Interview

Ira Glass

By Nathan Rabin

Time magazine called him the best radio host in America. David Mamet has written that he "reinvented radio." His Peabody Award-winning show has played a crucial role in the careers of contributors David Sedaris, Sarah Vowell, and David Rakoff. Not bad for a man who never even listened to public radio until he began working for it as a 19-year-old college student. As the host and driving creative force behind Public Radio International's *This American Life*, Ira Glass has become a beloved fixture in the lives of the 1.5 million listeners who tune in every week to hear stories built around a common theme, and run from hilarious to tragic.

Over the past two years, some of the program's more experimental shows have been derived from a single Sunday newspaper's classifieds, 24 consecutive hours spent in a diner, and a visit to an aircraft carrier. In a medium dominated by right-wing demagogues and corporate conglomerates, Glass and *This American Life* have carved out a niche for warm, empathetic storytelling and gentle humanism.

Born in Baltimore, Glass has worked in public radio nearly all his adult life, launching *This American Life* in 1995. The show took a while to find an audience, but steadily developed a cult following and now ranks among public radio's most popular and talked-about shows. In 1999, *This American Life* put out its first best-of compilation, *Lies, Sissies & Fiascoes*, and its double-disc follow-up, *Crimebusters + Crossed Wires*, arrives next week. *The Onion* A.V. *Club* recently spoke with Glass about his favorite TV shows, the nuts and bolts of *This American Life*, the trauma of pledge drives, and why all writing veers toward mediocrity.

Q: To borrow a question from a segment on *Crimebusters + Crossed Wires*, if you could have one superpower, what would it be?

It would be nice to have the power to do something twice as fast. There was a superhero who could do that, right? The Flash could do everything twice as fast. Except you never saw him think twice as fast or speak twice as fast. Could he do math faster than the other superheroes? Could he compute the tip for the bill twice as fast?

Q: If I'm not mistaken, he was a scientist. Half of the superheroes are scientists, because it calls for them to be around gamma radiation and stuff like that.

It's a dangerous job. The problem with having one superpower is the problem that came up in the story that was on the show—if you just have one, you're sort of stuck. Like if you could just fly but you don't have super-strength, or if you have the sort of super body capacity to withstand the frigid air around you, what are you going to do with that? You can't really fight crime. You're not invulnerable to bullets. It's not very helpful. Are you watching *Smallville*?

Q: No. Is it good?

No. I have to say, this season I haven't gotten on the chain, because last season it moved so slowly. Occasionally, you get a show like that as an adult, where you find that you do want to watch each week, even though you don't like it. I never realized it until this conversation, but for me, *Smallville* is that show. While I'm watching it, I'm constantly saying "Get to something interesting! Be good!" My girlfriend watches it because she thinks the whole point of the show is this homoerotic thing that the writers are doing with Lex and Clark. They're constantly staring into each other's eyes and giving each other looks. She's watching basically for the hot boy-on-boy action. Then she'll say, "Why are you watching?" and my actual answer is an answer that a 12-year-old would

give, which is "He's got superpowers! He can fly!" Even as I'm saying it, I realize it's the truth, but what's wrong with me?

Q: There was a profile of Quentin Tarantino in *The New Yorker* a few weeks back, where he was talking about a certain kind of film that's not good on any concrete level, but there's something compelling about it that draws you to it.

I have to say, though, why do you come back if it's not satisfying? *Smallville* is like a Domino's pizza. While you're eating, you're thinking, "This is good, and it reminds me of pizza, but there's not enough flavor in each bite." That's the feeling you have the entire time with *Smallville*—that it's just about to be good, but it never is.

Q: It might just be that people like a certain amount of predictability. They don't always like challenging art.

See, but I don't like that whole "art should challenge you" thing. Because I don't feel like art actually does challenge you. I was a semiotics major at Brown, and there's this idea that stories are better, books are better, and movies are better if they cocked you off your axis and you were completely disoriented and you'd really have to rethink everything. Nobody has that experience, actually. Also, it's not interesting. You have that experience the very first time you see a serious film. I feel like it's way more about . . . Some people are looking for a feeling that they can relate to, unless most of your feelings are really dark, then you're stuck. I was talking to [cartoonist] Chris Ware, who wrote maybe the most depressing book ever put out. But then, in a way, his work is like a comic strip where at the end of every page, it just gets worse. Instead of a punchline, there's the opposite of what a punchline would be. As the book goes on, it just gets further and further down, until you're wondering, "How far are we going to go with this?" It just gets worse and worse and sadder and sadder, and I was asking him, "Why not have a character who's happy?" He said the entire culture was organized for people who are happy. People who are miserable need reassurance that other people are miserable.

Q: Why do you think Chris Ware's work is so compelling, if it doesn't work the pleasure centers that entertainment conceivably should?

