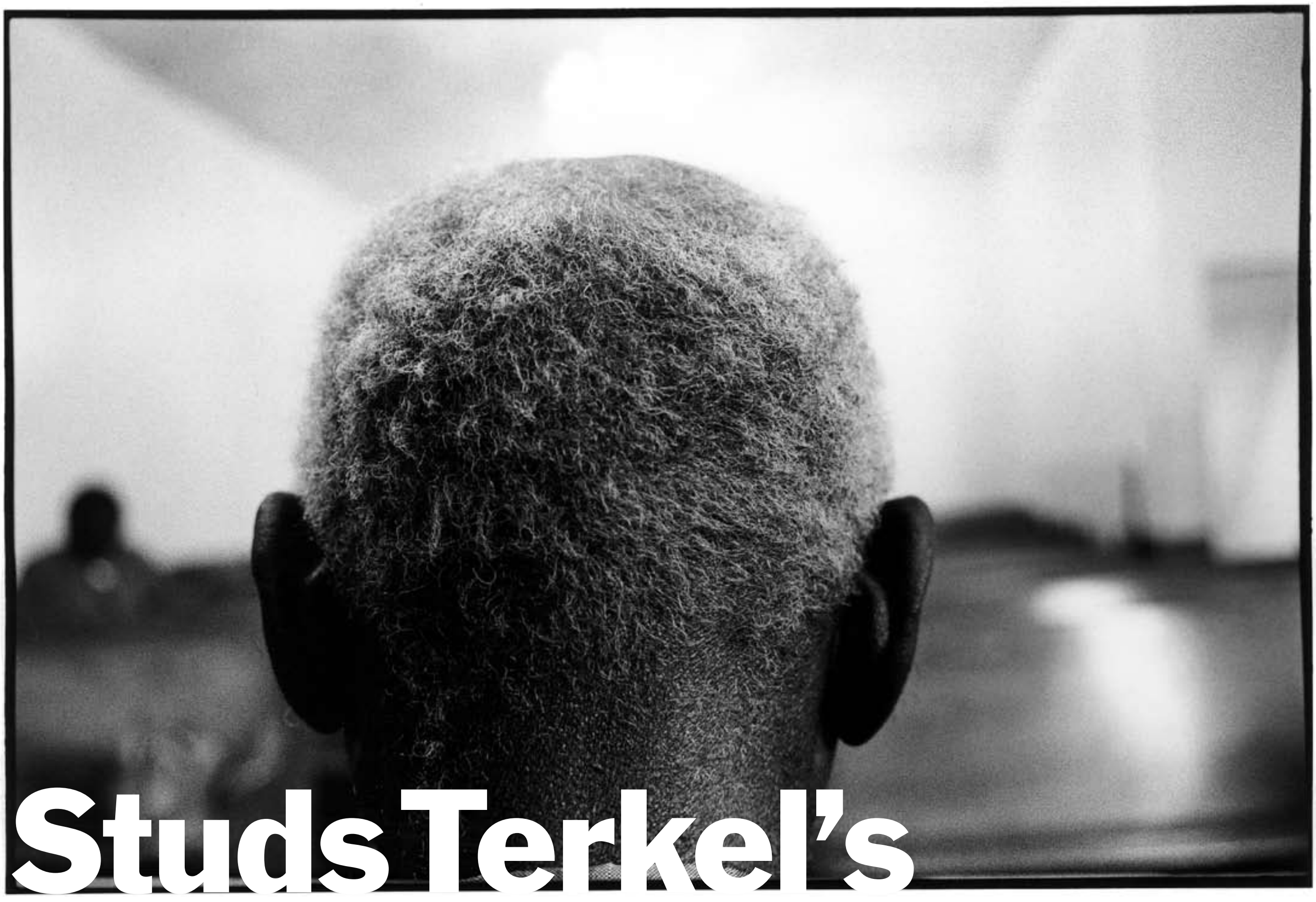
Hope Dies Last



MAUREEN BEITLER

Studs Terkel's Enduring Conversation With America

MICHAEL SHAPIRO

In the late seventies, as a teenager growing up in a sheltered suburb of San Francisco, I stumbled upon a paperback that introduced me to people I'd rarely read about. The book's title, Working *(New Press), was inscribed diagonally in bold black letters across a scarlet cover, and inside were interviews with a hundred hardworking people, from a footsore waitress to a gas-meter reader dodging canines. The compassionate interviewer, Louis "Studs" Terkel, somehow got thick-skinned and bristly workers to reveal their inner feelings about their jobs.*

