“I Can Hear It Now: 1933-1945”--Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly (1948)

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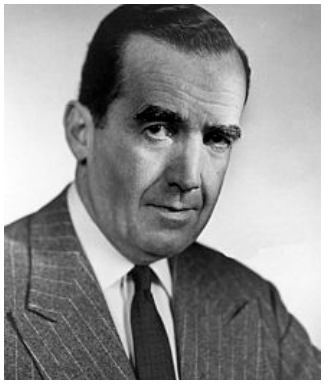
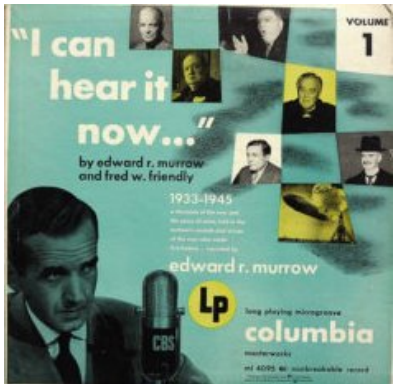
Essay by Cary O’Dell



Edward R. Murrow



Original album

Fred Friendly

Capturing moments in time, capturing history, is something people have long sought to do—in writing, in photographs, and in sound. In 1948, legendary newsmen Edward R. Murrow and soon-to-be legendary news producer Fred Friendly gave to the record-buying public the chance to capture history, own it, and to relive it via the great and important radio news reports of an era just gone by.

Fred Friendly (nee Ferdinand Friendly Wachenheimer) was one of the most important, influential journalists of the 20th century. Born in New York City in 1915, Friendly showed an early interest in and aptitude for radio. In his youth, he and his father built a radio receiver in order to listen to boxing matches being broadcast over KDKA in Pittsburgh. While in high school, in the 1930s, Friendly began to make his first radio appearances on radio by being an actor on various radio shows broadcast over WJAR in Providence, Rhode Island. By 1936, after graduation, Friendly went to work at Rhode Island’s WEAN, a NBC Blue affiliate. At WEAN, Friendly worked as an announcer, conducted man-on-the-street interviews, and produced a daily five-minute biography series titled “Footprints in the Sands of Time.”

Some years later, long after the “Footprints” installments were packed away into mothballs and Friendly was eking out a career at various radio outlets including Armed Forces Radio, Friendly was approached by the Decca label to put “Footprints” out in record form. That idea and that deal (for which Friendly eventually received a residual of several thousand dollars) stuck in Friendly’s head.

Later, in 1947, during a widespread musician’s strike that was promising to cripple the recording industry, Friendly recalled the earlier Decca exchange. In a conversation Friendly was having with J.G. Gude, Edward R. Murrow’s business manager, Friendly proposed the idea of having recently-aired radio broadcasts being stamped onto vinyl and sold commercially. Friendly said later, “My idea [was] for an album of recorded history for the years 1933 to 1945.”

The post-Depression, post-World War II era was well-suited for a recorded remembrance. Meanwhile the semi-recent advent of magnetic tape made it a possibility since it was much easier to edit than the previous recording medium of wire.

After Decca (surprisingly) passed on Friendly and Gude’s idea, the two men took their enthusiasm to Goddard Lieberson. Lieberson was the head of Columbia Record’s classical music division and would later help shepherd to vinyl some of the greatest original Broadway cast recordings in history. But, at the time, owning to the ongoing strike, he was being faced

with an array of idle studios and stalled factories. Lieberson got sold on the project by Friendly and Gude and gifted the team with a $1,000 advance.

Friendly and Gude's timing of fortuitous, not only had the musicians' strike opened a door for them and new recording tape eased the process, but the newly developed long-playing album ("LP") made the endeavor all the more attractive and potentially profitable.

To try to add gravitas to the project, Friendly and Gude approached CBS newsman Edward R. Murrow to provide the recordings' over-arching narration. Murrow, who had already covered many of the stories the record set was going to showcase, readily agreed to take part in the project. With Murrow on board, and a few assistants and researchers in tow, Friendly set to work.

It took 18-months and the review of hundreds of hours of audio to complete the multi-album package. Friendly and his new wife, Dorothy, spent endless hours of a hot summer in the National Archives in DC and at the War Department researching actualities.

Other members of the "I Can" team included audio engineer Joel Tree and write Joer Wershba.

In the end, it is said that the first "draft" of the "I Can Hear It Now" recording ran in excess of 30,000 minutes, roughly 500 hours of content! That's easy to understand as the first installment of "I Can Hear It Now" focused on some very dramatic American years with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 of course serving as its dramatic high point. But other events and personalities of the era that were represented too included: Charles Lindbergh's crossing; Franklin D. Roosevelt's inauguration; Huey Long; Wendell Wilkie; Will Rogers; Edward VIII; the bombing of Hiroshima; the *Hindenburg* disaster; D-Day; and Japan's surrender. Basically, it was radio's greatest hits, its most amazing real-life moments.

