"SOUNDS OF MY CITY"

The stories, music and sounds
of the people of New York

Recorded and narrated by
TONY SCHWARTZ

LKWAYS RECORDS FC 7341
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New York City is the "home town" of more than 8,000,000 people. It is also the "Office" and "Job" of many others. It is an entertainment and vacation center for many, many more. I could in no way document all aspects of N. Y. City life in a half hour radio program. I didn't try to. I just wanted to present the sounds I hear as I go about my work-life, my home-life and my leisure-life in New York City. There is much room for other records on New York City life and sounds.

(Some of this material appears on other records I have prepared for Folkways. "Sounds Of My City" was originally prepared as a radio program and the framework is in no way similar to any of the other records I have produced.)

I would like to thank Fonie Iacelli and Paul Roberts for their help in the production of "Sounds of My City".

Special appreciation to the Ampex Corporation of America for the development of the "Magnumite", a completely portable, lightweight tape recorder, which makes the world your recording studio and a little hand-held box your control room.

Tony Schwartz
"SOUNDS OF MY CITY"

"Sounds Of My City" was prepared as a radio program for presentation on Radio Station WNYC (the Municipal Station of New York City) and for entry into the "Prix Italia Radio Competition". Every second of this program is documentary, including the narration. All recordings in the program were considered as sound patterns, including speech and music. I wanted the program to answer the question, "What can a person living in, or visiting, New York, hear?" Each item presented was intended to answer this question with another dimension. I hoped non-English speaking people could understand and enjoy this program. Even though they could not understand the English words of a little child or an elderly woman they could tell that children and elderly people are part of the sound of my city. The program material was recorded over the past nine years and took a little more than two months to edit and assemble.

I would like to tell you a little about my approach to my recording work.

I am interested in recording the audible expression of life around us. One might call this material folklore, but the dictionary definition, "traditional customs, beliefs, tales, or sayings, preserved unreflectively among a people," does not entirely define what I record, since I am concerned also with that material which stems from current life. My main interest is in how the material is an expression of the people and their ways of life.

In the past, the main tools of the folklorist and documentarian in the word and sound field have been the pen and typewriter. My interest in this field, grew at the time that a new tool, the magnetic recorder, was developed. This enabled me to think in new and different terms.

Magnetic recording (erasable tape and wire recorders) make it possible for a middle-income person to undertake projects which were previously limited to well-endowed individuals or libraries. In the course of living I come across many subjects that are worthy of study and presentation in audible form. Many of these studies fall within the interest of organized foundations, record companies or the broadcast industry. Other areas of material (for various reasons) do not interest me or cannot be handled by the above groups. I feel that individuals like myself can go into these untouched areas of study. I also feel that since a middle-income person can support such study and work there is no need to accept the various forms of restriction and censorship that may be imposed by institutions or industry. When I speak of censorship, I do not in any way mean government censorship. I mean the type of censorship implied in judgments such as "Does this have commercial value?" and "will anyone object to this?" etc. The only restrictions I have to deal with are the limitations of my mind, talents and equipment. To obtain this type of freedom I have to be prepared to earn my livelihood in another profession. At present only a part of my income comes from my recording work because I only take work where my interest in the subject and commercial value coincide. I earn the remainder of my income working as a free-lance commercial artist in the advertising field.

The radio and recording field have, as a whole, dealt with the prepared expression of people, and the cultural industry. The people and material to be recorded or broadcast, were always brought to the microphone and its surroundings. The things that interest me the most are the things that happen in the course of every-day life and these things cannot be re-created effectively. I felt that I wanted to work toward the development of equipment and techniques that could take the microphone to life and record what it found. Also, I wanted my equipment and me to be the minimum participants in a situation. To me, acoustics are not the problem. Whether someone is speaking in a small "live" room or out in a field is unimportant; I just do my best to record them. I don't find people objecting to where things are recorded; in fact, to the contrary, they enjoy hearing people in different acoustical situations.