Terkel was in his sixties and seemed impossibly old to me then, a relic from the bygone age of Wobblies, the Great Depression, and union battles. Now ninety-four, Studs (his nickname comes from his resemblance to the fictional character Studs Lonigan, from the novels of James T. Farrell) is still working and living in Chicago, near the shore of Lake Michigan. In 2005 he published And They All Sang: Adventures of an Eclectic Disc Jockey *(New Press), a collection of archival interviews conducted during his forty-five years as a Chicago disc jockey. Just released in paperback, it includes conversations with gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, classical guitarist Andrés Segovia, jazz legend Louis Armstrong, and a young Bob Dylan.*

On his radio show, Terkel mixed jazz, opera, folk, gospel, and blues. He'd become enamored of the blues during the Depression, when he first heard Big Bill Broonzy and other artists who brought the music of the deep South to the cities. Terkel remains partial to Big Bill's definition of the blues: "Ain't nothing but a good man feeling bad."

In the 1960s, calling himself "a guerrilla journalist with a tape recorder," Terkel began interviewing ordinary people and compiling their stories into books. His first, Division Street: America *(New Press), published in 1967, was a groundbreaking look at the lives of Chicagoans, rich and poor, black and white. He followed it with another book in the same format,* Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression *(Norton). In 1984 he won the Pulitzer Prize for* The Good War *(New Press), in which he talked to those who'd participated in World War II.*

Terkel often edits out his questions, letting the interviewee do the talking, but his presence can always be felt. Compassionate and curious, he never judges his subjects, which is one reason why people open up to him so readily. He's proud of helping readers understand the lives of people like waitress Dolores Dante, whom he interviewed for Working. *"I'm never going to speak to a waitress again the way I did before," a reader once told Terkel.*

In his 2001 book about death and dying, Will the Circle Be Unbroken? *(Ballantine Books), he writes of his own experience with death: During the research for that book, Terkel's wife and companion of sixty years, Ida, died at the age of eighty-seven. Not long afterward, a friend, trying to help Studs get over his grief, told him he should be happy, because he'd had so many good years with her. "Bullshit" was Studs's response. He is grateful for his time with Ida, he writes, but he doesn't believe grief should have a timetable.*

Circle *was published on the eve of Terkel's ninetieth birthday, and many believed it would be his final book, a fitting coda to a career that had spanned more than half a century. But in 2003 the irrepressible oral historian followed it with* Hope Dies Last *(New Press), in which he urges readers to "keep the faith in difficult times." Mixed in among the interviews with ordinary Americans are a few conversations with well-known figures, including folk singers Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie, and politicians Tom Hayden and Dennis Kucinich. Whether Terkel is interviewing laborers who weathered the Depression or left-wing activists who are fighting the Bush administration, the central theme of his work is hope. To listen to some of his interviews online, visit www.studsterkel.org.*

I met Terkel on a brisk and sunny November afternoon at his home on Chicago's North Side. He'd recently spent seven weeks in the hospital after a fall that had broken his neck but possibly saved his life: while he'd been hospitalized, doctors had detected a heart condition that was remedied with surgery. He appeared frail due to his recent medical troubles, but his voice remained fierce, and he spoke in staccato bursts about his political and artistic passions. We talked for two and a half hours, at the end of which he offered me "a touch of Scotch." I offered him a gourmet chocolate bar that I'd brought with me from San Francisco. The chocolate was so tightly wrapped we had trouble opening it. "I can't open half the things today," he groused. Sensing another affront to the common man, he added, "It's deliberate!"

Shapiro: [Setting up the recording equipment.] Have you ever lost an interview because of a technical problem?

Terkel: Sure. I'm known for my ineptitude. That's the irony of the whole thing: they call me the "master of the tape recorder," but I haven't the faintest idea what I'm doing. I'm just learning the electric typewriter. And I don't know what a computer is. You've got neocons and neoliberals: I'm a neo-Neanderthal. But my ingratitude to technology is the real irony, because were it not for technology, I wouldn't be here talking to you right now. Eight weeks ago, at the age of ninety-three, I was in the hospital with a broken neck. While I'm there, my personal doctor and my cardiologist say, "Your whole valve is shot, and you've got about three months to live." I'm ninety-three, so I say, "What the hell. Ninety-three. Let the damned thing ride." But they say the odds are a little better than they were nine years ago, when I had a quintuple bypass. So I say, "OK, I'll do it," because I'm curious. My ego wants to know: what's the world going to be like? It may be in terrible shape, but I want to be around . . . sort of.

