

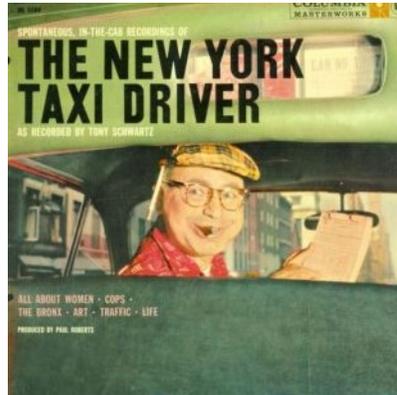
“The New York Taxi Driver”--Tony Schwartz (1959)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Donald A. Ritchie (guest post)*



Dwight Weist



Original LP cover



Tony Schwartz

“I couldn’t get no other job,” a cabby tells his passenger as they make their way through New York City traffic.

The passenger was Anthony “Tony” Schwartz, who had brought his tape recorder with him to capture the conversation. “I could write a book,” said one of the many taxi drivers he interviewed about his experiences. Of course, they rarely did. Instead, Schwartz preserved bits of their talk in his record album, “The New York Taxi Driver” (Columbia Records, 1959).

Like the oral historian Studs Terkel, Schwartz started interviewing as a radio broadcaster. In 1945, he launched “Around New York” on WNYC. That same year, he bought his first Webster wire recorder (tape recorders did not become readily available until the 1950’s). He hooked the bulky machine to a battery to make it portable and set out to record the everyday sounds of the streets, playgrounds, and community centers.

Born in New York City in 1923, Tony Schwartz had been raised upstate before spending his adult life in Manhattan. Suffering from agoraphobia, he rarely left his West Side neighborhood. One of his first albums was “New York 19” (Folkways, 1954), named after his local postal code (now the zip code 10019).

A brief episode of blindness as a teenager heightened Schwartz’s sensitivity to sound. Although he studied graphic design at the Pratt Institute and served as a civilian artist for the Navy during World War II, his passions were more audio than visual. He came to believe there was “music in everyday speech, and often a kind of poetry in the way people talk,” as he explained in “Millions of Musicians” (Folkways, 1954).

One of his radio broadcasts, “Death of a Turtle,” caught the attention of the philanthropist William Rosenwald, who underwrote his early projects. Folkways Records, with its catalog of

folk music and field recordings, produced most of Schwartz's albums, beginning with "1,2,3, and a Zing Zing Zing" (Folkways, 1953), a compilation of children's street games and songs.

"The New York Taxi Driver" was Schwartz' 11th album and his only one for Columbia. Narrated by the veteran radio announcer Dwight Weist, the record blends snippets of conversation from hack drivers with background sounds of honking horns, blaring sirens, and ticking meters.

For the album, Schwartz edited some 35 hours of recordings down to a 32-minute LP. Anyone who has ever been stuck in traffic or taken a long ride to the airport with a garrulous taxi driver will recognize the themes: politics, the police, and their philosophies of life, all delivered over-the-shoulder while driving.

There were 38,000 taxi drivers in New York at the time Schwartz was recording, and all of them seemed willing to talk about their work: "It was something I had to do or do nothing." ... "I just hate my work. I hate it. What am I gonna do? I gotta do it to make a living." ... "Anybody who drives for a living, day in and day out, if he had to worry about traffic...why they'd put him in a straight-jacket. I already had my ulcers. So now I take everything the way it is. Nothing bothers me whatsoever. If traffic is bad, it's bad."... "I love to be independent. I don't want to be pushed around." ... "A lot of people look down upon you, but those people are wrong when they look down upon you because you're a cab driver. That is my opinion, and it's very true."

The album celebrates taxi drivers as "raconteurs of the street," whose job provided a chance to talk to people as in no other brief encounter. Drivers and their fares could speak freely because they would probably never meet again. "Every once in a while you'll meet a woman, who'll cry on your shoulder and tell you her whole goddamn trouble inside and out," said one driver. "Then after she'll get through she'll say, 'Why the hell am I telling you for anyway?'"

Cabbies described passengers changing clothes in the backseat or inviting them to "come upstairs" in lieu of a fare. They also recounted robberies. "I knew he didn't want to kiss me goodnight," said one about being asked to stop on a dark street. "I didn't like the idea of him hitting me on the head or putting a bullet in me." And they freely shared stories about their home lives, wives, and children.

One rarely hears Schwartz asking a question. Like a good interviewer, he spent most of his time listening. Recording street sounds made him more acutely aware of how people related to sound, knowledge he then employed for a second career in advertising. In 1958, Johnson and Johnson tapped his experience recording children to create ads for their baby powder. Rather than hire adult actors to mimic youngsters, Schwartz pioneered in using real children's voices in commercials. He expanded his work to other commercials, public service announcements, and political campaign ads.

Perhaps from having listened to all those taxi drivers, Schwartz advised candidates to appeal to people's emotions rather than trying to persuade them with facts. The best political ads, in his opinion, reinforced viewers' existing feelings and provided a context for them to express those feelings.

Most memorably, Schwartz shaped the sound on the “Daisy” ad for President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 Presidential campaign. Although it aired only once, it stands as the first example of a negative television political ad. In it, a little girl counts “One, two, three, four”...as she plucks daisy petals, while an announcer counts down to zero. Then, a nuclear bomb explodes, ending with Johnson’s warning: “We must either love each other, or we must die.”

Media scholar Marshall McLuhan dubbed Tony Schwartz “the guru of the electronic age.” The two of them shared the Albert Schweitzer Chair in Humanities at Fordham University. Schwartz also published two well-received books, “The Responsive Chord” (1973) and “Media: The Second God” (1981). He died in 2008, leaving behind a medley of voices from his era.

Donald A. Ritchie is historian emeritus of the United States Senate. A former president of the Oral History Association, his books include “Doing Oral History” and the “Oxford Handbook of Oral History” (both Oxford University Press).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

WORKS CITED (

David Suisman, “Listening to the City,” *Smithsonian Folkways Magazine* (Fall/Winter 2012).
<https://folkways.si.edu/magazine-fall-winter-2012-listening-city/sounds/music/article/smithsonian>

Tony Schwartz website: <http://www.tonyschwartz.org/>