I do my recording while going about my regular life. I always carry a small portable recorder with me. I have developed the equipment to the degree that I can make a medium-to-high-fidelity recording of any situation I am in, or near, within fifteen seconds from the start of the situation or my awareness of it. My job may take me to a printer's shop. The sounds, situations, and language of a trade can be recorded in just a few extra minutes of the required job time. The ride to work can produce a recording of a cab or bus driver talking about his work or other aspects of his life. The walk home from dinner at a restaurant, can yield a street preacher or musician. A Saturday morning walk to the supermarket can yield three or four children's games or jump-roping rhymes. I have found the best approach with children as well as with adults is to be honest with them. Identification with and understanding of people is the key to many rich recordings.

I consider my recording work as a means of expression and communication. My programs and records express ideas and feelings I have about life around me. I feel they are complete when people understand and feel what I am trying to say and respond with some of the emotion I have about the subject. I do not believe radio programs and records can be rushed in production as I believe that documentary recording projects, like children, need understanding, time and love, to grow to maturity.

Tony Schwartz 1956
TONY SCHWARTZ:
Master Tape Recordist by Jeanne Lowe

...his portable recorders have captured the mood and melodies of the big city. His exchanges cover the world.

The new horizons which magnetic tape recording has opened up in its still young, but spectacularly successful career, are a continuing source of amazement, even to those most familiar with the talents of this versatile new medium.

Take an individual with particular interests, plus some imagination and ingenuity, give him a tape recorder, and chances are you'll have a new use—or maybe a dozen new uses for it. The more you have to offer tape, the more it will give to you.
A particularly active and outstanding case in point is a 31-year old New Yorker named Tony Schwartz. Tony is a commercial artist by training and profession, but a tape recorder in every available moment. A true amateur in his pursuit of recording for personal enjoyment and expression, he has developed the creative potentialities of tape recording as a hobby to an unusual and newsworthy degree. At the same time, he is making a basic contribution, through his use of the medium, towards a better understanding of people.

Without ever travelling to a foreign country, this soft-spoken six-footer has gathered folk music recorded in its native setting in 40 different countries all over the world. In a few years' time he collected over 10,000 foreign songs—a collection so voluminous that it forced him out of his one-room apartment into larger quarters, and to professional and unique that it caused Ben Botkin, former curator of folk music for the Library of Congress to state that it "could easily be transformed into a public archive."

The Voice of America and United Nations Radio thought this tape-exchange interesting enough to broadcast excerpts on 5,000 stations throughout the world. You may already have heard Tony on the Dave Garroway show, or one of the other radio programs on which he has told about his recording hobby. Next month, anyone will be able to listen to some of the outstanding samples from his international tape collection on a record called "Exchange," which Folkways is issuing on both disc and tape.

Already, eight other discs have been produced from the thousands of fascinating sounds and songs which he has taped in his home town, New York, and two hit songs—"Wimoweh" and "Tzena" got their start in this country through Tony's exchange hobby.

Although Tony has had no training in electronics or recording, professionals frequently want to learn the special recording techniques he has developed, and famous folk singers whose records he once used to buy now make tapes at his West 57th Street apartment.

Recently a university invited Tony to join their Sociology department on the basis of his documentary recording work, and he has had a number of offers from recording companies to join their staff at handsome salaries. But he has turned these offers down. Tony doesn't object to collecting sounds for network programs like "The Search," on a free-lance basis. But he refuses to turn his tape recording hobby into his regular livelihood. "If I did, I'd try to record things that would sell, rather than things that interest me. My enjoyment of tape recording is as a means of getting closer to life."

Despite the impressive heights to which Tony's tape recording hobby has carried him, he started off quite casually. While in the Navy he had heard about a new thing called magnetic recording, and when he started work, after the war, he frequently noticed a wire machine in the store front of the office building where he worked. He thought the recorder might come in handy for making off-the-air recordings of folk music broadcasts to supplement his disc collection. If he didn't like it, he figured, he could always trade it in.

That was in 1946. Tony did trade in the machine, first for another, more expensive wire recorder and then, in 1947, when tape was introduced, he switched to the more faithful and flexible medium. Since that time, he has owned seven tape recorders, putting the three he now owns to fairly constant use. From an intriguing whim, tape recording has become practically a way of life.

But Tony is not a gadgeteer or an audio hound. Part of his absorption with tape, says Tony, is that it allows him to produce a creative product in terms he can support by himself. But even more important, it provides him with a means of getting closer to people.