So my ego got the best of me. And the next thing I know I wake up, and they're pulling me out on a gurney, and the surgeon says, "It's all over." I say, "You mean I'm dead?" He says, "No, no, you've got about four more years." Four more years. I'm ninety-three — I don't need four more years! It sounds so Nixonian: *four more years.* Two! I'll settle for two.

The other irony is, the same race — human, that is — that made those machines that extend life also did Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and God knows what else. And the great mind, the great heart of the twentieth century, Albert Einstein, is responsible for this; that's the greatest irony of all. He found that $E = mc^2$.

STUDS TERKEL

Niels Bohr in Denmark took it up, and then Enrico Fermi split the atom, and then it went to J. Robert Oppenheimer in Los Alamos, and then to Paul Tibbetts flying that plane bearing his mother's name: the *Enola Gay.* And then Sunday morning, August 6, 1945, a nice, sweet morning in Hiroshima, *bang!* And three days later, just to prove they were right, *bang!* Nagasaki. Well, Einstein tore his hair. He'd never dreamed the bomb would be dropped on someplace inhabited. His secretary thought he said, "Oh way." She was not Jewish. "Oy vey" — that's what he was saying.

If you drive across the country — I never drove a car in my life, by the way — and pass through, say, Missouri, you see these little hillocks, these little mounds, and they're missile silos by the hundreds. And you know what's in each one of them: enough to knock off Nagasaki and Hiroshima put together.

James Cameron — not the director but the journalist — chose the word *refugee* as the defining word of the last half of the twentieth century. Now, we had that word during the Depression. [Folk singer] Woody Guthrie sang of "Dust Bowl refugees." But war to us was always elsewhere. We Americans were an exception. In World War II, the Axis and the Allied countries — every one of them was either bombed or occupied. But not the U.S. And then come these loonies in 2001. All fundamentalists are loonies, by the way, whether they be Islamic, Christian, or Judaic; if they have that belief that "my God is it, and no other," then they're loonies.

That day, September 11, we saw refugees in Brooks Brothers suits, in Gucci shoes, in fashionable Levi's. The buildings were all empty. The skies were emptied, and the people went back and forth like the refugees in Bangladesh. My son and I were going to a law firm in Chicago. There were just four of us on the whole floor of the skyscraper where the lawyer had his office; every door of every office was open, and nobody was there.

We still haven't gotten over that. We can't believe that anyone would dare do this. We do it elsewhere — but that's another thing entirely, because we're special people.

Shapiro: You've just come out with a new book called *And They All Sang.*

Terkel: That was a phrase of [conductor] Leonard Bernstein's. The subtitle tells what it's about: *Adventures of an Eclectic Disc Jockey* — "eclectic," of course, being the operative word. How it began: I went to the University of Chicago Law School, and it wasn't for me. I went there dreaming of Clarence Darrow, and I woke up to Antonin Scalia. He [Scalia] taught there, by the way — not when I was there, of course: I graduated in 1934. Anyway, law school wasn't for me. Corporations and such. So I was a rotten student. My parents ran a men's hotel near the North Side on Wells and Grand, and I rode the streetcar to law school. There was a stopover where I changed streetcars in Bronzeville, which was a black community in the thirties. It was, of course, segregated, but, oh, there was a life there then that isn't there now. I heard records in shops. They were called "race records," on labels such as Okeh, Vocalion, Bluebird. And there I heard the blues singers: Big Bill Broonzy (my favorite), Memphis Slim, Memphis Minnie, and Tampa Red. So going to the University of Chicago Law School helped me get acquainted with the blues.

And then I graduated and got a job with the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. The WPA did what free enterprise couldn't do. The free market fell on its ass in the big stock-market crash of October 1929. People didn't know what had hit them. The wise men of Wall Street were going crazy. The WPA provided jobs for millions who were unemployed. And now they're talking about privatizing everything! Privatizing is what killed us then. It was all privatized. We were saved by the government. There is no memory of this. We are suffering from a national Alzheimer's disease. And this didn't begin with Bush. Bush is the cartoon spirit; he's a caricature. It began with Ronald Reagan.

