: Plus, I'd guess you're less likely to be star-struck if a famous person isn't right there with you.

TG: It's true. It's easier to talk. I mean, I'm basically a shy person who has overcome a lot of her shyness for professional reasons. But it's easier to not be star-struck when it's long-distance. Absolutely. And it's easier also to ask challenging questions when it's long-distance. Like when I was interviewing Nancy Reagan, I think it would have been much harder for me in person.

AJR: One interesting thing about your questioning technique is that you often ask your guests "How did you feel?" when key events happened in their lives.

TG: Here's the thing. I never went to journalism school, but I think that journalists are usually taught not to use words like "feel" when what you're trying to get at is some-

thing that's more objective. But part of what I'm interested in when I'm interviewing somebody is their inner life. So I'm in that murky territory of feeling and perception. That's where I try to go, and that's why the word "feeling" gets used a whole lot.

AJR: The last time AJR visited with you, in 1989, you said that "what's interesting about a person is not just their successes but their failures, not just what makes them happy but what they're scared of. To me the world is a pretty scary place, fraught with all kinds of dangers real and imagined." Do you still subscribe to that notion?

TG: Absolutely. I often talk to people about their failures. Someone I used to work with once said that he thought I tended to talk to the "dark side" of people. If that's true, I think that's because we're defined at least as much by our failures, the contradictions in our lives, as we are by our successes. And sometimes people misinterpret that line of questioning and think I'm trying to show them up or belittle them in some way. I'm not.

AJR: But people are more inclined to talk about their successes than their failures.

TG: Right. That's why I also like to talk to people who have a sense of humor about themselves and can kind of recognize those failures with, you know, with some humor and irony.

AJR: What happens when you get a guest who is clam-

hand I respect my guest's feeling. On the other hand I feel like, well, the interview is going to be very unsatisfying without that. And so I try to decide on the spot what to do. Part of my equation is this: If I think the problem is that the guest doesn't want to say anything beyond promoting their new work, I'll push hard, because the show isn't an infomercial.

AJR: Speaking of the "personality press," since "Fresh Air" debuted there has been an explosion of celebrity-oriented media, from People magazine to the reincarnated Vanity Fair to the E! channel. Has that actually made it harder for you to do your job?

TG: Well, I'll tell you, sometimes I'm interviewing someone—say an actor who seems really shallow to me—and I'll listen to the questions that I'm asking and I feel like I'm on "Entertainment Tonight." So I'll think, "Ask something else." Then maybe I'll ask questions that are more personal, only to find the guest doesn't want to get that personal. So I'll try more analytical, craft-oriented questions and find the guest just isn't an analytical thinker. Then I don't know where to turn. I hate that feeling.

AJR: You do a lot with musicians; music informs the entire show. Is that an outgrowth of your own passion for music?

TG: Oh, absolutely. But not just mine; the producers love music too. When we started and the show went national, we were warned by some people not to include much pop music

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ming up or is clearly uncomfortable?

TG: Well, some interviews are just real flat or very short. I mean, I think on the whole the show is good. But there are days that are more interesting and days that are less interesting. And that's how people are. We haven't discovered a secret formula for finding only dazzling people.

AJR: I recall reading about how you once interviewed Paul Simon and were questioning him about the early days with Art Garfunkel, and he wasn't much interested in talking about that. I suppose not every guest will go where you want to take them.

TG: Right. Where I usually run into trouble with this is with people who have become celebrities. After people have become very famous, they become much more protective, for understandable reasons. For some parts of the "personality press," news is equated with revealing something embarrassing about the celebrity. So a lot of times celebrities have like a wall that they've built around themselves. Other times, as with Paul Simon, they've given a lot of interviews over the years and they're tired of talking about the early part of their career.

The dilemma for me is, when I interview somebody, I like to include that part of their life when everything changed for one reason or another, whether it was a hit record or an auto accident in which they lost a leg. But sometimes that life-changing incident is something that has been talked about so much it's painful to talk about it anymore. So on the one

on it, because at that point the music on most of our affiliates was classical. There was a lot of fear that rock music, or rap, or rhythm and blues, or even more contemporary jazz would alienate a lot of listeners. But we included it anyway because we saw it as part of the show's personality. And I'm often told by listeners that they really like the music we play. We stuck with that.

AJR: You interviewed Paul McCartney the other day. When there's such an iconic presence on the other end of the line, it must seem a little intimidating. I mean, how do you approach a former Beatle?

TG: That was really a hard one for me—for several reasons. First of all, there are so many different directions you could go with Paul McCartney. There are so many questions you can ask. At the same time, he's been written about so much over the years, and so much of what you want to know about him and the Beatles has already been told in several documentaries, millions of quotes and articles. So you put those two together and you just feel kind of lost. Where do you turn?

He had just had a new book of poems and lyrics published. So to give the interview some kind of focus, I figured I would take these and use them as kind of jumping-off points to get to things in his life. To have him read a poem about John Lennon and then talk about how he met John and what his impressions were, or to take a poem about his childhood and talk about that, his father's music collection,

his father's approach to music, how that influenced his own sense of harmony and so on.