It was this predominating interest in people that led Tony to folk music and recorded folklore. To him, folk music is a spontaneous expression of people in all moods—joy, sorrow, work, and play. When combined with tape recording, it allows people at opposite ends of the world to communicate with each other, despite barriers of land and language.

Recorded folk music can also help you to meet people in your own city, Tony discovered. After he had been taking songs off the air for a while, he met one of the performers whom he had recorded. Tony mentioned the recording to him, and within a few days the singer arrived at Tony's door, guitar in hand, to hear the recordings and make some more in person.

"That's the way it always seems to go," Tony says. "One thing leads to another. I found that most folk singers didn't have a chance to hear recordings of themselves and were happy to come up to record a few numbers for me just so they could check on their performance."

Gradually he built up an impressive collection of folk music recorded in his home, and a host of friends in the folk music world: Pete Seeger, Burl Ives, Harry Belafonte, and Gordon Jenkins frequented his West 57th Street apartment, and when Yma Sumac came to New York, she made her first recordings on his tape machine.

He also developed a new approach to recording folk singers, causing many of them to comment, "I've never heard myself recorded like this before."

The secret, Tony says, is not an engineering trick, but a point of view. "I am interested in content, rather than total sound." By placement of the microphone, you can indicate your attitude towards the song and develop a perspective in sound. "If you want to stress the words, put the mike closer to the mouth of the performer; if it's the music you're more interested in, place the mike closer to the instrument." By bearing in mind the position of the person who will listen to the playback, Tony gives you the feeling that the performer is singing directly to you when he makes the recording.

As one thing leads to another in Tony's life, a folk singer mentioned that a friend of his in California knew a lot of good songs. Perhaps he would be willing to record them for Tony on an exchange basis.

Tony thought it was worth looking into and carefully prepared a tape of choice selections from his growing collection. But when two months passed without a reply,
he began to worry. "I was afraid he might not like what I
sent him."

His fears were unfounded. Not only was the Califor- 

nian tremendously enthusiastic, but his response con- 

tained a wonderful assortment of new songs from his 

community, inspiring Tony to look around for some more 
exchange sources.

One way or another he found the names and addresses 
of people in this country and all over the world who 
owned recorders and were interested in exchanging folk 
music. Sometimes he found them through reading the 
classified columns of farm and ranch journals, music 
magazines, fraternal publications. Often he learned about 
them via the grapevine, through friends who knew of his 
interest and from strangers who began to hear of him.

As the tape exchange became heavy and he heard about 
many new sources, Tony prepared a tape "letter" to 
introduce himself and illustrate, by example, from his 
collection, what kind of music he was interested in. Over 
600 of these were sent out in five years, bringing back 
to his mail box the most extensive amateur collection of 
folk music in the world, as well as some good friends 
and unusual experiences.

Sometimes Tony waited as long as six months but he 
ever failed to get a reply, in fact, usually two or three 
arrived for every one he sent. Once an unknown European 
correspondent to whom he had sent a tape turned up on 
his front doorstep, guitar in hand, ready to make the 
exchange recordings in person, while on his vacation.

When others asked how to build a tape exchange li- 

brary, Tony says that first of all you have to know what 
you want. Then you should guide your new sources to 
the type of material you wish to receive, such as Tony 
did in his tape letter. "Give something first, and ask last; 
if you do you will be much more rewarded."

Exchange is truly the basis of his collection, and he 
fillls some unusual requests for the people who send him 
tapes. Once he recorded a sample of American radio 
commercials for an English girl who was writing her 
thesis on the subject, but had never heard one over the 
BBC. Sometimes foreign tape correspondents don't want 
tape recordings, but prefer material better such as a pair 
of nylons or a hard-to-get tool. Tony tries to send it if 
possible.

Often you may have to do research and use considerable 
Ingenuity to get what you're looking for. When Tony 
wanted to collect railroad songs, he first went to the 
public library and found a dictionary of all the railroad 
junctions in the country. From the many thousand listed, 
he compiled a list of several hundred from different 
regions.

Then he cross-referenced the railroad junctions with a 
directory of radio stations.