Through that job with the WPA I met this guy who had a workers' theater company called the Chicago Repertory Group. So I became an actor. We did *Waiting for Lefty.* Then the director told me there was work in radio soap operas. They were all the same script, and all had the same crooks: the bright one, the middle one, and the dumb one. I was always the dumb one. It was steady work.

Some producer liked my style, and I became a commentator on the air. Then I was in the war, but only for nine months stateside: I had a perforated eardrum. I wanted to join the Red Cross, but they wouldn't let me in. I found out later on that the FBI had a dossier on me because of this repertory-group stuff, and because I was making speeches for the Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee. This was just after the Spanish Civil War. I was outspoken at rallies, especially for civil rights. Remember that [FBI director] J. Edgar Hoover was as close to a thug as you could get.

I applied for a job at the FBI, a civil-service job: fingerprint classifier. I almost worked for the FBI. When the FBI asked for references, one of my law professors at the University of Chicago said, "Sloppy, slovenly, low-class Jew." So Hoover's response was "Take Louis Terkel off the payroll. He's not our type of boy." I like that. There could be a little chapter in my memoir called "I Was Almost an FBI Man."

For the rest of the war I got a civil-service job with the Treasury Department counting "baby bonds." In 1932 World War I vets had gone to Washington because they hadn't gotten their bonuses, and they were tear-gassed by General Douglas MacArthur. The commissioner of police had said that under no circumstances would he drive out his old war buddies, but MacArthur did it. MacArthur's two aides in doing it were [future president] Dwight D. Eisenhower and [future general] George S. Patton; isn't that interesting? So then Franklin D. Roosevelt got in the White House, and the veterans got their bonuses, of course. And the New Deal Congress decided they deserved more than that, so they were getting "baby bonuses." That's the job I got: to count baby bonuses. I went nuts doing

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it, so I came back to Chicago.

[Jazz singer] Billie Holiday sang at my farewell party — she was a friend of a friend of someone who was in the repertory group. And I remember she was beautiful, with this gardenia in her hair, and she asked me [puts on Holiday's voice], "What would you like to hear, baby?" Well, "Strange Fruit," of course, but also "Fine and Mellow." That was her theme. And she sang it. They had that in my FBI dossier.

Then I got a job as a disc jockey. I was playing records, and you could do anything you wanted then. I played [Italian tenor] Enrico Caruso. I'd loved Caruso as a kid. My father would buy one-sided Caruso records for two bucks a head — that's like fifty bucks today. John Ciardi, the Italian American poet, said Caruso was about the potential in the human race. A singer could hit a certain note — that's as far as you could go — but Caruso would go beyond that. It told us that human beings have possibilities, that all of us are better than we may be behaving at the moment.

Classical music is considered music for the upper classes. There is a guy in a wonderful oral history called *Akenfield*, by Ronald Blythe. And this guy is a working man — a very literate working man, but the classical symphonies are not for him. They're a little beyond him. Then one day he's caught in a torrential rain, so he rushes into this building, and it's the lobby of a symphony hall. He hears music from inside and opens the door slightly, and it's Mozart, and he's transformed. That's what Mozart had in mind; that's what Brahms had in mind; that's certainly what Bach had in mind. They wrote for the great many, not for the few.

So I'd put on a Caruso aria — say, "Ombra mai fu" from Handel's *Xerxes*. Then came Louis Armstrong's "West End Blues," my favorite jazz record. I followed that with Woody Guthrie doing "Tom Joad," a Dust Bowl ballad. Then a Brazilian soprano, and maybe a country song.

Shapiro: You could never do that today on a mainstream radio station. Every station has its own format, whether it's rock, country . . .

Terkel: That's right. So I played everything. I'm known as an oral historian, but I still consider myself a disc jockey. I'd play all these records: Andrés Segovia, followed by Ravi Shankar, then Dizzy Gillespie. And I'd interview musicians. Andrés Segovia told me this story: There was an audience of five thousand in Ann Arbor to hear him, one old man — I call him "old"; I'm ninety-three, and he was eighty at the time — with a guitar, a classical guitar, delicate, and they leaned over listening as he played a Bach transcription. After the performance, one of his admirers came up to him and said, "It was wonderful, but you play so softly. I had to lean forward and listen so hard." "You know what I did next time?" Segovia said to me. "I played even more softly, so that he listened even more."

