

This American Life - Best Episodes

2015/10/31

In this blog post I'll be highlighting my most memorable episodes of the This American Life podcast. I've been listening to this very popular podcast for a number of years now and currently I've listened to 62 of the 570 episodes (2015-10-30), at least since I've been tracking which I listened to. I plan to update this post once in a while with any new episodes I consider good enough (probably once a year or so). Also, here is their own favorites list, which I didn't look at before producing this one. Every episode can be listened to from their site.

This American Life is a weekly public radio show broadcast (and podcast) which lasts about one hour per episode and focuses on a specific theme each week. Each theme is explored by telling a variety of stories about that theme. The thing they in my opinion do very well, is that each of these stories is told from a personal viewpoint, but together they give you a lot of insight in the theme they are talking about. The subject matter is very diverse, but in general it is about social / cultural things and it often focuses on American culture, which isn't too strange considering it's an American podcast. This American Life has been around since 1995.

Regarding how I choose which episodes to put on this list: I generally test a few months later whether or not I can still instantly remember an episode (or one of the acts in the episode) and if it still invokes a strong feeling of 'that was really interesting' (which generally means it was very insightful, shocking or very bright!). Otherwise I'd be including pretty much every episode as I enjoy about 90% of all the episodes. These are just the one's that really made an impression on me and in many cases changed at least a bit how I view the world. Note: The episodes are listed in episode order, not in any kind of ranking.

As I've still listed 10+ episodes, these are the one's I feel are the best of the best: #544, #561 and #502.

Episode	My notes	Name + Summary
	I simply could not, not include this one. The first act shows one person being so extremely passionate about being a theme park manager, that it really made me smile.	#443: Amusement Park. We head to some of the happiest places on Earth: Amusement Parks! Jonathan Goldstein revisits one he worked at as a teen, Ira takes us behind the scenes at Worlds of Fun in Kansas City, where the staff so loves their jobs they make music videos and other videos.
	The first act is pretty interesting, with an insight in the bitter power struggle in a Native American Tribe that runs a casino. Act two is where this one shines, about a relatively unknown condition (ASMR). But even the third episode is quite good, about mailing-list brides!	#491: Tribes. A Native American tribe is doing exactly the opposite of what you'd think they'd do: they're kicking people out of the tribe, huge numbers of them, including people whose ancestors without question were part of the tribe. And the story of a white guy who only wants to date Asian women, who then has to adjust to the reality of a real actual Asian woman in his life. The phrase "finding your tribe" is a total cliché — but one that does apply to certain situations.
	Incredible sociological story as it dives into the African kidnapping industry. And a very emotional, life changing one (for the hostages and the journalist).	#502: This Call May Be Recorded... To Save Your Life. A journalist named Meron Estefanos gets a disturbing tip. She's given a phone number that supposedly belongs to a group of refugees being held hostage in the Sinai desert. She dials the number, and soon dozens of strangers are begging her to rescue them. How can she ignore them?

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	The second act is the one that stuck with me here. Very endearing and powerful story about a very shy girl that completely changes once she becomes a school mascot :).	#506: Secret Identity. A bank robber on an undercover mission. A teenage girl with the powers of a tiger. A vigilante seeking vengeance in Ciudad Juarez. All have secret identities. But not all of them chose those identities for themselves.
	Act three was one of the funniest stories I ever heard, act one is also pretty funny. And I liked getting the thoughts about how fiasco's affect people / crowds.	#510: Fiasco!. Stories of when things go wrong. Really wrong. When you leave the normal realm of human error, fumble, mishap, and mistake and enter the territory of really huge breakdowns. Fiascos. Things go so awry that normal social order collapses.
	I found the view of culture at an American car dealership very interesting. Also, the way this report is made very personal by focusing on the different sales people one by one.	#513: 129 Cars. We spend a month at a Jeep dealership on Long Island as they try to make their monthly sales goal: 129 cars. If they make it, they'll get a huge bonus from the manufacturer, possibly as high as \$85,000 — enough to put them in the black for the month. If they don't make it, it'll be the second month in a row. So they pull out all the stops.