He made up a tape of railroad songs he had already 
collected into a program suitable for broadcast, and 
concluded the recording with an appeal for exchange 
tapes. This was to be sent out to those radio stations 
which were near railroad junctions. Before sending the 
tape, though, he always queried the program director 
to determine his possible interest in the recording.

Many asked for it, and the results were beyond Tony's 
dreams. By way of example, Station KWRO in Coquille, 
Oregon, played the tape over the air three times, twice on 
the request of the schools. The program director made 
and sent copies of it to two of his friends and to several 
other radio stations. He also made recordings, free, for 
those people who came into the studio with songs in 
response to Tony's program, and sent the tape to him.

Although Tony doesn't speak any foreign languages, 
he has sent out his exchange recording in nineteen 
languages, preparing it in this ingenious way: First, he 
asks a foreign friend of his to translate the tape letters 
idiomatically into the appropriate tongue. Then he has 
a native American who learned the language here read 
the actual recording from the translation. This way he 
retains the American accent in a foreign language, and 
gives the recipient the feeling that he is hearing from an 
American, not a native of his own country.
"You don't have to go far for authentic folk music though," Tony says, "There's material all around us, but we're not apt to notice it. In fact, we may not even think it's folk music."

One day when his mother was visiting him, Tony played for her a recording he had recently received from a mountainer of a folk song called, "Dig My Grave."

"That's not a folk song," she sniffed. "I used to sing that when I was a child." She then sang her own version of the tune, which she had always known as "In Jersey City."

Tony began to develop a new perspective about folk music. Through friendships that developed with people in his apartment house, he learned about sources close at hand, and even under his own roof. The lady in the next apartment knew Yugoslav songs, the rabbi downstairs had lived in France and Belgium and remembered much of the native music. The Australian on the third floor knew tunes from Down Under. The Jamaican bank clerk knew Calypso tunes. He began to hear folk music as he walked along the streets in his neighborhood.

The wealth of live material all around him, which he had overlooked while recording material off the air or sending tapes to the far corners of the earth both surprised and fascinated Tony. He became intrigued with the potentiality of tape for documenting folklore-in-the-making in his own community. With the recent availability of light-weight, battery-operated tape recorders which "make the world your recording studio and the little hand-held box your control room," he had the equipment to do the job.

Recorder in hand, he began roaming the streets of New York, the postal zone where he lived, to tape the folk music and folk expressions of the heterogeneous area, which extends from the Plaza Hotel on Central Park South to Hell's Kitchen and the Hudson River waterfront on the other extreme.

Although New York 19 encompasses Times Square, Tin Pan Alley, Radio City, Carnegie Hall, the large television recording studios, music publishing firms and Broadway theaters, Tony did not record the formalized music that came from those places.

Instead, he got the songs of kids playing games and singing on the sidewalks, an Italian street festival, the spiel of pickmen, sounds of street drizzling, flower vendors and night club bakers, a Puerto Rican storefront church service, an orthodox Jewish Friday night service at home, an auctioneer, sidewalk musicians. He even taped the voices of customers at the grocers—the everyday expression of people.

The first album to come out of this new project, "1, 2, 3, and a Zing, Zing, Zing," was a slight sensation. Disc reviewers called it "fascinating," "superlative," "outstanding." The youngsters who listened to it were delighted that the sounds which fascinated them had at last been recorded.

The disc also began to crop up in all sorts of unexpected places. Hospitals discovered that it was valuable in treating emotionally disturbed children. Sociologists studied it as a significant new source and the Museum of Natural History buried the record in its time capsule, so that people a century hence could hear children's folk songs of circa 1930.

Across the seas, in France, a tape recorder got a grant, on the strength of Tony's results, to carry out a similar project in his own country.

Then there was a Moondog, a blind musician who wanders through the streets of mid-Manhattan in flowing brown robe and beard, and squats in store doorways to pound out exotic tunes and rhythms on his weird instruments. Tony was so fascinated by his "music" that he taped it extensively. Mars released the results on disc.