I think that is a pleasure center. I think that being able to relate to something is one of the main things a story can do for you. The grammar in that last sentence was really shameful, and it's going to look even worse typed out on a page. It's funny: So many stories come through the show, and we try stuff, and half of it just fails. We don't put it on the air. Thinking about what makes a story really compelling versus the ones that don't, often it's like certain plotlines have a good character. They're catchy as a plotline in the way a melody is catchy. I think he's got a real gift for that. There's something about the way he composes a story that's like a catchy melody, where you get on at the beginning and you feel yourself tugged ahead, and it's so easy to relate to, and there's the sheer fucking craft of it. It looks like nothing else, and it's so nice-looking. Everyone who reads it ends up being like, "Wow. Colors are nice." All those things are enjoyable. The meticulousness of it is one of the best things about it. The entire book is like the world's most perfectly organized desk.

Q: What else do you enjoy on television?

I was watching *Buffy* until it went off the air, and now, thanks to my girlfriend, I'm watching *Angel*. Do you watch *Angel*?

Q: No. All my friends love it, and I'm sure I'd love it, but I'm not sure I'm ready to make the emotional and time commitment necessary to be a new fan.

What you're describing was my feeling about going to Israel when I was a kid. I grew up in a Jewishy area of Baltimore County. Everyone I knew at one point went to Israel and got really, really into it. I never wanted to do it, because I just felt that I couldn't let

myself be taken over by that. I felt like I had such a tenuous grip on my personality that I didn't want to go and have that become my personality, which seemed to happen to everyone around me.

Q: Marc Maron wrote about that in a book called *The Jerusalem Syndrome*.

That's interesting, because the other meaning of the phrase "The Jerusalem Syndrome" is people who go to Israel and actually believe that they're Jesus. It's a whole big thing. In fact, during the first year of the show, we talked about doing a show about it. There's one or two doctors in this team of doctors in Jerusalem . . . When somebody emotionally impressionable comes to the Holy Land and suddenly snaps and thinks he's Jesus or any one of the prophets, there's a group of guys you're taken to and they talk you down. Isn't that great? They're convincing you you're crazy.

Q: Maybe they'd be happier if they went on believing they were Jesus.

Have you been watching *Joan Of Arcadia*? It's funny and kind of light, but with sort of a wistful yearning and something bigger. Somehow, every time I try to watch it, I'm thwarted by the hand of something bigger than myself.

Q: That's what TiVo is for.

I have a TiVo, and it didn't do it. I think it was an accident.

Q: Once this interview comes out, TiVo sales are going to plummet.

It wasn't the TiVo's fault. The TiVo acted flawlessly, as it always does. The TiVo is really an amazing machine. Like everyone who has one, I totally recommend it. Just as everyone who's married will tell you to get married, and everyone who has a baby tells you to have a baby, everyone who owns a TiVo will tell you to get a TiVo, and they'll say things like "Your life will be completely different." It's true. With a lot of shows, whatever my girlfriend is watching, that becomes my taste. I know everything that's happening on *Gilmore Girls*. I watched *America's Next Top Model* last year. That was fascinating, actually. There's something raw about it.

Q: Do you enjoy reality television?

I like it okay. It always moves a little slowly for me. Before I started watching reality television, I'd never believed that nice-looking people are stupider than the rest of us. But there's something about the way they cast the reality shows and who the people turn out to be where usually I feel like there's not one person on the show who's as interesting as anyone I know. I don't feel like I have that special of a group of friends. I'm talking about normal friends. I think anybody watching feels that, though.

Q: What's the culture like at the radio station?

[Long pause.] I'm trying to think of how to describe it. I feel like everything that I'm about to say is going to sound like I'm saying it in a mean way, but I don't mean it in a mean way. People are very nice. People are very well-meaning, and they come in all ages and races. They come in all levels of education and ability. But the thing that characterizes them all is that there's a kind of understated, "I might have been a person pledging, but I took an extra step, and now I work here" quality to the whole thing. Compared to that, I feel very dark and mean.

Q: Do you think a lot of the contributors to *This American Life* started out as listeners who are just extending or continuing their fandom?