It seemed to work OK. Because, let's face it, he wasn't there to talk about the Beatles. He was there because he wanted to promote a new book. By using the book as the point of departure, I also solved the problem of asking the questions in such a way so that he would be comfortable in talking about them.

AJR: These days a lot of publicists try to set ground rules—what their celebrity clients will and won't talk about—before you can have them. How do you handle that?

TG: We try to not make deals. On the other hand, I respect somebody's right to privacy. So if the deal is something like they really don't want to talk about their father's death or they just got out of rehab and they really don't want to talk about rehab, that's fine. I can accept that, because, you know, we didn't elect these people to public office. They don't owe us an accounting of every private decision they've made or every emotion that they've had. If there's something in their life that they feel they need to keep private, more power to them.

AJR: On the other hand, if they're *not* reticent about it, that's exactly the sort of thing that you would get them to talk about.

TG: If they're comfortable doing it, I *do* tell people before the interview starts—not politicians, I have separate rules for politicians—but for artists and anyone not in politics, I'll tell them that if I ask anything too personal, they should let me know and we'll move on to something else. Because I really believe people should have that right to draw a line between one's public and private lives—understanding that that line is probably going to keep shifting from day to day, from interviewer to interviewer. Where we *don't* accept it is when a publicist tells us that a certain rock star will come on, but they only want to talk about the rain forest or recycling or something. No way.

AJR: Have you really angered some of your guests?

TG: Sure. Yeah. Nancy Reagan was very unhappy. Several people have walked out on me.

AJR: Who? And what do you do when that happens?

TG: If they have given a good interview up to that point, we'll play the part that was good. If there is nothing there, we'll just not run it. We'll run something else. [The actor] Peter Boyle walked out, but everything went fine up until a certain point so we ran most of that. [Rolling Stone Publisher] Jann Wenner walked out, but that was one of the shortest interviews I ever did. It was like two minutes and 48 seconds. So there was really nothing to run.

AJR: What got him so upset?

TG: First of all, we had kept him waiting somewhere between 20 and 40 minutes. It was a long-distance interview and there were technical problems. Then, I had just read Robert Draper's book on the history of Rolling Stone. So I asked Wenner a couple of things like, "Is it true that you kind of made up a subscription list to show to advertisers when you were getting started?" He wasn't pleased with that question. And I said, "You know, some people say"—this was a report in Draper's book—"some people say when you started Rolling Stone you really just wanted to get to know John Lennon." I think that's about when he left.

He had every reason to be irritable because we kept him waiting so long. But I also thought that he was awfully thin-skinned for somebody who prided himself on publishing investigative reporting. And who *wouldn't* forge a subscription list to get started, and who wouldn't want to meet John

Lennon? I mean, what exactly was so wrong about that?

AJR: Monica Lewinsky walked out on you?

TG: Yeah.

AJR: This was when she was promoting her book?

TG: Yeah. And, in fact, it was the only time in my life I actually wrote an essay that bracketed the interview. Because I was so uncomfortable about doing the interview in the first place and she was clearly uncomfortable being interviewed, so I thought her walking out was a fitting end.

AJR: Was she here or was that on the phone?

TG: Long-distance. No one has ever walked out on me in the same room, but several people have walked out long-distance.

AJR: Is there anyone out there you've always wanted to interview but who has yet to agree to sit down with you?

TG: Probably, but at this point the show is not really about that to me. The people who were on our wish list when we started we've basically gotten on the show. The more exciting thing tends to be discovering new people—finding the character actor who just seems to be coming into his own.

AJR: Speaking of difficult guests, I know that you admire the composer Stephen Sondheim, but that he has proven to be a problematic interview for you.

TG: Well, he hates being interviewed. He happens to be one of my heroes because I love his music and his lyrics, but he hates being interviewed. The last time I interviewed him he started parsing my questions—taking an individual word and saying, "When you say this, do you mean this, that or the other?" I became so self-conscious after a while I could barely speak. I mean, I don't think he meant to hurt me, but he just doesn't like being interviewed.

AJR: Who are some interviewers you enjoy or have learned from?

TG: I think Scott Simon [of National Public Radio] and Ira Glass ["This American Life"] are really great. I've learned a lot listening to them. In the MacNeil-Lehrer era, I really liked the way they would do their team interviews and just how scrupulously fair they were about everything, and very focused. I used to really like Lesley Stahl when she hosted "Face the Nation" because I thought that she wouldn't let anyone get away with anything. She was very matter-of-fact, didn't call attention to herself. She just asked the question and would keep asking it and insist that they answer it.

AJR: In the quarter-century—not to make you feel old—that you've been doing interviews for a living, how has your own technique evolved?

TG: Well, when I started out, I was in my mid-twenties and no taller than I am today...

AJR: Which is how tall?

TG: Somewhere probably close to 5 feet 1, if I'm standing straight. So I was younger—and shorter—than just about everyone I was interviewing. And I was very inexperienced. So what I drew on often was real curiosity. I still draw on raw curiosity, but I've done so many more interviews and I've kind of seen and heard and experienced and read about so much more and actually remembered some of it, that I have more knowledge to go on than before.

My theory of interviewing is that whatever you have, use it. If you are confused, use that. If you have raw curiosity, use that. If you have experience, use that. If you have a lot of research, use that. But figure out what it is you have and make it work for you. ●

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