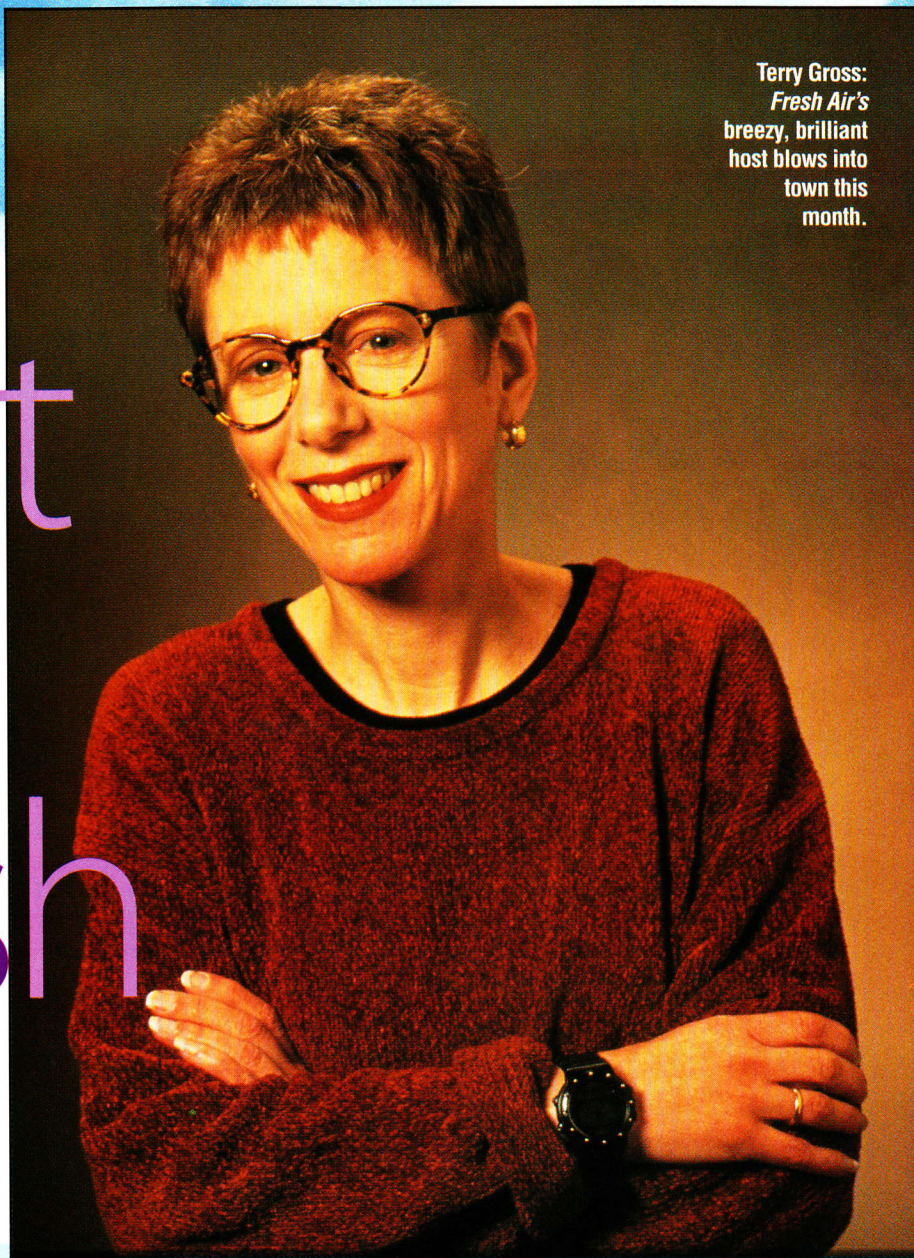


A Blast of Fresh Air

Jim Graham



Terry Gross:
Fresh Air's
breezy, brilliant
host blows into
town this
month.

*In a world of overheated talk shows,
Terry Gross comes on like a cool breeze.*

BY CLAUDIA PEARCE

More than 2.5 million people tune their radios in to *Fresh Air* every week. They count on host Terry Gross for thought-provoking interviews with prominent cultural, entertainment and political figures ranging from Jerry Seinfeld to Nancy Reagan, Stephen King to Audrey Hepburn, Maurice Sendak, Mickey Mantle, Sandra Bernhard, Ice-T, Jimmy Carter. The list goes on and on—she's been doing the show since 1975.

