

Living on the Air: The Dick Gibson Show's Greatest Hits

Arthur J. Saltzman

HOST: Welcome to The Dick Gibson Show, where the format is all talk, all the time. If you are familiar with the works of Stanley Elkin, you will no doubt recognize the premise, for Elkin has frequently been introduced as a writer who exploits the conventional components of fiction primarily for their verbal capital. Plot is primarily employed as a language propellant. Ethical priorities are manifested as elocution lessons. Vocations are repositories of vocabulary. And character is an ongoing audition of identity. In other words—and for Elkin, other words are the best claim one has on perpetuity—voice is presence and presence voice. To be is to be broadcast, and because the radio talk show particularly insists upon that definition, there being no other authorization of presence apart from its aural components, it may be suggested that The Dick Gibson Show is the purest representation of the author's aesthetic, preoccupation, and inevitable situation.

ERIC BOGOSIAN: That part is only amplified by the fact that we can't see him. As we hear his silken voice, our imaginations take over and we fill in his face and demeanor (xvii).

ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET: The dramatic character is on stage, that is his primary quality: he is there (111).

HOST: But, begging Gertrude Stein's pardon, to what degree is there a there there? Presence is confined to what's here. Moreover, it's a pretty flimsy, furtive presence that is posited here. Didn't Stoppard's *Player in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* make much the same contention? Not precisely in those words, I'll warrant.

GUILDENSTERN: Words, words. They're all we have to go on (41).

T. S. ELIOT: And so each venture/Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate/With shabby equipment always deteriorating/In the general mess of imprecision of feeling . . . (5.7-10).

ROSENCRANTZ: Shouldn't we be doing something—constructive? (41).

HOST: But that is my point. Words are the way one persists in these—pardon, in your—circumstances. They are a character's constitution and conveyance. And if Robbe-Grillet is right, there is no alternative.

PLAYER: You don't understand the humiliation of it—to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable—that somebody is watching (63).

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: Not really understanding how they've worked it, but suspecting . . . that the show might not be going out over the air at all (221).

HOST: A conspiracy of engineers, then? It is a kind of Bakhtinian nightmare: the dialogic premise of the novel—of any novel—is that the voices are being heard and responded to.

M. M. BAKHTIN: For the prose writer, the object is a focal point for heteroglot voices among which his own voice must also sound; these voices create the background necessary for his own voice, outside of which his artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived, and without which they “do not sound” (278).

HOST: Agreed. This emphasis on voice, or more accurately, on the interchange of voices, renders the novel as more of a process than an artifact or finished system. Literature and society alike are founded upon the premise of responsiveness. But if dialogic assumptions are scuttled, where can one go from there? And in view of the decertification of the medium, how?

T. S. ELIOT: Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt/Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure (5.3-4).

HOST: So if only words ratify and locate you—let me get this straight—where are you in all this?

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: I have no character; I am what I think. And what I say on the radio. What I think and what I say. My voice (209).

ERIC BOGOSIAN: He lost his voice once in nineteen eighty-three. Freaked him the fuck out. At first he was climbing the walls . . . then he started getting depressed. . . . Real depressed. I know what it was. He missed the sound of his own voice (39).

GUILDENSTERN: Give us this day our daily cue (102).

HOST: In other words, which as we've established is all there is to go on, the adoption or dissemination of alter egos in itself is no guarantee of the ego. There must be witnesses. Or in the particular medium in question, space must be validated as auditorium. And there's the nub of it: radio affirms intimacy and distance simultaneously. It provides unprecedented capacities for contact (the Internet notwithstanding—a subject for another show), yet it verifies nothing so much as distance.

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: He continued to work in whatever he could of the unusual and by consistently putting himself in the way of opportunity, managed to do everything, discovering in the infinite resources of his voice, in the disparate uses to which it could be put, the various alter egos of human sound (14).

HAMLET: I eat the air, promise-crammed (3.2.98).

