

A passion for radio fuels the work of a University sound designer

University Communications
February 2020

At 7 years old, **Matt Marcus** was starring in a radio play written, performed and exclusively enjoyed by him and his group of friends. He jokes that it might as well have been titled "Knights in a Castle Who Burp a Lot."

This low-budget production was the beginning of a lifelong love affair with radio that would ultimately bring him to his current job as an instructor of sound design in the **School of Theatre, Film and Television**^[1].

This year's **World Radio Day**^[2], which is observed on Feb. 13, celebrates the approximately 125-year-old technology's ability to educate and entertain people as well as its role in providing a platform for democratic discourse. Marcus says the concepts used in creating some of the earliest radio programming continue to shape his curriculum and professional practice.

His passion for radio grew from a boyhood love affair with music.

"The main way I listened to music was on the AM radio. I'm kind of old," he says. "We were lucky enough in my household to have a very early cassette recorder. I used to put the cassette recorder next to the radio and record the songs that I really liked and made mix tapes."

Radio continued to play a big part in Marcus' life when he was a college student at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where he studied visual arts and got involved with the college radio station.

"One of the reasons I did that is because I didn't have the means of listening to my own music at home," Marcus said. "I didn't have a stereo system or anything like that. By having a weekly radio show, I could listen to whatever music I wanted."

Marcus went on to work for Pittsburgh's Department of Parks and Recreation as a sound engineer for live concerts, then for an audiovisual company that worked with corporate clients on live presentations, or what Marcus called "industrial theater."

A desire to work more with his hands took Marcus' career on a detour into the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, where he worked as a props master for "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" from 1989-1993. Marcus says working with the television legend was a constant source of inspiration and entertainment.

"During our weekly production meetings, which Fred obviously attended since he wrote the episodes, we'd often have a few of the puppets on hand," Marcus said. "Fred would put one of them on and essentially become the puppet character and talk to us as him or her. Though initially disconcerting, really it was very sweet and playful. Lady Elaine could be a little saucy!"

Ultimately, Marcus got the bug to teach, and came to the University of Arizona in 1993 as a graduate student. After several years working with production companies and running sound for national touring companies of musical theater productions, he eventually joined the University in 2008 as a full-time faculty member.

As he teaches the next generation of sound designers, Marcus leans on what he learned decades ago studying radio.

"When I started to work more and more in theater and got into the avenue of designing sound for stories, the experience of learning how people told stories on radio was very important to me," Marcus said. "A lot of the techniques used in radio are the same conceptually as what is used now in theater."

Marcus puts those concepts into practice in his curriculum by having his students produce radio plays – or their more modern relative, podcasts. He says those types of projects force students to be more creative with their audio storytelling, since they don't have the advantage of the sounds actors naturally make on stage.

"It gets students to be able to concentrate on the importance of sound in storytelling without getting any effects for free," Marcus said. "It's an important, fun and classic way to focus the students' creative development on storytelling."

Marcus says he will continue to teach the concepts of audio storytelling that predate radio, stretching back to ritualistic performances that used sound to create a reaction from anyone viewing them. However, while the fundamentals will remain the same, Marcus knows there are more innovations to come.

"Hopefully my students will be the ones that move that forward."

Links

[1] <https://tftv.arizona.edu/> [2] <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/worldradioday>