In the studio, Friendly and company quickly nicknamed their work a "scrapbook of the air." They worked hard to create an authentic experience, one free of actors, sound effects and the like.

Still, even with the best intentions—and maintaining a strong journalistic creed—some creative license was taken. To the later frustration of historians and audio purists around the world, some of the reports included in the set were sweetened, recreated and/or simply faked. In 1999, respected newsman Robert Trout confessed to NPR that his announcing of the end of World War II, as heard on "I Can Hear It Now," was a recreation, done in order to obtain a better quality audio, a more "cleaned-up" version of the report he originally delivered years before.

The audio augmentation didn't end there. A 20 second delay (or possibly a pause) in Arthur Godfrey's coverage of FDR's funeral in 1945 was excised for "Hear It Now," which, though not greatly noticeable, does nevertheless change how it was originally heard.

The 1941 announcement of the bombing of Pearl Harbor was redone also—allegedly to make up for the poor quality of the original recording. The announcement, by reporter John Daly, as it appears on record seems to interrupt a broadcast of a symphony. In actuality, the original announcement was made during a regularly scheduled news program that happened to coincide with this major breaking bulletin. For dramatic effect, however, for "I Can Hear It Now," the emergency was heard cutting into some serene and soothing classical music.

For years after the release of "I Can Hear It Now: 1933-1945," these audio liberties were erroneously accepted as fact. It was not until some after-the-fact confessions (like those mentioned above) and some diligent work done by dedicated scholars that the recordings' falsity was brought to light. But, by then, as they say, it was too late. Most of what was heard on record had already been accepted as the truth.

The finished "I Can Hear It Now" ran about 45 minutes in length and was released in both 78rpm and LP sets. In either form, the final product was a handsome package. For a cover, positioned in the lower left-hand corner, was a blue-tinted photo of a serious-looking Edward R. Murrow

shown looking up from his desk. Scattered above him in the upper right corners are various pictures of several early 20th century movers and shakers.

Released near Thanksgiving of 1949, the set sold over a quarter a million units in its first year. Friendly later recalled that sales were so good, so fast that, by Christmas, he was depositing a $25,000 check into the bank. Friendly would later credit the album with paying for his kids' college educations. Murrow's involvement proved equally lucrative, adding handsomely to his already star salary.

As with all successes, "I Can Hear It Now" quickly inspired a sequel. A year later, Friendly, Murrow and Gude reunited for "I Can Hear It Now, Vol. II." This set focused on the years 1945 through 1949. As with its predecessor, the recordings were released over the Columbia Masterworks label and, too, became a great seller. Another "I Can Hear It Now" volume, this one focusing on the years 1919 to 1932, emerged in 1950. A final set, devoted to the 1960s, was issued in 1971 with Walter Cronkite handling the narration duties. Despite the increasing plethora of recorded sources to pull from, later sets began to rely more heavily on the use of actors, a decision that Friendly would later admit to regretting.

As popular and lucrative as these sets were for the people involved, perhaps their greatest achievement was their uniting of Fred Friendly with Edward R. Murrow. The two men had first met in 1947. Through the process of producing the "I Can" series, they formed a quality working relationship. In 1950, Friendly joined CBS full-time. (Previously, Friendly had been employed by both ABC and NBC.) Together, Friendly and Murrow formed what has since been called "the most productive, most influential partnership in the whole history of broadcast journalism."

The success of the first set of "I Can Hear It Now" not only inspired several vinyl sequels but also a radio series spin-off. Headed up by Friendly with Murrow acting as host, the radio show "Hear It Now" debuted over CBS radio on December 15, 1950. It would air until June of 1951. The series applied the album's philosophy to a weekly radio series format, in the process creating the concept of the media news magazine. Radio's "Hear It Now" program only aired for six months before it was transferred to TV and was renamed "See It Now."

Produced by Fred Friendly, "See It Now" debuted on April 20, 1952. It was hosted by Murrow. It is on this program that Murrow would enjoy some of his most legendary moments including his famous on-air essay about Senator Joe McCarthy. "See It Now" was on the air until July of 1955.

After "See It Now," Friendly assumed the role of executive director of CBS-TV's "CBS Reports." From 1964 to 1966, Friendly served as president of CBS News. He concluded his career as an advisor at the Ford Foundation and then as a professor of journalism at Columbia University. He died in 1998.

At the time of its release, and for years afterward, "I Can Hear It Now: 1933-1945" was the recording industry's most successful spoken-word/non-musical album. This installment and others from the series are still in print and now available for digital download. And though they do tweak history at times, these recordings, presented in this form, nevertheless retain their power and resurrect the potency and immediacy of the radio age.

Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).