

Something About Terry

Fresh Air's Terry Gross talks about her hopes, fears and fantasy interviews.

By Amy Abrams

She's interviewed society's superstars—musicians Eric Clapton and Paul McCartney, actors Dustin Hoffman and Jodie Foster, writers John Updike and Philip Roth—as well as politicians, playwrights, artists, directors and comedians. Everyone from Divine to Grandmaster Flash.

Terry Gross really is a breath of fresh air in a media world where digging up dirt on drug busts and divorce often comprises the latest sound bites. She shows us what makes the famous tick, how their lives inform their work, and how their triumphs and disappointments might light our own paths.

Widely considered one of today's top interviewers and known for her extensive research before every radio conversation, Gross surprisingly says she gets nervous while interviewing. "I think I haven't had enough preparation. I should have seen one more movie, read one more book or 10 more articles. There seems not enough time. It's a daily show—most nights I'm preparing two interviews. It helps that I'm not really in the person's presence ... most interviews are done long-distance, by phone, so I don't have to be as impressive," she says with a self-deprecating laugh.



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Funny and candid, Gross has tremendous appeal off-air, frequently making herself the brunt of jokes. It's an endearing quality for someone fans rightly classify as cultured and intellectual.

About five feet tall, she confesses, "Most people think I'm really tall ... that if you can fill a radio speaker, you can fill a room. They create a version of me that they want, so it's liberating—not worrying about that. I like the invisibility, the mystery of radio, although it's disconcerting for some listeners when they meet me. I'm smaller, not larger, than life."

Her voice—that smooth, distinctive sound fans have come to love—also becomes a target: "The first time I heard my voice on the radio, I was mortified and I remained that way for years, but I liked radio so much, I wouldn't let it get me."

Radio became a calling while Gross was obtaining a bachelor's in English and a master's in communications at the State University of New York at Buffalo. In 1973, she began producing and hosting several radio programs on the arts, public affairs and women's issues at WBFO, Buffalo's public radio station. Only two years later, she moved to Philadelphia to join the staff of WHYY as producer and host of *Fresh Air*. In 1985, the show went national. "Of course, part of me was thrilled that we were taking the next step. The other part was afraid—not so much that I'd talk to that many people, but my heart was in my mouth. We had to hire new staff and build offices for them. Is it all going to work?"

Terry Gross and *Fresh Air* have earned many awards, including the prestigious Peabody Award, which lauded her "probing questions and unusual insights." In 2003,

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Gross received public radio's highest honor, the Edward R. Murrow Award. *Fresh Air* remains one of public radio's most popular programs.

Reflecting on her beginnings in radio 35 years ago, Gross says, "Everyone I interviewed seemed so wise, experienced and mature. I'd like to think I know more as a result of having lived longer," then laughingly adds, "but I can't guarantee that's true."

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Gross lives in Philadelphia with her husband, culture and music writer Francis Davis. Both jazz aficionados, Gross says with excitement, "My dream interviews of bygone musicians would include a series of legendary American songwriters—I'd have the Gershwins at the piano. Harold Arlen, Billy Strayhorn, Ellington, Irving Berlin and Harry Warren would perform songs as I talk to them. And of course, I'd interview Billie Holiday, Chet Baker and Sinatra."

"I'm very interested in the human voice," she says. "It's my favorite instrument—I love singers best of all. I studied voice a bit. Although I still can't really hold a tune, it helped me learn about voice placement and breathing, which I find fascinating."

Fans of the show are familiar with the breathy, attention-getting style in which she opens the dialogue, "I'm Terry Gross, and this is *Fresh Air*." She reveals, "I've always wanted the opening to be a curtain raiser—like the overture in theater or the opening monologue on *The Tonight Show*—and when I welcome guests, I want it to sound big, not just a mumble."

What does Gross do in her rare spare time? "I love to read, but there was a time while on vacation when I only read books by dead authors. That way, I wouldn't think, *What am I going to ask them?*"

On the Air



Hear *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross Monday through Friday, 2:00 to 3:00 p.m. on KJZZ. Nearly 4.5 million people tune in each week on more than 450 NPR stations nationwide and on World Radio Network in Europe.

Fan Favorites

Several *Fresh Air* compilations are available at npr.org, such as:

Fresh Air: Laughs, which includes excerpts from interviews with comedians like Henny Youngman, discussing his famous line, "Take my wife, please," and Chris Rock, on growing up small and black in a white community.

Fresh Air: The Best of Stage & Screen. This compilation includes interviews with luminaries such as Clint Eastwood, Sidney Poitier, Catherine Deneuve, Peter Fonda, Diane Keaton, Mel Brooks and Uta Hagen.

Fresh Air: Stars, which features film and television celebrities such as Robin Williams, Jodie Foster and George Clooney.

Writers Speak. Hear Stephen King, on being run over by one of his own characters, and David Sedaris reminiscing about his salad days.

The Terry Gross / Ira Glass Interviews. Marking her 25th anniversary with *Fresh Air*, WHYY producers invited Ira Glass to interview Terry Gross. In 1999, Gross interviewed Glass, and that's included, too.

Listeners also can purchase and download most shows from audible.com/freshair.

In Print

Read *All I Did Was Ask: Conversations With Writers, Actors, Musicians, and Artists*. Gross selected 39 interviews for this book, including Johnny Cash, Michael Caine and Isabella Rossellini.