



Leonard Lopate, Chatting Up the World

Interviewed by Judith Levine

Leonard Lopate has been holding public conversations on New York public radio, WNYC, five days per week for twenty-five years. Some hundred thousand guests have sat in his studio to converse on every conceivable political, scientific, philosophical, cultural or culinary topic. “It has often seemed to me,” Cynthia Ozick has observed, “that the old term ‘Renaissance man’ should be scrapped in favor of simply uttering ‘Leonard Lopate.’”

In fact, Lopate broke into radio by accident. After abandoning a painting career because he doubted his originality, he was making a living in advertising (including a stint in television marketing that helped revive the record sales and careers of Slim Whitman and Boxcar Willie, among other country musicians). In 1977, “WBAI was going through



Judith Levine’s books include *Not Buying It* (2006) and *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex* (2002), which won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. Her column, “Poli Psy,” about public emotions, appears monthly in *Seven Days* (Vermont). She’s active in feminist, peace, and criminal justice politics.

one of its periodic crises and had a lot of empty slots,” he recalls. “I was handed a Monday night talk show, midnight to five. And because I had never really thought about doing a talk show, I wasn’t imitating anybody, and that actually seemed special to them.” The show, “Round Midnight,” was on the air for eight years until Lopate was offered a tryout at WNYC.

His experiences as an artist, he has told the *New York Times*, gave him “a real insight into what happens when you fail. . . . I have an appreciation of people who succeed, and I also have an appreciation of people who have done okay but not great, because I know how hard it is.” That insight is reflected on *The Leonard Lopate Show*, which includes celebrities and top-of-the-ladder achievers but also spotlights the up-and-coming and the unrecognized. “What we don’t want is sameness,” Lopate says. “If everyone’s talking about Tiger Woods, I’m 100 percent sure I will not be talking about Tiger Woods.”

The show has received three Associated Press Awards for interviews with President Jimmy Carter, Tony Bennett, and Yoko Ono. Among the many subjects on which Lopate has broken ground have been AIDS and the criminal justice system, the doubtful recollections of Henry Kissinger, and the rising star of Barack Obama, whom he first interviewed in 2004.

Leonard Lopate lives in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. He has an autistic son and has dedicated

several show segments to exploring the causes and challenges of autism. *The Leonard Lopate Show* airs on WNYC from noon to 2 p.m. every weekday as well as on XM Satellite Radio channel 133, from 4 pm to 6 pm (EST). Judith Levine interviewed him in late April.



Judith Levine: Do you think that radio can do anything that other media can’t do?

Leonard Lopate: Oh, absolutely. I hear from people all the time that they feel a certain kind of closeness to the people they listen to on the radio. You can't feel that with somebody you watch on television. You may love Larry King's show, but you don't feel that you're his buddy or a member of the family. Because of the nature of radio, and the fact that you don't have to sit and watch it passively, it's more like having somebody in the room with you. Artists tell me that while they're working they keep the show on and it keeps them connected to the real world in a way that they couldn't feel if they had a television on.

Levine: What else do you know about your listeners, their politics and preferences — and how does that influence the show?

Leonard Lopate: The studies have been done, but I think if you start worrying about reaching this demographic group or that, you start pandering. The best way for me to do the show is just to think about what I and my staff think is interesting. We do know that our audience can be a little older — though not completely, we have a lot of stay-at-home moms and young people listening — and that our audience tends to be better educated and a little more affluent than the general public. I know that we have a large African-American listenership, which I found interesting initially because we don't do something in particular that aims at that audience. And we probably get more calls from women than any other show. Women often don't like to call radio shows because they're afraid that they're going to be put down; they can be intimidated by somebody who's nasty.

When I was at WBAI, I wasn't exactly a shock jock, but I was on from midnight to 5:00 and received a lot of challenging call-ins. The show was meant to be a battle of wits, and I could be rather sharp-tongued. Then I came to WNYC, and my producer began saying into my headphones, "Be nice, Leonard," when I was responding to some idiot listener. I took that to heart and realized that I preferred creating a comfortable environment for people.