Last March, Folkways brought out the "New York 19" album, which again brought to Tony's creative tape recording praise from all over. A critic for Downbeat said, "I cannot praise too expansively the work of Tony Schwartz." The artist Ben Shahn said that he has listened to it carefully some sixty times, and called Tony an artist. One reviewer said that Tony had, "opened a treasure house to the public." Another described it as "magnificently alive and diversified." Ben Botkin said that, "he succeeds in catching the idiom, accent and character of the man on the street" as no commercial recordings do. A professor at Bucknell University reported the record brought his students "alive to the realities in the city world" in which they live.

How does Tony go about it? How does he get such penetrating and fascinating recordings? Part of it is due to his point of view—the identification with people and the insight which this brings. Part of it is due to his methods.

"I never go out looking for material but always take the recorder along," says Tony. "I tape the things that interest me. The sequence arises out of the material I collect.

"Because the things that interest me most are what happen in every day life, I have tried to develop equipment and techniques which take the microphone to life and let it record what it finds. I want my equipment and me to be the minimum participants in a situation."

"The philosophy behind recording is what determines the design of equipment," he believes. Most of the time he uses a battery-operated, 12-pound Magnemite, which he has modified in certain ways. In order to make the controls immediately accessible, he has extended the start-stop and volume control knobs through the cover, into which he cut holes to accommodate them. This has two advantages. It allows him to be recording within a few seconds after he hears a sound or song he wishes to tape. Also, by keeping the lid on, he disguises the fact that he is carrying a tape recorder.

For candid street recording Tony wears a concealed Brush rubber-covered microphone on his right wrist, attached to a stiff watch band. From the mike, a wire runs up inside his right coat sleeve, around his neck and down the inside of his left coat sleeve, within ready reach of the Magnemite's input.

Recording on this candid basis is "educated guesswork," Tony says, and you have to remember from previous experience, as in camera settings. Practice will improve the percentage of good takes.

With this kind of mobile recording outfit, anything can
be easily taped. "My job takes me to a printer's shop. The sounds, situations and languages of a trade can be recorded in just a few minutes of the required job time. My ride to work may produce a recording of a cab or bus driver talking about work or other aspects of his life. The walk from dinner at a restaurant can yield a street preacher or musician. A Saturday morning walk to the supermarket can yield three or four children's games or jump rope rhymes." The recorder also accompanies him on Saturday night dates.

When the recording need not be candid, but there is no electric outlet handy, he uses a more sensitive microphone with the Magnemite lying open, recording at 7.5 i.p.s. and getting excellent results. For really high-fi recordings, when there is a power source nearby or he can take a generator in the car, Tony takes one of his Magnecords and records at 15 i.p.s. To go with it, he has designed a remote control box which enables him to do mobile recording up to 50 feet away from the machine.

The design of this particular piece of equipment evolved from Tony's belief that placement of the microphone is crucial in documentary work. You need to be flexible with the mike yet have the controls at the same place.

The remote control box allows just that. It is a metal box, somewhat smaller than shoe box size, which he hangs from around his neck to his waist on a leather strap. Level meter, volume control and output for monitoring sound are all extended from the recorder to this box by two lines which he keeps together with electrical tape. The meters are plainly visible to him on the flat upright side of the box.

For those who wish to do remote recording with a plug-in machine, Tony offers several cautionary bits of advice: Test the power source you are planning to use before plugging in. To do this, buy an ordinary neon bulb with a plug-in socket, and test the outlet with it. If both sides light up, the source is AC and usable. If only one side lights up, the source is DC and will save you from putting your recorder out of commission.

To keep all the highs with an extended microphone line, you should use a low impedance microphone, but most home recorders come with a high impedance mike. Tony offers this solution: Buy a line microphone transformer which will allow you to run the mike line a long distance, and a multiple impedance mike which will record at high or low impedance equally well. "Your ingenuity will make the average machine right."

"Acoustics should not be a problem in documentary recording," Tony maintains. "Tape brings the listener to the spot and puts the emphasis on the contents and context in which he will be hearing it, rather than the quality of the recorded sound. "You should accept where you are and make the recording as clearly as you can."

Two rules for making good documentary recordings which he stresses over and over are: Work close, and under-record.

An easy method he uses for learning how a room will sound and where to place the microphone is to listen with a finger over one ear. If something sounds good at 20 feet, go in to ten feet. Generally, the nearer you are to a person, the better.