Wouldn't it be weird if that was like the whole project of the show, that we'd slowly work our way through our 1.5 million listeners? Honestly, I think most people would much rather keep a polite distance. It would be such a weird thing if everyone wanted to be on the show who heard it. People would be so disappointed if they actually did a story, because we run them through the wringer with rewrites and everything else,

saying, "You know, this is a really great story, but it's got to relate to the theme we're doing, whether you like it or not, so you have to mention the theme." At which point, any decent writer says, "Can I just call you back in five minutes?" and hangs up the phone and seethes and then calls back with a calm voice. We're a very particular group of radio producers, so I think that would make the listeners feel weird. The weird thing about radio is that there's not really any locus for it. If you were to suddenly get a part in the new *Spider-Man* sequel, you'd get to go to the set and see all the costumes and meet the special-effects guys or something. There's nothing like that here. I would talk to you on the phone and walk you through your edits, and then book you into some dumpy studio in your hometown at the public-radio station, where possibly the ceiling would be leaking. We'd direct you over the phone as you read into a tape recorder, and you'd never actually meet us person-to-person, and where we are isn't really any better than the studio that you're going to. Whereas on the radio, it just sounds like one big happy party where everyone's in the same place and people are talking, and then music comes in, and everyone seems very smart because they've been edited heavily, me included. Me especially.

Q: Do you think it's good or bad that radio is so decentralized now?

I think it's a really good thing. It means we can get a lot more people on. Somehow, I've ended up painting this as an incredibly dark scenario, like I've got a problem with it, but I love how the radio station works. I don't think we're too hard on people or anything. One of the things we do is the show as an actual live broadcast. I read the introductions live into a microphone that's going out over a radio station, and we play the stories and hit the songs live, just because it makes it feel like we're doing more of a show.

Q: Do you enjoy doing the live broadcasts?

No, I hate it, actually. It's the worst part of the job, next to the pledge drive. In all the other parts of the job, there's room to soar. If you're writing something or you're editing something or talking with somebody, you're wondering, "What could this story be like? Who else should we get?" You laugh and you make up stuff and it's fun, whereas the actual performance of the show is like flying a very complicated aircraft or something. All you can do is fuck up. Every single act is just another opportunity for something to go wrong, but if everything goes right, it'll be invisible, and nobody will know what happened. The whole thing is an exercise in "Oh, please, don't blow this."

Q: But isn't there an excitement and an adrenaline rush in doing something like that?

There is an excitement, but it's the excitement of being hunted, not being the hunter.

Q: You mentioned pledge drives. You're famous for taking a very proactive stance toward fundraising. How do you feel about pledge drives in general?

Like all public-radio listeners, I hate the pledge drives. In fact, at one point, the public-radio system did audience surveys where—I'm not even sure I'm allowed to talk about this in public, but anyway—they did these surveys, and our listeners said that during the pledge drive, they felt like their local radio station had been taken over by these morons that they hated. Those were the qualities: They felt that the people on the air were stupider, and they hated them, and they felt they did not share the values of the programs that they listen to, where people seemed to be kind of smart and inquisitive and alive. So my feeling about the pledge drive is that I don't like things to be bad. I just didn't want to be boring on the radio. I couldn't face that, so we put a lot of work into trying not to make it boring, some years with more success than others. There have been two different times, once in Chicago and once in Boston, where we did a thing where if you called during our show, once every five minutes we'd choose another name from a hat, and I'd deliver a pizza to that person that day. At the end of an hour, I had to deliver 12 pizzas to people. What else have we done? We did the paint-by-numbers set,

but that doesn't sound too interesting. At one point, we sicced one of our contributors, Jonathan Goldstein . . . We told him that $20 million was the total amount of money the public-radio stations needed to raise in the fall pledge drive. We sent him out cold-calling people, trying to get them to donate the $20 million and end the whole thing right there.

Q: Did it work?

No. He was not able to raise any money.

Q: What about Bill Gates? He seems like a guy who could part with $20 million and not think much of it.

Wouldn't it have been weird if he was on our call list, but we just said, "Nah, let's not call him"?

Q: I can understand people hating the pledge drive, because nobody likes being asked for money, but where did the stupid part come from?

It's because the pledge-drive people aren't really planning out what they're going to say. They're just repeating the same things over and over and over again for hours on end, versus the regular people on public radio, who are edited very heavily. They're pretty smart people to start with, and they're edited by other smart people, so by the time Nina Totenberg makes it onto the air, you're going to get some interesting stuff. The pledge drive is the opposite. The pledge drive has everything going against it as broadcasting. It's repetitive. It's ad-libbed by people who can't ad-lib. It's about asking for money, which is something nobody wants to hear, even from their own relatives. From the moment you open your mouth, people know where you're going with it. As broadcasting, it's the biggest challenge, and it's the hardest thing to make interesting, because it can't be made interesting. One year, we did this thing where we'd just done a story on Medieval Times, the medieval jousting place they have around the country. We found that something like 300,000 to 350,000 people went to the Chicago Medieval Times over the course of a year. I went on the air and said, "Well, that actually turns out to be the annual audience of this radio station where I work." Medieval Times actually turned out to have a much bigger budget and a much bigger staff. I said that as someone who works in public radio, I work in a medium that is less popular than jousting, a sport that has been dead for 600 years. Then we turned to the people at Medieval Times and asked them to give us some tips, and they said we should get horses, because people love horses. So we staged a jousting match on horseback between the newscaster of *All Things Considered* and the newscaster of *Morning Edition*. At the end of it, we sort of said to the audience, "Is this what it will take? Is this what you want? Okay, then we've done that, too."