Levine: So you stepped back a bit: You're interviewing more than conversing. Is there a difference?

Lopate: Our format is interviews, but I try to make them sound as conversational as possible. The way I think of it is: I'm meeting someone who's really interesting, to talk about something I've been curious about, and we're having dinner, and I ask them questions about whatever it is they do — their accomplishments, their field of expertise. It's artificial, of course — dinner conversations are not usually that focused or intent or one-way — but I'm good at it. My girlfriend has commented that I've been to "boyfriend school."

Levine: I notice your staff comes from many different places with widely varying interests. They don't have conventional radio careers.

Lopate: I have a great staff. There's no way that one person could have these conversations, two hours per day, usually four segments in each show, without a lot of help. There's no way I can read all the books or know all the history and the details (although I do see pretty much every movie that we talk about, and every play that we talk about).

We want our show to be like *The New Yorker*: with something serious, something fun, something literary, something philosophical, something that might be the equivalent of a cartoon — a little bit of everything. We've had Barack Obama, Joe Biden, and John McCain, and we've also had a big debate about hand-made versus machine-made bagels. That was actually a favorite moment of mine, when the machine bagel-maker was asked some tough questions by the artisanal bagel-maker and put a call through to the guy who had made the bagel-making machine. That guy said his father had been a bagel-maker, and the hand-maker said, "Oh, yeah, what union?" The machine-maker says, "Local 423," and the hand-maker says, "That's the bread-baking union. We're talking bagels here!"

Levine: It's common these days to say the media have become more polarized, though demagoguery is as old as radio — I think, for instance, of Father Coughlin, the anti-Semite who was one of the first to use the medium. Do you, or NPR, represent a counterforce to the rightwing blather on FOX?

Lopate: I'm curious about those people who listen

to one FOX show after another: What are they going to get that's new? One reason that Glenn Beck has become successful is that he's *so* over the top that he sounds like he's doing something different from everybody.

What I try to do is not just present one side. We're much more concerned about presenting a full range of guests. I'll admit that with certain guests I'm much more likely to ask probing questions, but I really am open to seeing another side and changing my mind about an issue, and I'm not interested in just preaching to the choir.

Levine: Your show seems to be about everything. How do you choose among the infinite number of interesting subjects out there?

Lopate: Thanks to the show, I don't really have the personal life that other people have. Everything is grist for this mill. That's not a complaint; I think it's great. I created this monster! But it means that when I'm reading the newspaper, I'm thinking, *Now how can this be applied to the show?* And when I'm reading a magazine article, I may get impatient, even if it's very interesting piece, if it can't be used for the show.

Levine: Is there anything Jewish about your conversations? What were family conversations like?

Lopate: Talking was really important, reading was really important, gathering information was really important. My father was an autodidact who really read good books and two or three newspapers every day, and loved to debate politics, especially with all the lefties we came in contact with when we were in Williamsburg. My father would have been considered a liberal; he was not a Stalinist. And my mother was an actress, though she had to put that aside for many years while she brought us up and then helped pay the rent. But after we left the house, she went back to acting and had a career. She appeared in an Alka-Seltzer commercial that many people consider to be the greatest commercial in the history of advertising: "Mama mia, that's a spicy meatball!"

There was a lot of fighting at our table. We used to joke that we should put a tape recorder under the table and send the tape to Eugene O'Neill

— it would provide enough material for his next play. When guests came over, we used to talk about "The Flying Lopates" doing their thing. I stopped at a certain point, I guess in my early 20s — I didn't want to be part of the competition any more — but it was a kind of training for the way my mind works.

Levine: You were a synagogue choirboy. Was your family observant?