STANLEY ELKIN: He is, that is, as all of us are, the fiction of his sound, all his recombinant glottals, labials, fricatives, and plosives. He's his flaps and trills. He's his spirants, I mean ("What's in a Name?" 59).

HOST: That's the man's sound barrier, as it were. The intrinsic guarantee and constriction of voice. A variation, or a prescribed set of variations, whereby character remains a self-evident concept—an excuse or vehicle for verbal experimentation. I am reminded of W. H. Auden's contention that poetry "survives,/A way of happening, a mouth." And since you are, for all intents and purposes, what you say, the speaker is as much a verbal event as his speech.

M. M. BAKHTIN: Usually a hero acts no less in a novel than he does in an epic. The crucial distinction between him and the epic hero is to be found in the fact that the hero of a novel not only acts but talks, too . . . (334).

HOST: Precisely. The fictional figure is the sum of his sound bites, right? William Gass has said as much himself on several occasions. For instance, in "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction."

WILLIAM H. GASS: The esthetic aim of any fiction is the creation of a verbal world, or a significant part of such a world, alive through every order of its Being (7).

HOST: And of course, that Being is constituted, endowed, and consecrated linguistically. Events, characters, descriptions—sentences only, sentences all. Self and other come down to inscriptions, utterances. It's a simulation of Creation, or rather its reversal, if you will, as flesh is made word. Dick Gibson is, quite literally, all talk. (Unintelligible murmuring in background.)

HOST: So the reports of the "death of the author" have been greatly exaggerated, or rather, the corpse has been misidentified. The author survives quite nicely, thank you; it's his characters that have been exposed as his prosthetic parts.

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: . . . as though character were nothing more than hinged mood (100).

HOST: Or more to the point, in the case of The Dick Gibson Show, characters are revealed to be instances of elocution. And among prose writers, who is more attentive to cadence, alliteration, and metrical amenities than Stanley Elkin? His infamous riffs are oral prompts—they have been designed to be read aloud.

RICK MOODY: The unit of composition in the fictions of Stanley Elkin is not the sentence or the paragraph, but the breath (1).

HOST: The breath of the stand-up comic on a roll. The breath of the jazz saxophonist suffused with his solo. The keep-it-up antics of a guy in the groove.

RICK MOODY: Breath (from which comes the word inspiration, of course) is the real motivator in the way the sentences are structured. Sometimes a passage in Elkin goes on at some length just because the rhythms are good. Sometimes a passage goes on simply because of the sound (1).

HOST: Walk loudly and carry a big shtick.

RICK MOODY: Well, it's true that stand-up comedy is structured around how a comedian talks. It's all about spiel, about how a certain piece of business can sustain a sequence of jokes for a time. And certainly this emphasis on spoken rhythms is a relevant piece of Elkin's prose. . . . But this orality is about breath. The spiel goes on until the breath runs out. The texture of talk is essential to this language, sure . . . (1).

HOST: Clearly, Elkin's extremist, acrobatic, hyperventilated, if-it's-baroque-don't-fix-it style is what keeps most of his readers turned on and, if I may be excused the obvious gesture toward The Dick Gibson Show, tuned in. It's what he calls in "Pieces of Soap" that "something exponential in the blood" (180). Or better yet, how do you account for your penchant for aria?

STANLEY ELKIN: But life's tall order is to keep the feelings up, to make two dollars' worth of euphoria go the distance (Introduction to The Best American Short Stories 1980 204).

HOST: It's arguably something of an ethical standard for you.

STANLEY ELKIN: Energy is what counts. . . . Whoever has the better rhetoric is the better man (Interview with Duncan 61).

HOST: That's what I'm saying. In the word better you champion the coalescence of ethical and aesthetic priorities. Your sympathies are for those who keep up the good fight by prolonging themselves verbally, which is to say . . . well, which is to say.

RICK MOODY: Elkin stands for survival and memorial, whose improvisations in the face of mortality just keep reiterating, irascibly, loveably, the same wild chant, still here, still here, still here (3).

