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## On the Air: How a Rock 'n' Roll Radio Show Made Me a Better Librarian

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## FEATURED ARTICLE

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### On the Air: How a Rock ‘n’ Roll Radio Show Made Me a Better Librarian

By Charlie Bennett

Twelve years ago, I created a radio show with Ameet Doshi, my friend and colleague at the Georgia Tech library. We wanted to do a library talk show on the college radio station, but we wanted to have some fun, too, so we decided to play rock music in between the library talk. We called it *Lost in the Stacks (LITS)*. I thought I was adding a little rock ‘n’ roll fun to my Fridays with a student outreach project; I did not understand that I was embarking on a creative and scholarly venture that would inform my professional practice and identity in every way.

Since 2010, I have hosted this weekly radio show with a constantly changing team of cohosts. We call it the “research library rock ‘n’ roll radio show.” In each episode we examine some aspect of library science or archival practice—usually through an interview with an outside expert but sometimes in discussion between just the cohosts—and then interpolate

that interview or discussion with songs that (arguably) relate to the topic. It is my favorite professional activity. When we first began producing *LITS*, I felt an affinity to the editing and on-mic performance. The way the show worked—mixing a variety of communication styles, using eccentric or poetic methods to explain professional discourse to the general public—resonated with my interdisciplinary education in Georgia Tech’s School of Literature, Media, and Culture and my information organizing and contextualizing education at Valdosta State University’s MLIS program. That affinity, coupled with the audience’s delighted surprise that a couple of librarians were doing a rock ‘n’ roll radio show and talking information retrieval in between indie rock tracks, made the show an immediate success at the station and in our organization. Students came to the studio to hang out during the broadcast, our colleagues requested to be



*Author Charlie Bennett (right) with cocreator Ameet Doshi (left)*

interviewed on the show, and a local intellectual property lawyer—an alumnus of Georgia Tech and of WREK Atlanta—got in touch to congratulate us on such a unique and fun show. His firm, the Burrus Intellectual Property Law Group, has been our pro bono legal support ever since. You hear us thank them at the end of every episode.

Unfortunately for me, after we had done six months of successful broadcasting, I had delusions of grandeur. Like a band that plays two live shows and then thinks it's time to seek a record deal, I believed that we could leverage our work on the radio into a slot on the local NPR station and become famous. Doing a radio show is so much fun, and so rewarding in the moment, that I could fool myself into thinking that I was a great radio host right away. (I wasn't great at it; I was great at enjoying it.) I took every small mistake in the studio personally, imagining that we were messing up our inevitable shot at the big time. It wasn't until the worst interview I ever conducted, a car crash of a discussion with a local mystery writer (it's not on the Internet, so don't try to find it), that I was shocked out of my self-aggrandizement and understood, viscerally, that no one is great at anything right away. While Malcolm Gladwell's ten thousand hours hypothesis is unsupportable and ultimately pernicious, one must understand that becoming good at any vocation or avocation requires a long mix of failures and successes. That realization could have come through other work at the library eventually, but the studio is where I learned it fast.

Along with this check on my ego, *LITS* helped me learn how to get things done. Producing the show created a weekly practice in my life.



You've heard the phrase "the show must go on"; I used to think that was just the setup for jokes in cartoons. After having to create an hour-long radio program every week, and not being able to abandon an episode during the broadcast, I learned how powerful the drive to put on a show can be. Once I had that drive, I had to schedule the work of the show every week along with my daily and weekly job duties. I was sure that planning my work time was the only way I could keep everything going, especially after I began to explore podcasting. First, it was just *LITS*, but then I learned more about podcasting and cocreated other shows on the radio and as podcast originals. At my peak

productivity, I was working full-time as an academic librarian and producing four weekly shows: *LITS*, a radio talk show called *The North Avenue Lounge*, a conversational podcast called *Consilience with Pete and Charlie*, and a media critique podcast called *Supercontext*. This was roughly four hours of produced audio a week, most of which I edited and all of which I was responsible for distributing on the Internet. Without a strict work schedule and a carefully followed productivity system, I would never have made it through twelve years of work, five hundred *LITS* episodes, four hundred *North Avenue Lounges*, two hundred and twelve *Supercontexts*, and two hundred and eight *Consiliences*.

Doing the show also changed my attitude about my public-facing job responsibilities. I was a reluctant teacher and an uncertain presenter when I started hosting *LITS*; the studio is where I learned how to interview, improvise, listen, and connect. Almost every week, I met someone new

and tried to learn from them. That interaction doesn't have room for self-censorship or rehearsing what you say, and it doesn't allow the fear of public speaking or of asking a stupid question. I learned how to stay in the moment while talking to someone, how to actively listen to them instead of waiting for my turn to talk, and how to incorporate surprises and tangents into conversations in a useful way. These are all skills that improved my instruction. As my instructional technique improved, my radio



venture led me to a new area to teach within. Podcasting blew up in 2014 after *Serial*; professors and students became interested in podcasts and audio projects as assignments, and since I had been doing audio production and podcasting for years, I was an in-demand “expert.” I had to codify my practical skills into an instruction session on audio production and podcast composition that I have delivered to hundreds of students confronted with their first college podcast assignment.

*LITS* also gave me a reason to work on my presenting skills. A host of a public radio show

explained to me that because the production company couldn't advertise the show like a product (due to FCC rules and a nonprofit organization's requirements), he toured the country doing presentations, as indirect advertising for the show. “The idea,” he said, “is that fans of the show will bring friends who are not yet fans with them to these

presentations, and we'll grow an audience that way.” *Lost in the Stacks* was never going to have an advertising budget, so I decided to do as many presentations in as many different venues as I could, to indirectly advertise the show. I did improv shows, storytelling events, TEDx talks, guest slots on other radio shows and podcasts, talks at public libraries and high schools, workshops at festivals, classes at arts centers, and three conference presentations a year (until COVID-19 changed all our expectations of

conferences). I have overcome my shy introvert's resistance to public speaking.

Finally, the show made me a better librarian. If knowledge is information organized and contextualized, then *LITS* is a knowledge laboratory; we create eccentric, irreverent context through music, expertise, trivia, and in-the-moment reactions. Relistening to some of our shows, I can hear myself having realizations about archives, data, copyright, freedom, and creative expression *in real time*. Exposing my own learning process, listening to my cohorts' own exploration of new ideas, has made me change how I communicate outside of the studio: writing, presenting, and teaching. When creating a syllabus, I will sometimes catch

myself speaking in terms of show production: "In this segment, we'll introduce the concept, follow with a reflective break, bring in real-world examples for the second segment, and finish with practical applications at the end."

The show is my cognitive map for learning and communication, and while it is imperfect, I enjoy the messy rock 'n' roll spirit of it.

*Read more about Lost in the Stacks and view the archive at <https://lostinthestacks.libsyn.com/>*

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