

# Shattered Glass

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Will the real Ira Glass please stand up?

Ira Glass at Wordstock. (April Cottini)

Last night I went to a church in downtown Portland, Oregon and watched a radio show.

It was the last day of Wordstock, the city's annual literary festival, and the closing event was billed as "An Evening with Ira Glass." Glass, the 47-year-old creator and host of the perennially popular National Public Radio show *This American Life*, sat at a table behind a mixing board and microphone and proceeded to give a performance blending radio snippets, iPod instrumentals, and disarmingly personal patter.

"Okay, so this is probably more than you want to know about me, but I have operated an ATM while on LSD," he confessed.

Glass, who told the audience that he began his radio career at 19 as an editor at NPR, specializes in mixing things up. He strode onto the stage sporting a sleek, gray suit and pale yellow tie, the very image of the smooth broadcast professional. But once he was seated behind the table, his thick dark hair and trademark Buddy Holly glasses took over the visible signs of the proud geek that he is. He dispensed facts and stories with charm and aplomb, reminding listeners, "We're on 500 public-radio stations, with an audience of 1.7 million, more than once, and cueing music to enhance his own improvisatory chatter. But he littered his rapid speech with more "likes," "you knows," and "dunnos" than

He was entertaining a crammed church with the zeal of P.T. Barnum while confessing to that same audience as if it were a composite confidante, a Dear Abby sitting in the dark on the other side of the microphone. For most of us, listening to the radio is a solitary activity "we listen in the car, in the shower, in the bedroom" and while Glass is a regular on the lecture circuit, he understands the oddity of actually seeing a radio personality.

"When I was an editor at NPR, I'd spend all day editing interviews in a room the size of this table," he told us, his lips moving but his voice emanating from the two tall speakers framing him on the stage. "And then, when I actually met one of the interviewers, like Bob Edwards, I couldn't believe that the voice coming out of their mouth was the same one I listened to all day in the editing room. It was uncanny."

Except Glass didn't say it this way; what he actually said was something like, "It was, like, totally uncanny."

Like his episodic radio show, Glass moved sporadically from topic to topic, beginning the evening with a radio clip about Jesus and Martin Luther King, Jr., before launching into a series of jokes and manifestos, tossed together like a salad.

His audience, a congregation of the converted, applauded both his humor and his opinions. They giggled at the increasing intolerance of the Federal Communications Commission ("Yes, Ira, it's okay to run the piece about the hippopotamus with a leech up his ass.") and cheered *This American Life's* increasingly political slant, with episodes about prisoners in Guantanamo, sailors in the Middle East, and victims of Hurricane Katrina.

As befits the producer of a radio show that gained a following for its quirky, heartfelt stories about ordinary people, Glass asked journalists to stop falling prey to seriousness and start looking for "the surprise, the joy, the humor in life." He blamed this epidemic of seriousness on the tyranny of the topic sentence, and then winsomely admitted that his demand for the abolition of the topic sentence was itself a topic sentence.

Glass also talked about how he compulsively analyzes television story lines, citing such popular shows as *The Sopranos*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *South Park*. The recognition goes both ways. Glass re-enacted his own shock at hearing his show mentioned on Fox's drama *The O.C.* by leaping from his chair. Then he played the TV audio: "Is that that show where those hipster know-it-alls talk about how fascinating ordinary people are? God."

"I couldn't ask for a greater compliment," Glass beamed.

People love Ira Glass. He's intelligent, funny and sexy in a nerdy way. And he demonstrates his trust for his audience by confiding in them and assuming they're just as offbeat and witty as he is. Most public personalities guard their privacy with the ferocity of Dobermans. But Glass embraces his fans even from behind a mixing board.

During several of his serious interludes, Glass explicated the story structure used on *This American Life*. "It's easy, it's simple, and it works," he said. "First you have an action, which leads to another action, and another action, and then you step back and have a thought about it." His exposition turned into a lovely reminiscence about his childhood rabbi and a spiel about how rabbis and Glass really have the same job.

"You know a rabbi, or a minister or a preacher or a priest, is really good when the kids stay to hear the sermon," Glass explained. His rabbi told stories from the Old Testament and then explained them in a way Glass found irresistible. "I'd be sitting there, thinking, 'You know, this is pretty cool. You get to say your piece once a week and then people go out thinking about what you've said. That's a cool job. That'd be nice.'"

But it was hard to tell how much Glass had really listened to his own lecture. He was precise about the story structure of *This American Life*, but his rabbi anecdote was a little fuzzy, with asides about his parents and a trip home to Baltimore that distracted from the original inspirational story of the rabbi. He mocked his own speech habits, saying that this is what he sounds like without the benefit of editing.

His entire talk "performance? ad-lib? " seemed both rehearsed and improvised at the same time. On tour to promote his show (and its upcoming television version on Showtime), Glass understandably recycles many of the same anecdotes. But does he also recycle the charming confusion he displays on stage? He's a performer begging journalists to stop performing and start being natural. That's impossible. Despite the intimate trust he's built with his audience over years of radio shows, Glass will never be anything but a performer. It's like, you know, totally unnatural to ask otherwise. But perhaps that's the secret of his success.