I loved music as a kid. I never played an instrument, and I can't carry a tune, but I'd hear that music, the music played by black bands — the patrons were all white, but the bands were black. And then folk music came about during the Great Depression. When I was an actor, I ran into this group called the Almanac Singers. They sang at labor rallies and traveled in a jalopy around the country. And that group had Woody Guthrie in it.

One day they came to Chicago Repertory. We were doing a play about a strike or something. I'd just gotten married, and my wife and I had a two-and-a-half-room place with a pull-down Murphy bed. I sent these guys back to my place about twelve o'clock at night to sleep. I write a note to my wife to send along with them. It says, "These are good guys. Put them up for the night." Well, she's asleep, and the bell rings about 12:30 at night, and she goes to the door. There are four guys standing there: A little, freckle-faced guy; that's Woody. And a kid with a big, bobbing Adam's apple; that was Pete Seeger. And a huge man from Arkansas named Lee Hayes. And one other. They were there for two weeks, sleeping on the floor together. And one night I woke up, and Woody was asleep, and in the wastebasket were about twenty crumpled pages, single-spaced, and, so help me, it was fantastic writing. And I threw it away, wouldn't you know.

Shapiro: Around 1949 or '50 you had your own TV show, but then you lost it.

Terkel: That's right. *Studs' Place,* it was called. It was all improvised. There was a plot, usually about ordinary people's lives, but the dialogue was created by the cast. I was on the air on NBC in Chicago — the whole country wasn't covered yet. And a guy came from New York, from NBC, and said, "We're in big trouble. Your name is on all these petitions." It was some civil-rights petition, and a couple more for the Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee. And he said, "Don't you know that the commies are behind this thing?" And that's when I got cute and said, "Suppose the communists come out against cancer. Do we have to come out *for* cancer?" And he said, "Not funny. All you have to do is say you didn't mean it. It was a mistake. You were taken in by the commies, and you apologize." I said, "But I am an Anti-Fascist Committee guy. I am for civil rights. I'm not going to take back that stuff." And they fired me.

So I wasn't working for a while, but I was fairly well-known in town, and women's clubs would hire me, pay me a hundred bucks a shot to talk about jazz and folk music and play some records. And at every luncheon they were threatened by this Legionnaire in town, a self-proclaimed lieutenant of Joe Mc-

Carthy [the anticommunist Republican senator from Wisconsin]. And he would call these women's clubs up and warn them that I was a Red. Not one paid attention to him.

There was one elderly woman, very elegant, from an old-money family. She was so furious at this guy that she said, "Mr. Terkel, we are doubling your fee to two hundred dollars as a result." So I had no other choice but to write to this guy. I sent him a ten-dollar check and said, "You're my agent, it turns out. You got me an extra hundred dollars, so I'm giving you a 10 percent commission. Thanks very much. Keep it up." I never heard back from him.

And then I got a job at WFMT, this remarkable Chicago radio station. Meantime, I knew Mahalia Jackson because I'd heard her record "Move On Up a Little Higher." I'd never heard a voice like that before, so I went to the Olivet Baptist Church, where she was singing — all the churches claimed her, you know — and she and I got to be friends. I started playing her records on my radio show.

I've been credited with being the one who made Mahalia world renowned. What a sad commentary this is. Much of African America knew Mahalia's stuff — she'd pack a ballpark in a black neighborhood — but no white guy knew her music. I was a white disc jockey, so I did play a role, no doubt. But people are giving me credit when they shouldn't be.

Later, when CBS hired her for a network radio show, she said she would do it under one condition: that Studs Terkel is the host. So they trembled, but they did it. We were rehearsing when another guy from New York came in a half-hour before the show. He was very friendly and said, "Mr. Terkel, this is nothing, just a form for you to sign."

I asked, "Does everybody get this?"

"No, no, this is just for you."

"What is it?"

He didn't say, so I read, "I am not and never have been . . ."

I said, "I'm sorry. I'm not going to do it." And his voice was rising: "But you must." I said, "But I mustn't." Mahalia heard this ruckus and said, "Is that what I think it is?" She knew about me. She said, "Studs, you've got such a big mouth, you should've been a preacher. What are you going to do? Are you going to sign it?"