"Working close will decrease the hollow sound in large rooms. By increasing the proportion of the original sound to reflected sound, you will decrease the awareness of the room's acoustics."

If you are trying to record several different sound sources near each other, the remote control box is very helpful in getting the balance. You can move with the microphone and monitor simultaneously until you are satisfied.

To get around background noise in the street, get closer to your subject and lower the volume, Tony advises. You can always bring it up on playback. Should the voice of a person drop off as you are taping it, increasing the treble control will increase the legibility.

Of particular interest to many people is how Tony is able to get such natural recordings of children.

He admits that children are the hardest people to record candidly because it is so difficult for a strange adult to lose himself among them. If you stand nearby trying to record, they'll stop what they're doing.

"I have found that the best approach with children, as with adults, is to be honest with them. Tell them you are interested in their games and you want to record them. I often play for the kids of one block the games of kids of another block or neighborhood."

After a while, they will start playing the games again and look upon you as a friend. They will be unconscious while you are recording, even though you may work with the microphone only seven or eight inches from their mouths.
"When I'm out recording, I always keep in mind some of the things I'm looking for, but at the same time keep myself ready for anything that sounds interesting or might be worth saving. Often one album develops while I'm working on another.

"For instance, when I was collecting the sounds of New York, '39 I was frequently struck by the musicality of people's voices and expressions as they went about their daily lives—what you might call the innate musical ability in people. This showed up in some of the recordings I had already collected, like my 14-month old niece's prattling or the rhythmic cadences of a baseball radio announcer. I made a conscious effort to gather more, and the result was my most recent album, "Millions of Musicians."

"The real thrill in tape recording is getting the material back home and seeing it in relation to other things." Over weekends, he plays the week's collection, making detailed notes of the material he has gathered, and storing it for future use. He does not edit the tapes until sometime after the original recording is made.

When it comes to editing for a record, Tony measures out on a wall near his editing work table an area 24 inches long. As he cuts different sections out of a tape he puts them up on the wall with masking tape, identifying each selection by writing on the masking tape. Selections that run over a minute he stores on small reels, marking them also with masking tape so that he knows what he has. Editing is more accurate at 15 i.p.s., he says, but it's easier at 7.5 i.p.s.

Shelves of tape line the walls in his hall and narrow workroom up to the ceiling, and with a growing collection which already verges on 800 boxes of tape, storage space becomes a problem. For this reason, as well as for easy access to material, Tony always edits down all the tapes he is planning to keep. In some cases he will dub a few selections worth saving from one tape onto another shorter tape, or in other cases, splice several different sections together. Like contents is the criterion, and as little as one minute's recording is kept on a separate reel.

After the tape has been edited for storage, he plays it back, writing down the contents in detail on an index card which he files in the tape box. Sometimes he cross-indexes from one reel to another, though he admits his cataloguing system leaves much to be desired.

Special shelves which he built in three sizes to house his 3-inch, 5-inch and 7-inch reels save on storage space. The new thin tapes which give fifty percent more tape on a standard reel are another way of cutting down space with a large collection. Tony is very enthusiastic about them for use with his portable recorder as well because it gives him fifty percent extra playing time on the five-inch reels to which this machine is limited.

Even though he lives in a steam-heated New York apartment, Tony follows no special precautions for storage of tapes. He thinks that much of the concern about this is unnecessary, pointing out that in the eight years he has had tape, he has never had a recording become useless because of age. He says they sound just as good now as when the recordings were first made.

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**OTHER FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS OF INTEREST**

- **FD559** NUEVA YORK. Documentary of Puerto Rican New Yorkers. Tony Schwartz.
- **FD560** MILLIONS OF MUSICIANS. Music in everyday life. Tony Schwartz.
- **FD562** THE WORLD IN MY MAIL BOX. World exchange of tapes. Tony Schwartz.
- **FD 558** A DOG'S LIFE. Story of bringing up a dog in New York. Tony Schwartz.
- **FD582** YOU'RE STEPPING ON MY SHADOW. Interviews of children & grown-ups. 9 sound stories by Tony Schwartz.
- **FX6170** SOUND EFFECTS Vol. 1. Street, cocktail party, department store, etc.
- **FW6823** FRENCH FOLK SONGS. Collections of charming traditional songs.