Lopate: We went to an Orthodox *shul*. My parents both grew up, especially my father, in an Orthodox family. I can't imagine them joining a Conservative or Reform *shul*. I grew up knowing that pork and shrimp and lobster tasted bad. I'd never tasted them, but I knew they tasted bad. At the same time, I think my parents would have described themselves as agnostics, although my mother would have said she believed in some "greater power."

In Williamsburg, I'm not sure there *was* much besides an Orthodox environment. So when I went to Hebrew school, I went to the one attached to the local synagogue; two blocks away was the big yeshiva, which I passed every day on my way to P.S. 16. I liked singing, so I sang with the Silberman Choir, which many people consider to be one of the greatest Orthodox choirs *ever* — so I was in Orthodox shuls all over the city. I sang with Koussevitzky, with Sholom Katz, with great cantors of the time, and it was thrilling.

Years later, I got a call from a friend asking if I wanted to do a gospel show on the radio at Columbia University. Well, I loved liturgical music — I loved Jewish liturgical music, I loved gospel music (this was back in the days when gospel music was *good*). I saw the similarities between them, and I said yes. That was my first time on radio.

Levine: Do you consider yourself to be Jewish-identified? Does that affect your politics?

Lopate: There's the matter of Israel. I've been critical of Israel, but it gets me upset when listeners, no matter what it is we're talking about, will somehow try to steer the conversation to make a point critical of Israel. That kind of thing starts making me nervous.

Levine: Why does criticism of Israel make you nervous?

Lopate: I grew up in Williamsburg at a time when people were just starting to come into the country with tattoos on their arms. Israel was the place that felt like a safe haven and, for many people, *still* feels like a safe haven.

Levine: Do you think your Jewishness resonates with your listeners?

Lopate: It can work the other way. The first death threat I ever got was for a show I did on WBAI in 1977 about the occupied territories. Somebody had expressed the opinion that those lands should not be settled by Israel, but should be used as a bargaining chip for Israel. I took a call, and this guy said, "You are marked, you are dead."

What you have to keep in mind is that when you go to Israel you find that a lot of the people there are critical of the government. If you're critical of a particular Israeli government or policy, there are a lot more Americans who are going to get upset with you than Israelis.

Levine: There's a strongly conservative cast to much of the American Jewish establishment.

Lopate: Well, I don't know about that. It's very pro-Israel because we're very aware of history. If it *does* happen here, you still want to know that Israel is there for you to escape to.

Levine: Do you have any kind of Jewish life now?

Lopate: I like seders on Passover. When I read Saul Bellow or Philip Roth or Bernard Malamud, I feel a certain kinship; we have shared experiences. It dawned on me one day that if you put together a Jewish atheist, a Catholic atheist, a Buddhist atheist, an Evangelical atheist, what they'll have in common is that they don't believe in God. But they'll all very much belong to the culture they grew up in. So whether I'm a believer or not, I'm Jewish on many levels. My mind works that way. I'm a cultural Jew. **JC**

Class Action Filed Regarding Hadassah Members' Group Catastrophic Major Medical Plan

Levy Phillips & Konigsberg LLP has filed a Class Action Complaint in the Southern District of New York against Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, New York Life Insurance Company and United States Life Insurance Company in the City of New York.

The Complaint alleges that nationwide, consumers enrolled in Hadassah's Group Catastrophic Major Medical Plan have been defrauded. According to the Complaint, although the marketing materials for Hadassah's Group Catastrophic Major Medical Plan promise coverage for nursing home and convalescent care benefits "regardless of your age," the Plan cuts off these benefits at age 65.

If you are or were enrolled in Hadassah's Group Catastrophic Major Medical Plan, you may be a member of the class and have rights to claim a recovery. Please contact Attorneys Diane Paolicelli or Theresa A. Vitello by e-mail at dpaolicelli@lpklaw.com, tvitello@lpklaw.com or by telephone at (800) 637-6529 or (212) 605-6200.