"Of course not."

"OK, then let's rehearse."

And the New York guy said, "Oh, Miss Jackson, Mr. Terkel." He got very polite then.

Mahalia said, "He just said no — let's rehearse." The guy persisted. Finally she said, "I'm getting a little tired of this. You tell Mr. Big, or whoever it is, if they fire Studs Terkel, they can find another Mahalia Jackson." You know what happened? Nothing. The show ran for twenty-six weeks, and nothing. What's the moral? To say no! Say no to authorities you think are full of crap. Who the hell are they?

Shapiro: Let's talk about your literary career, starting with *Division Street: America* in 1967.

Terkel: Well, way back in 1957 I did a book for children, *Giants of Jazz* (New Press). But the first of the interview books was *Division Street: America*.

I think of the loneliness, the greed, the overwhelming arrogance of this administration and its stupidity, not knowing when to quit. They've won the game. Ninety-five percent of the pie is theirs; but they want a hundred. And that's where they flopped it up: they didn't know when to quit.

Shapiro: You went out into the streets and interviewed the common people: not the politicians, not the authors, not the celebrities.

Terkel: That, of course, was the point. You know how that happened? My publisher, André Schiffrin, called me up; he had just finished a book, *Report from a Chinese Village*, by Jan Myrdal, describing the changes in a small village in China as a result of the Maoist revolution. So André said, "How about you do an American village during its own revolution: the civil-rights movement?" He meant, of course, Chicago. I said, "Are you out of your mind?" But I did it, and it turned out just right. It fell naturally into place.

And then about six months later Schiffrin called and said, "How about a book about the Great Depression? The young know nothing about this." I said, "Are you out of your mind?" But I did the Depression book. And that's how it started.

Shapiro: When you started work on *Division Street*, you were looking for a single street where you could find white and black, rich and poor. Did that street exist?

Terkel: There is a Division Street in Chicago, but I meant the title metaphorically. We're on Division Street in this country; we're split.

Shapiro: Are we more divided now than forty years ago?

Terkel: The answer is a paradox, a contradiction. We have more integration to some extent: the new black middle class. But as far as the greater black population, it's probably worse than ever. The anti-affirmative-action people say to minorities, "You've had your chance." Minorities can go into restaurants that they couldn't go into before, but they haven't got the dough to buy a meal. And we know what's happening in New Orleans, obviously.

But are we more divided? That's an interesting question. Yes and no. I think of the loneliness, the greed, the overwhelming arrogance of this administration and its stupidity, not knowing when to quit. They've won the game. Ninety-five percent

JEFFREY HERSCH

of the pie is theirs; but they want a hundred. And that's where they flopped it up: they didn't know when to quit.

You wonder: How stupid are the American people? Are my books a hoax? Because the books say there's a basic decency in the American people, and a basic honesty, and a basic intelligence. Am I wrong? No, because the cards have been stacked against the people from the beginning.

We talk about "assaults" these days. We talk about the "9/11 assault." The most egregious assault right now is on our intelligence. Public TV is a big offender — look who's been on there the longest: [conservative commentator] Bill Buckley. And who else has been on? John McLaughlin and Robert Novak and Mort Kondracke [all conservatives].

Shapiro: And meanwhile the liberal Bill Moyers —

Terkel: — was forced out of public TV. They say he's too biased. And so you have to think that the American people can be pretty stupid. Or is it that we're suffering from a national Alzheimer's disease? We cannot remember yesterday, let alone what happened fifty years ago. In the thirties we saw the Great Depression bucked by the New Deal; of course the war played a role, but it was bucked mostly by the New Deal, by the government stepping in benignly. And now we have the catastrophe in New Orleans. Nothing was prepared, and there was no dough because it's all going to Iraq and the war. The country has been betrayed by politicians ever since Reagan, and certainly with Bill Clinton and the "centrifying" of the Democrats — meaning castrating them. And the castrators are Bill Clinton and [Democratic senators] Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden. They've got to go. Hope has to come from some candidate who says, "I am for withdrawal from Iraq now. We've blown it, and let's see if we can recover peace and sanity in the world."