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	Act one is so utterly unbelievable, yet interesting (and it really happened). It's about a Japanese reality TV show in which a person has to survive alone and locked in a room only on sweepstakes. The other acts are good, but without this one, this episode wouldn't have made this list.	#529: Human Spectacle. Gladiators in the Colosseum. Sideshow performers. Reality television. We've always loved to gawk at the misery or majesty of others. But this week, we ask the question: What's it like when the tables are turned and all eyes are on you?
	This is a pretty depressing story, but powerful. It tells about how a school district is slowly being taken over by ultra-orthodox jews and how that destroyed the funding for public schooling. Despite all that, very interesting.	#534: A Not-So-Simple Majority. We take it for granted that the majority calls the shots. But in one NY school district, that idea — majority rules — has led to an all-out war. School board disputes are pretty common, but not like this one. This involves multimillion-dollar land deals, lawyers threatening to beat up parents, felony criminal charges, and the highest levels of state government. Meanwhile, the students are caught in the middle.
	This one made the list because it gives a rare insight in what goes on with bank monitoring and the culture there. I sadly don't really remember whether or not I was shocked by these findings, so I really need to re-listen this one somewhere in the future.	#536: The Secret Recordings of Carmen Segarra. An unprecedented look inside one of the most powerful, secretive institutions in the country. The NY Federal Reserve is supposed to monitor big banks. But when Carmen Segarra was hired, what she witnessed inside the Fed was so alarming that she got a tiny recorder and started secretly taping.

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✖	I simply had to add this one, because in the first act you get an utterly intriguing look into how a marketing pyramid scheme / cult works. Warning: It might cause you to be annoyed / depressed about the human race.	#543: Wake Up Now. As New Year's approaches and people are contemplating things they want to change about themselves, we have stories of people trying to wake themselves up, shake up their own lives, or wake up others. Including the story of a company - or maybe it's a movement - called WakeUpNow.
✖	One of my all-time favorites. It shows how one person found an almost super human way to deal with his blindness. And that the way we deal with blind people in society might not be what's best for them.	#544: Batman. Can other people's expectations of you alter what you can do physically? Alix Spiegel and Lulu Miller of NPR's new radio show and podcast Invisibilia investigate that question - specifically, they look into something that sounds impossible: if people's expectations can change whether a blind man can see.
✖	The reason I remembered this one vividly was because a police friend of the journalist completely couldn't understand why most people would view a particular incident as police brutality. All in all this gives a lot of insight from both a police / civilian perspective (most applicable to America though).	#547 & #548: Cops See It Differently. There are so many cops who look at the killing of Eric Garner or Mike Brown and say race didn't play a factor. And there are tons of black people who say that's insane. There's a division between people who distrust the police — even fear them — and people who see cops as a force for good. Stories of people living on both sides of that divide, and people trying to bridge it.

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	Incredible story about the cultural difference between private and public schools in America and the (shock) effect it can have on the students. And also a powerful personal story about failed dreams (Melanie).	#550: Three Miles. There's a program that brings together kids from two schools. One school is public and in the country's poorest congressional district. The other is private and costs \$43,000/year. They are three miles apart. The hope is that kids connect, but some of the public school kids just can't get over the divide. We hear what happens when you get to see the other side and it looks a lot better
	Very interesting historical insight in the corporate culture of General Motors, the labor market of the US and the social differences between Japan and the United States.	#561: NUMMI 2015. A car plant in Fremont California that might have saved the U.S. car industry. In 1984, General Motors and Toyota opened NUMMI as a joint venture. Toyota showed GM the secrets of its production system: How it made cars of much higher quality and much lower cost than GM achieved. Frank Langfitt explains why GM didn't learn the lessons—until it was too late.