HOST: The fact is that in The Dick Gibson Show in particular the stakes are demonstrably higher, or better, more comprehensive, because there is no telling whether or not what the radio says exists, exists. Because there is no way to verify what's said when saying is all there is. Because he might be making it all up. Stop me if you've heard this one.

JOHN BARTH: " '(((('((((' 'Well . . . ')))'))))' (152).

HAMM: Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark (Beckett, Endgame 70).

HOST: Hold on, all of you! We won't get very far if everyone keeps talking at once. (Static) Better. Thank you. I am reminded how Dick Gibson reacts to his family's role-playing games, which even though they anticipate his own professional inflections/deflections, still oppress him.

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: It wasn't simply that they worked so hard to show off. Rather it was that their divertissements were a delaying action that held him off (75).

HOST: So instead of establishing identity and intimacy, talk threatens to disqualify the speaker and the auditor alike.

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: He had always felt just a little silly announcing, introducing, selling, describing, interviewing, giving the time and telling the weather, doing local color, acting and reciting bed-time stories, holding up his spokesman's end of the conversation—which in radio was the only end there was (83).

HOST: To pick up on that, in terms specific to radio, we are talking about a feedback loop, aren't we? An impenetrable and perpetual vicious cycle. Although "vicious" may be unfair to the satisfactions it provides. Dick?

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: "One moment, please," he begged, and again the two voices—the one in his mouth that all his life he would stand behind, his sound but always sent away, forever sacrificed, and the one booming from the speaker—seemed to collide fiercely in midair. It was a phenomenon he had experienced at the studio whenever someone had carelessly left open the door to the engineer's booth, and he knew it could combust in a sudden piercing feedback. But something about the shack's isolation, the idea of his ricocheting voice, its far-flung ventriloquous roundtrip, was exciting to him (6).

HOST: Like the radio personality, the novelist is also destined to "stand behind" his voices, both in the sense of hiding behind them and in the sense of supporting them. They are the vehicle of self, as well as the tenor. This leads me to another paradox: radio is arguably all circumference, in that it endlessly disperses the self as waves, or it is all center, in the sense that we have been entertaining—namely, that all emanations track back to a single point of origin. The ur-sound bite, say—Dick Gibson's "scrambled 'I am' " writ (or rather, spoken) large. WMIA—the self simultaneously expanded and missing in action. Or how else did The Dick Gibson Show style it? We are prisoners of the "ventriloquous" self, by whose sleight-of-mouth, monologue deceives us (and at times, its instigator) to appear communal, dialogic. The initial symptom may be the deliberate disguises Dick Gibson adopts—the on-air pseudonyms that upholster, deflect, and reconstitute him. Or, to put a pessimistic spin on it, disintegrate him.

MOUTH: . . . realized . . . words were coming . . . imagine! . . . words were coming . . . a voice she did not recognize . . . at first . . . so long since it had sounded . . . then finally had to admit . . . could be none other . . . than her own . . . (Beckett, *Not I* 80).

WILLIAM H. GASS: This illustrates a basic principle: if I describe my peach too perfectly, it's the poem which will make my mouth water . . . while the real peach spoils ("*The Medium of Fiction*" 32).

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: "The personalities," Dick said, "I don't know if I can explain this . . ."

HOST: Please, go on.

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: ". . . but they're part of our lives, not even a trivial part either because we grow up to their jokes, we tell time by their voices. And what voices! Broadcast. Broad cast. Personality like seed, a part of nature, in forests and beside streams, and high up the sides of mountains, higher than the timber line" (82).

HOST: As ubiquitous and competitive in nature as that! Radio may be especially conducive to this literal effect of the broadcast—of broadening the cast—by virtue of the medium's invisible saturation of the environment. We have entered the realm of secret harmony or conspiracy, in the sense of everyone being "attuned."

DON DELILLO: . . . the stunned landscape feeding the convulsive radio, every acre of the night bursting with a kinetic unity, the logic beyond delirium (214).