"What Terry does is the closest thing we have to conversation in culture anymore," *Nightline* host Ted Koppel recently told *The Christian Science Monitor*. "She listens to answers. That sounds like an obvious thing for an interviewer to do, but it's amazing how few do it." The host's listening skills as well as her warmth, her intense preparation and her lively curiosity are what make Gross, 47, one of the country's best interviewers—in any broadcast medium.

Gross usually preps for and conducts two one-hour interviews each weekday, which her editors then cut to fit into her one-hour show. That rigorous schedule comes at a cost—the Philadelphia-based radio host is rarely able to leave town. So it's a privilege to announce that Gross will be in San Diego for a show on Friday, November 13, at Copley Symphony Hall. In honor of the momentous occasion, we interviewed the 5'1" host in person at the public radio conference in San Francisco.

The night before, Gross had done a live interview with magician Ricky Jay. During the show, she was intensely focused on Jay, leaning forward in her chair and asking questions that showed her obvious interest. He basked in the attention—anyone would—and, not surprisingly, was quite candid with his answers.

So it was gratifying to find Gross just as engaged when she was sitting in the *interviewee's* seat the next day—leaning forward, intensely focused, answering the questions with intelligence, thoughtfulness and humor. In short, Terry Gross is as captivating when she's answering the questions as when she's asking them.

Claudia Pearce: Your *Fresh Air* guests always sound so interesting. Do you ever tape a show, and then find it wasn't as fascinating as you had hoped?

Terry Gross: Oh sure. Then we have two alternatives. We can edit the tape and keep it very short. Maybe [the guest] told two wonderful stories, or told two points that you wouldn't have thought of before, so we just edit it down to that. Or if it's very, very bad, if it's sleep-inducing bad, we can just not run it.

The problem is, if you don't run it, you feel terrible, because somebody's been generous enough to give you their time. But we figure, if they're not going to come across well, we're not doing them a favor. And we're certainly not doing any good for our listeners. So when we have to, we kill the tape.

C.P.: Have you made enemies that way?

T.G.: Yeah, a couple. That's one of the things I've had to learn, being a woman in broadcasting. You know, I grew up wanting to be liked and wanting to be nice. And suddenly I'm

in a position where I'm saying no to people all the time. No, we're not going to book you on the show. No, we're not going to run your interview. No, you can't shamelessly promote your book. And so, early on in my career, I felt *awful!* But you just have to deal with it.

In one instance, we were accused of censorship—it even made the newspapers. I think [the guest] must have called in all his chits from the reporters he knew and said, "Terry Gross is not running my tape!" So these reporters were calling me up, and the more I explained, the more I was misinterpreted. They thought I was *covering up*. It was a horrible experience, I didn't sleep for days. It was just a nightmare.

C.P.: How much time do you spend on the job?

T.G.: On weekdays, all day, all night with the exception of dinner. Well, I mean, I sleep, but I work when I wake up and I work after dinner until it's time for bed. Weekends I've made some progress. I used to work a lot Saturday and Sunday, but now I keep my work to a few hours.

C.P.: You recently got married to your long-time boyfriend, music critic Francis Davis, right?

T.G.: Yeah, it will be two years in September. We celebrated our first anniversary together as husband and wife within a month of celebrating our 20th anniversary as a couple.

C.P.: What made you finally decide to get married?

T.G.: Oh, legal things. At some point you realize you could have been together for 1,000 years, and you still won't get certain husband and wife privileges.

The truth is, Francis was sick briefly, and it was a frightening experience. We were lucky, because his doctor was also mine. So the doctor afforded us all of the privileges of husband and wife in the hospital. But had it not been for that, we knew we wouldn't have had the privileges. So we knew right then and there we had to get married.

Then it was, well, how are we going to do it? I'm Jewish and he's Catholic and neither one of us practice, so we didn't want to go the religious route.

So I called one of these we-rent-'em justice of the peace places. I didn't even know what a justice of the peace was, really. I was on the phone, asking them questions like, "How much do you pay them?" "What are their hours?" "How far will they travel?" "What do they do when they're not doing justice-of-the-peace-type stuff?"...

They hung up on me. So I've learned that

curiosity is a good thing when you're doing an interview, but sometimes people think you're nuts when you ask a lot of questions as a civilian.

We finally got one of the judges who wrote the decision on Internet censorship to marry us.

C.P.: You were briefly married a long time ago, weren't you?

T.G.: Oh yeah, very briefly. Was it three, four months... Or maybe almost a year? I should know that.

C.P.: How did that brief encounter with marriage come about?