Q: Did anybody get hurt in the jousting match?

Fortunately, it was a jousting match done completely through the magic of sound effects. I have to say, I found it very satisfying to do, because you never get to use a horse whinnying in my normal line of work. You're like, "Cue the horse whinnying!" [Impersonates whinnying horse.] The heroic music comes in and [newscaster] Carl Kasell comes in and yells "Take that!"

Q: Were you always interested in radio?

No. No. Like most Americans, of course not. I started totally by accident. I was 19, and it was after my freshman year of college. I wanted a summer job, and I went to all the TV stations and advertising agencies and radio stations in Baltimore looking for some sort of summer job. Nobody had anything, but someone at a rock station in Baltimore knew someone at NPR in Washington, and just basically gave me his phone number and said, "They're kind of a new organization, so call him." So I called that guy and talked my way into an internship, but at the time, I had never heard NPR on the radio.

Q: Really?

It was 1978, and public radio had only been around for five years, so nobody had heard NPR on the radio. Then again, I came from the kind of family that wouldn't really listen to NPR. Honestly, my dad still complains to me about how boring public radio is.

Q: When did you realize that *This American Life* was resonating with people?

In the first year that we were on the air, the buzz on us wasn't that we were actually a good show. The buzz on us was that we made a lot of money in pledge drives. As soon as we realized that, we totally made it about that for the stations. Everyone knew that you could make a ton of money from us on the pledge drives. Stations would say, "We want to get those pledge drives you guys are doing," and we'd say, "Well, you've got to take the show." Half the first hundred stations pretty much signed up for us for the pledge drives, which I have no problem with. So it took a year or two before it seemed like it was happening. We made shows that we all liked a lot from the very beginning, but it took a year or two before we felt like we were really existing in the world that felt real.

Q: Do you generally come up with a theme for a show and then look for stories that fit into it, or do you usually have a story you love, so you find a theme to support it?

We'll have one story, usually, that we'll really love and want to get on the air, and then we'll look around at everything else that we're considering or have in the works, and see if we could possibly put the two together to fill out a show. Or we then just make up some kind of theme to fill out the show. Basically, we'll start with a story, and we'll go from that to saying, "We can put this in a show about the following subject." Then we'll go look for other stories. It takes us a while to put together a show. It takes three or four months to really get it together.

Q: Is it stressful, working on so many shows concurrently?

Yeah. I don't know. I've been doing it for so long that I have no idea who I would be if I weren't doing this. Maybe I'd have a lot more in me. Broadcasting is generally stressful. I remember a couple of years ago, my friend Danny Miller, the producer of *Fresh Air*, went to this management retreat, and he had to go to all his employees and have them critique him. The first thing you have to do at the retreat is stand up and read from the critiques of you that your employees make. One of his employees said he had a huge penchant for cutting things close to the deadline, and seemed to thrive on stress. When he said that, I said, "Oh my God, I'm the same way." It had never occurred to him that there would be anybody who didn't just accept the fact that it's going to be unbelievably stressful. He just thought that was the job, it's unbelievably stressful, you feel freaked out all the time, and that's what you do for a living. For years before this, I worked in daily news, first as a producer and then as a reporter. Every single day when I was a producer on *All Things Considered*, I would run something into the studio at the last minute. It's our job. [Sighs.]

Q: Can you conceive of a time when you'd hand off hosting duties on *This American Life* to someone else? Would the show go on without you?

I have no idea. I guess I feel like anyone could do it. All the little things that I think are nice touches that I'm putting in there . . . I don't know. Maybe I'm not so special.

Q: Is that something that motivates you, feeling like you need to prove yourself?

No, because I'm the boss. They can't fire me. I'm in no danger. I went out and raised the money. I know that I can do the job. For me, pushing myself is way more about "It's hard to make something that's interesting." It's really, really hard, and I'm sure we don't succeed with every story on every show. Basically, anything that anyone makes . . .

It's like a law of nature, a law of aerodynamics, that anything that's written or anything that's created wants to be mediocre. The natural state of all writing is mediocrity. It's all tending toward mediocrity in the same way that all atoms are sort of dissipating out toward the expanse of the universe. Everything wants to be mediocre, so what it takes to make anything more than mediocre is such a fucking act of will. Anyone who makes something for a living, or even not for a living, if they're really excited about it . . . You just have to exert so much will into something for it to be good. That feels exactly the same now as it did the first week of the show. That hasn't changed at all. That's the premise of what it takes to make something.