Getting back to the national Alzheimer's disease: Social Security — privatize it, and half my friends would be buried in potter's field. If it wasn't for Social Security, my God, I'd be in trouble, quite frankly. My books do OK, but healthcare costs . . . Think about this. We are the only industrialized nation in the world that does not have universal healthcare. We are also the only industrialized nation in the world that still has the death penalty. In these two cases, we seem to favor death more than life.

Shapiro: Especially those who say they are "pro-life."

Terkel: As though we are anti-life. Are they pro-life for the boy who's in Iraq? Are they pro his life, or do they want to keep on having these kids die?

The big shock for me was Ronald Reagan. It really began with him. What is the first big thing he did after being elected? In 1981 he broke the air-traffic controllers' strike and blacklisted eleven thousand seasoned air-traffic controllers. That union was the most conservative union in the country. They backed Ronald Reagan 80 percent in the election. Now, what was the issue that caused the strike? They were striking for more psychiatric care, more counseling, because the work would wear them down. They also wanted more R & R. In the hands of one air-traffic controller rest the lives of thousands of passengers each day. In short, they were striking for more passenger safety. So they were striking on behalf of us. And guess what the poll result was: a majority of Americans applauded Reagan for showing up those guys.

So that tells me that we're a dumb bunch of schmucks here, really, voting against ourselves. Or is there something else? If you're fed banality and you're fed trivia and you're fed all the schlock — the sex and the crime and the overdose of food and everything else — something is bound to happen. It isn't just people being dumb. The cards are stacked; the dice are loaded.

And yet, despite that, you always have this prescient minority that becomes the majority. The kids who protested the Vietnam War at the beginning had the crap beaten out of them by the jocks. Then the jocks finally discovered, "Hey, they were doing it for me."

I'll tell you a story about [peace activist] Dave Dellinger. Remember the Chicago Eight trial, with Abbie Hoffman and Tom Hayden?

Shapiro: You mean the Chicago Seven?

Terkel: Chicago *Eight* — the eighth guy was [African American activist] Bobby Seale. The oldest one, the strongest one was Dave Dellinger. He was a conscientious objector from World War II, and Dave Dellinger's father was an ultraconservative lawyer in Worcester, Massachusetts. Dave's father was

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just destroyed by Dave's antiwar activities in the sixties. But Dave noticed one thing about his father: The family went out to dinner to celebrate a birthday, and the waitress was nervous and spilled soup on Dave's mother's dress. Dave's father said, "Oh, no, it's not your fault; it's my fault." He wasn't within a hundred feet of her, but he took the blame. He never abused the people who were serving him. And so at the very end, as Dave's father was dying, he said, "You know, Dave, about the Vietnam War: I think you were right; you were right all along that the decent thing was to oppose it." And Dave said, "Dad, I learned about decency from you."

And that's the point I'm making in this book on music. Good music, no matter what it is — jazz and spirituals and blues as well as classical — if people hear it, they get it. But if, day after day after day, you hear schlock, it becomes your language.

Shapiro: You've called the Bush administration "a burlesque show, but not a funny one."

Terkel: Well, it is. The burlesque show began with Ronnie Reagan. Not just that he was a class-z actor, but there wasn't anybody there. His stuff was written out for him on cards. They say, "Oh, he was brilliant." What was brilliant about him? He read the gags that were given to him. You know he was voted — on the Discovery Channel, by two and a half million people — as the greatest leader we've ever had, over Abraham Lincoln! FDR was tenth. Tenth! He was below Oprah Winfrey. There you have it. That tells you right there we can condition people to believe anything.

Shapiro: The thing that strikes me about your work is that you get your subjects to share so much of their intimate life, their history, their feelings, their passions. How do you get people to be so forthcoming?

Terkel: I don't know. There's nothing mysterious about it.

I spoke earlier of my ineptitude with mechanical things: I can't drive a car. I can't ride a bike. And I press the wrong buttons sometimes. I lost an interview with [choreographer] Martha Graham. I lost [English actor] Michael Redgrave. And I almost lost [philosopher] Bertrand Russell during the Cuban Missile Crisis in '63. If I had lost that one, I would have put my head in the oven.

So I'll be sitting there, and this person I'm interviewing says, "Hey, the tape recorder's not working." At that moment that person feels my equal, certainly; my superior, probably. But most important, that person feels needed. To feel needed is what every person wants, and they feel I need them because I'm inept. And I don't do this as a gag. You know who Mike Royko was?

