

Interview with NPR Fresh Air's Terry Gross

by Masha Rumer

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"Hello, I'm Terry Gross and this is Fresh Air" is a line familiar to millions of National Public Radio listeners. For over 20 years Terry Gross has been the host of Fresh Air, an award-winning program produced by WHYY and featuring interviews with the leading artistic, cultural, and political figures of the day. What makes Fresh Air unique is the array of interesting guests, Ms. Gross's expansive knowledge of the topics, and her uncanny ability to listen and ask questions that reveal, explain, and inspire. Her book, "All I Did Was Ask," was published in 2004 by Hyperion, and brings together a collection of some of her most memorable interviews with the likes of Johnny Cash, John Updike, Sonny Rollins, Chris Rock, Uta Hagen, and even Kiss frontman Gene Simmons. On February 25, I spoke with Ms. Gross from the studios of WHYY in Philadelphia.



Photo by Will Ryan

MR: In your book, "All I Did Was Ask," you mention that the media is often preoccupied with the dirty details of celebrities' personal lives. How do you avoid this on Fresh Air and what do you focus on? What's important to you in an interview?

TG: I figure the reason why we're interested in an actor, or writer, or a musician in the first place is their work. We like their work. It makes us laugh, it makes us feel something, we like the sensibility of this person. So what I try to do in interviews is to discover what shaped that sensibility that we love. If you're an artist, you're born with a gift. But that gift is shaped by what happens to you, it's shaped by how your parents treated you, the neighborhood you grew up in, what your school years were like, all that kind of stuff. So I want to ask about that kind of stuff. And that requires asking some personal questions, not intimate questions. Not questions about who you're sleeping with or a secret alcohol habit, or anything like that, but just biographical questions. And, unfortunately, people take these questions the wrong way, because they're so used to questions that are just leading to who they're having an affair with or if they have a secret drug problem. I'm not heading there, but they don't necessarily know that.

MR: What role does Fresh Air play in the American culture?

TG: What we see as our mission in arts and entertainment is to call people's attention to some of the most interesting performers, artists, and writers, some of the most interesting books, movies and music, and world of issues. Part of our mission is to just stand back and try to explain what's going on, to get some of the smartest and some of the most informed people in the country explain some of the more complicated issues in the news.

MR: Does Fresh Air have a target audience?

TG: I don't think of it that way. We tend to not think demographically. Age-wise, our staff is really diverse—twenties through fifties. So we have different generations represented within the staff, and we generally try to go with what would we believe is interesting and important, without thinking about the target audience. Though we do assume that most of the people who listen to public radio have a fairly high level of curiosity about the world around them and about the arts and entertainment. And they want to hear things with more depth. If you didn't assume that, you'd be really wasting your time.

MR: Back in January you came to the CUNY Graduate Center to speak at the New York Times Arts & Leisure Weekend, along with James Lipton of Inside the Actor's Studio. Mr. Lipton told a story about Jack Lemmon coming onto his show and confessing that he was an alcoholic. Everybody was shocked and there was a long pause in the studio, then Mr. Lipton changed the subject. You asked Lipton at this point: "But why didn't you ask about his alcoholism?" How does this incident capture your approach to interviewing?

TG: You see, I might have done the same thing as he did. What he meant was he thought Lemmon said all that he cared to say about it, and that it was time to move on. And I had something similar happen to me, where something surprises you, but you get the feeling that this wouldn't be the right moment to go further. So I wasn't suggesting that he should have pushed harder or should have asked more. I just wanted to know why he decided not to.

MR: How do you keep bias from interfering during your interviews?

TG: The show isn't about my views and what I think, it's about getting people to express what they think.

MR: You speak with a variety of interesting people: musicians, writers, actors, about their craft. Do you ever find yourself fantasizing, what it would be like to have their job, to work in their field?

TG: Only in the sense that I try to imagine myself in their shoes as an exercise to prepare for the interview, to get a feeling what it's like to do their work, to know what to ask them. But I don't fool myself into thinking that talking to actors, writers, and musicians

makes me an actor, writer, or a musician. So it's not like I'm there thinking or wishing I was in their shoes or doing their work.

MR: During your famous interview with Bill O'Reilly, you were discussing objectivity in certain news and talk show programs, whether they seek to divide the population or to find answers. What is your opinion?

TG: In general, I think that talk shows have become more partisan than ever. The host tends to have the point of view as well as the guest. Sometimes that sheds light on the information, and sometimes it just adds to the confusion. I think that a lot of shows are about generating controversy, as opposed to truly trying to present the most fair and accurate information.