T.G.: We'd been living together in college. And somehow, shortly after we got married, I had this feeling like, (she puts on an airhead voice), "Oh wait a minute, I know what I need to do, I need to live by myself." And I suppose it wasn't the right time to figure that out, but I figured it out. I needed to be alone, and I lived alone for... 23 years, about. Except Francis and I spent weekends together.

After we got married, we actually found a place to live together. And I'm really enjoying it.

C.P.: I hope you don't mind me asking this. David Sedaris wants to know too—he's a fervent admirer of yours.

T.G.: Oh, I'm a *huge* admirer of him. God!

C.P.: Anyway, I was asking him if he knew anything about these rumors that have been circulating around public radio stations that you're gay.

T.G.: Oh yeah, that's really funny.



C.P.: David was pretty sure you weren't, so I said, "Well, she does have kind of a butch haircut," and he said, "Oh, it's not butch, it's *pixieish!*" And then I told him, "She's just married her long-time boyfriend, but a Midwestern station manager told me that she had *announced* she was gay." And David didn't know what to make of that.

T.G.: (Laughing heartily.) Yeah, my husband could just be a cover.

I'm glad you asked about that, it's so funny. A lot of people think I'm a lesbian, but I'm not. I was even invited to submit my biography to the *Lesbian Who's Who of America*. In fact there was a story on me in one of the gay newspapers in Philadelphia, because I was going to be speaking at a benefit for something like a gay chamber of commerce. So I was on the front page. And one of Francis's colleagues brought the paper to him and said, "Francis, I didn't know your girlfriend was a lesbian."

And then, before we got married, we were at a cocktail reception for the recipients of this award Francis was getting. And the wife of one of his fellow recipients talked to the person who's now my mother-in-law. And she said, "Look over there, that's Terry Gross. Did you know? She's a lesbian." And my mother-in-law said, "She is not!"

So I'm just really amused by it.

You know what I think is part of it? Sometimes, when I interview a musician, people say, "Oh, are you a musician too? Because you seem so interested in music." Or if I interview writers, people say, "Oh, do you write? Because you seem so interested and you ask good questions." So perhaps people assume I'm gay because of my interviews with gay people. Plus the haircut.

C.P.: Are you working less on weekends because you're a married woman now?

T.G.: Well, I decided a while back that I was

just getting too old to live that way. I mean, you can't just be an interviewing machine, you have to savor a little bit of life. I'm always trying to think of ways to work a little less.

C.P.: So have you ever thought about...

T.G.: Being a lesbian? (laughs)

C.P.: No, about hosting your show every other day or finding some other method to take off some pressure?

T.G.: There was a period of a few months in the spring where Barbara Bogaev was hosting for me on Mondays. I was working on a National Endowment for the Humanities project. So it was good to have Mondays off. I mean, I was still working, but I wasn't preparing for interviews.

C.P.: You do most of your interviews long-distance rather than in person. Do you have a preference?

T.G.: You know, I like them both. The advan-

tage of being in person is obvious. You can see each other, pick up on body language, schmooze for a few minutes before the interview begins and get to know each other. But that's also a potential disadvantage. Because, when you're schmoozing beforehand, you don't want to talk about the main subject. You don't want the interviewee to say [on the air], "Well, as I just told you a few minutes ago," and then give a lesser version of the incident.

And then sometimes your schmoozing chemistry isn't that good. I'm not the best schmoozer. I'm a better interviewer—when I have a focus and I'm going for the real thing. So it's nice when you're doing it long-distance—your time starts and you start the interview. Also, it's pure radio. Because you don't have the body language, you have to communicate with your voice, which means the listeners are sharing it too.

C.P.: Do all these interesting people you've interviewed and prepped for so intensely become a blur?

T.G.: Oh, yes, I've jammed so much into my short-term memory banks that I've developed a proper-noun block. I have trouble retrieving anything that starts with a capital letter. So I'll know the movie but can't access the title. Or I'll know the person, the book, the record, but can't access the name. It's so irksome.

C.P.: What do you do when you're in the middle of an interview and that happens?

T.G.: It doesn't usually happen in interviews. I don't really know why.

C.P.: On the surface, a milliner and a housewife don't sound like the sort of people who would produce a national in-depth radio interviewer. How did your parents influence you?

T.G.: Well, they really believed in their kids.

"A couple of times I've bought my mother books and she says, 'Why are you spending money on books? There are libraries!'"

There was never any doubt that my brother and I were going to go to college, although my parents only graduated from high school, because they were Depression kids.