Shapiro: Sure, the Chicago columnist.

Terkel: Mike accused me of deliberately doing that. He said, "You son of a bitch, you deliberately . . ." But later on he discovered that I really am inept. He said, "You know what? It's true. You are hopeless."

The other thing I do is keep it simple: "What do you do? What is your day like?" Here's a good example: a gas-meter reader in *Working.* I ask, "What is the day of a gas-meter reader like?" He says, "Well, it's dogs and women." And I say, "Dogs and women?" And then I realize the first is the reality, the second the fantasy. You've got to know that. "Well, let's talk about the dogs first."

"I don't care for a pit bull," he says. "I've got my flashlight ready. I don't mind a wolfhound. It's those little poodles, those Pekingese pups, I hate them. They gnaw at my legs."

"Now, what about the women?"

"Oh, nothing's happened. It's just sometimes it's summertime, and it's hot, and a woman is kind of good-looking, and she's lying there in the backyard on her stomach on the blanket, and she's in a bikini. She's getting the sun on her back, and she's got the bra unfastened. So what I do is I creep up very slowly, very softly, and when I'm right near her, I holler: 'Gas man!' And she turns around. You know what, I'm bawled out an awful lot, but it makes the day go faster."

A great moment for me was when I was interviewing this woman years ago. The housing projects were still new, and this was an integrated one. Poverty was the only common denominator among the residents. The woman had three little kids and was very pretty. She had bad teeth — no money for the dentist — but pretty. And I got out the mike — the mike wasn't as ubiquitous as it is today — and the kids were jumping up and down. They're five, six years old. So I say to the kids, "You be quiet, and I'll play back your mommy's voice." I'm playing back her voice, and she's listening, and suddenly she says: "Oh, my God, I never knew I felt that way before." Well, that's a big moment. That's what I call a "bingo moment" — for her and for me.

So how do I do it? There is no one way. I sit down with a guy, and he might give me a cup of coffee, and I start talking. I sometimes mention something about myself as I'm talking to them. I'm just a guy who's asking questions, and they forget about the mike.

We talk about "assaults" these days. We talk about the "9/11 assault." The most egregious assault right now is on our intelligence.

Shapiro: You have interviewed celebrities like Louis Armstrong and Bob Dylan, and also so many ordinary people. Who has made the greatest impression on you?

Terkel: There isn't any one in particular. Well, there was the ex-Klansman C.P. Ellis [who became a civil-rights activist and trade-union organizer]. His growth was phenomenal, his development and his epiphanies. He's as good as anybody, I would say.

Shapiro: One of my favorite books of yours is *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?* What did you learn from working on that book about the process of death?

Terkel: I wrote that shortly after my wife died, but I'd started work on the book before she had become ill. I respect those who believe in the hereafter. I envy them. I don't know if I wish there were a hereafter. I don't believe there is; I must admit that. I think we're ashes, and I'll have my ashes and my wife's ashes together. Those are her ashes there [pointing to an urn]. I'll have my sons spread them and mine at Bughouse Square, next to Newberry Library [in Chicago]. And if it violates the ordinance, tough! What are you going to do about it? Dig it up?

I am very moved by people who speak of out-of-body experiences. These are good, decent people, and they may have had some adventure. I had an adventure, quite frankly, when I broke my neck. I was in the hospital for seven weeks, and I had these dreams. To this day I ask my son, "Are you sure such-and-such didn't happen?" I thought all this was real stuff, but it wasn't. It was my imagination. So these people who speak of leaving the body — I don't laugh at them. It's their belief. If it gives anybody solace, I say let it go. If you say, "Naw, there ain't no such thing," you break their hearts, especially people who have had a hard life.

It's their right; it's their life. If I want the plug pulled, it's my right. I'm pro-choice when it comes to death, just as I'm pro-choice when it comes to life. Quite frankly, they're connected.

So basically that book is about life. I can't talk about death unless I talk about life. Death is when life comes to an end. Now, we all want to live life. But I would just as soon kick off in a year. Why ninety-four? Winston Churchill is given credit for a lot of quotes, and this is one: "Who would want to live to be ninety? Everybody who's eighty-nine." That's basically true.

Shapiro: Just one last question: Are you still hopeful about this country?

Terkel: You know what, whether I want to be or not, I have to be. It's as simple as that. ■