I grew up in an apartment building in a Jewish middle-class neighborhood. It was such a Jewish neighborhood that I thought the Catholic family across the street was part of an embattled minority.

My grandparents were all Jews from Eastern Europe. So education was important to them. My mother was always a reader, but she never believed in buying books—she has probably never bought a book in her life. She *really* believes in the library, though. She has always read, ever since I can remember, and it's always been a library book. Now I send her books that we get, because we get zillions. But a couple of times I've bought her books for presents and she says, "Why are you spending money on books? There are *libraries!*"

C.P.: During your college years at State University of New York, there was a lot of student unrest. Were you involved?

T.G.: There was a really strong anti-war movement, and a strong radical student movement. I got active in a sideline kind of way, because I wasn't a political leader and I couldn't run very fast. I mention that because there were a lot of violent confrontations in which the police would charge, and people would get beaten up, clubbed, tear gassed and so on. So you really needed to run well.

One of the things I loved about the campus was it was very culturally rich, all these poetry readings and concerts—jazz, rock, folk, blues, avant-garde, new music... It was also the early days of the revival of the women's movement.

C.P.: Sounds like the perfect background for *Fresh Air*.

T.G.: Oh yeah, it was like the prequel for *Fresh Air*. There was always good stuff to see and hear. Always.

C.P.: After you did a brief, disastrous stint teaching junior high English in the inner city, you got into radio. How did that happen?

T.G.: I was living in a house with a bunch of men and women. And all the women in the house gathered around the radio one night, because one of our roommates was going to be on *Women Power* [the feminist show on the campus radio station]. And it turned out that she came out that night. And she hadn't come out to us yet. So we were astonished.

When she returned, we had a long talk.

Later she told me that her lover was one of the producers of this show, and was about to move from the feminist show to the lesbian feminist show. So there was going to be an opening. She knew I wanted to get into the media, so she figured the remaining producers might let me come work for them.

I was too shy to approach organizations on my own, but once I was given a phone number and a reference, I did it.

C.P.: So you worked for the feminist show for a while...

T.G.: Yes, and every show I did started "Women and..." Women and Marriage, Women and Divorce, Women and Sports, Women and Blues, Women and Rock. So after about a year I thought, "I gotta broaden out."

C.P.: And you switched to a *three-hour* magazine show, and then to *Fresh Air*. You have kept a heavy schedule for a very long time!

T.G.: I'll say.

C.P.: Have you ever gone back and listened to your old shows?

T.G.: I do have tapes of the women's show. And when I moved, and I was going through all this stuff hidden in the corners of my apartment, I saw the tapes. I thought, "What do I do with these?" Because I hadn't listened to them since I did them. And I think if I listened to them, I would probably have to change professions or something. I was probably so horrible—I can't imagine why they let me on the air back then.

C.P.: The confidence of youth.

T.G.: Also, like most public radio stations then, there were lots of volunteers. There was a staff of around 110, and only four or five were paid. And when you're running a volunteer staff, you take pretty much anyone who's reliable. So it was a real bonanza for people like me, who never would have been allowed on the air if you had to come in good enough to get paid to do it.

C.P.: Did you end up listening to the tapes?

T.G.: Oh, no!

C.P.: You didn't get rid of them, did you?

T.G.: No, I saved them. But they're taking up

a lot of space. I have a feeling that if I put them on a machine, the tape is so old, and we used such cheap tape, and they're so full of splices, that they'll probably just fall apart. I mean, I'd give them to one of our engineers to dub, but then I'm afraid that he or she would listen, and I'd be mortified.

C.P.: Yeah, they could blackmail you.

T.G.: Yeah! So now they're taking up space in the closet.

C.P.: You're coming to San Diego soon. How do you feel about going on the road to do shows?

T.G.: You know, I lead a very insular life—not intellectually, but physically. I'm almost always at one of three places: My desk—which is my dining room table—my office in the station, or the recording studio. So it's good to get to actually see the different worlds people live in. It's interesting to meet people who listen to the show and see what they're like and what they think works and what doesn't.

C.P.: What will you do for your show here?

T.G.: I'll be sharing some behind-the-scenes adventures and misadventures and playing tapes of things that have gone particularly wrong—things I wouldn't put on the air. And also, giving the audience a chance to ask questions.

You can question the questioner on Friday, November 13, at 7:30 p.m., when Terry Gross appears at Copley Symphony Hall. Tickets are \$30 (\$75 includes post-event reception), and can be purchased by calling KPBS at (619) 594-6787.

Fresh Air airs weekdays at 1 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. on KPBS Radio (FM 89.5).