HOST: And to complete or close the circuit, the radio feeds back into that charged atmosphere. But can we return specifically to the notion of how Dick Gibson's centrifugal force proves centripetal, too? There is always the ghost of the host to contend with. I mean, the radio personality—the on-air voice—foregrounds its inescapable origin even as it fragments and scatters. I believe that we are expressing something of the heteroglossia of interior consciousness and exterior verbal life whose impact Mikhail Bakhtin has described as a refraction of discourse.

M. M. BAKHTIN: Therefore proper theoretical recognition and illumination could not be found for the specific feel for language and discourse that one gets in stylizations, in skaz, in parodies and in various forms of verbal masquerade, "not talking straight," and in the more complex artistic forms for the organization of contradiction . . . (274-75).

HOST: Indeed, I've read your book, and I found continual reference to how the novelistic verbal environment is diverse, elastic, and saturated with play. Perhaps the most intense demonstration of this phenomenon in *The Dick Gibson Show* may be the paranoid schizophrenic struggle for on-air ascendancy between Dick Gibson and Behr-Bleibtreau. If you'll indulge us?

DICK GIBSON: Yes.

BEHR-BLEIBTREAU: Did you say yes or was that me imitating your voice?

DICK GIBSON: I said yes.

BEHR-BLEIBTREAU: Speak up. Will Dick Gibson deny that Mel Son has a weapon in his hand? Supposing for a moment that the audience has been hearing two Dick Gibsons, a real one and an imposter—which is not the case—that would still leave the real Dick Gibson to deny the existence of the gun. Does he deny it?

DICK GIBSON: I already said he has a gun. I already said so.

BEHR-BLEIBTREAU: There are no disclaimers? It's not too late.

DICK GIBSON: The gun's real. The real Dick Gibson says the real gun is real.

BEHR-BLEIBTREAU: Very well, then.

BEHR-BLEIBTREAU: You really are a superb mimic, Mr. Gibson.

BEHR-BLEIBTREAU: Stop that (215).

HOST: That'll do, that'll do. Thank you, gentle . . . men. Sorry, but it's sometimes hard to remember when you are on . . .

PLAYER: I start on (34).

HOST: Who? Oh, sorry. The business about the gun reminds me of the transfiguration of firearm into word, or is it vice versa, in DeLillo's *White Noise*. Word and thing are equally ambiguous and equally lethal, if one is sufficiently open to the power of suggestion. As I was saying . . . I was, wasn't I? Yes, about when one is acting in character. The question begs a redundancy.

MOUTH: . . . till she began trying to . . . delude herself . . . it was not hers at all . . . not her voice at all . . . (Beckett, *Not I* 81).

HOST: Where now? Who now?

UNNAMABLE: Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving (291).

STANLEY ELKIN: . . . character layered as a cake ("Performance and Reality" 26).

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: He was a character as other people were amoral (208).

STANLEY ELKIN: But always, peeking over the will's shoulder—to pick up just one element in the chain—is the character's brooding, critical, and concerned presence ("Plot" 35).

HOST: Meaning Behr-Bleibtreau? Or meaning Dick Gibson? Or meaning Dick Gibson meaning Behr-Bleibtreau? Anyone? (Silence) This may be a reasonable juncture to take a couple of calls. Is the caller there? (Brief laughter, off)

SCREENER: Only in a manner of speaking.

HOST: 'Twas ever thus. All right, assume quotation marks around every term of that question. Yes, hello?

MARTIN AMIS: The post-modern world magnifies the self to the point of insupportability; those who can't take it will need to surrender to an idea or—easier still—a personality (314).

HOST: Thank you. Your assertion dovetails quite nicely with The Dick Gibson Show's continually emerging and merging personalities. Where you depart from the novel's condition, perhaps, is in your assumption that one surrenders to a unitarian personality, whereas the reverse seems to be the case here. E Unum Pluribus.

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: Then he talks till 5 A.M., rambling, filling in, not always aware of what he is saying, or even if the program is still on the air, but using his voice because he still has it, because it's still his—uniquely inflected, Gibson-timbred, a sum of private frequencies and personal resonances, as marked as his thumbs—because the show must go on and he must be on it (229).

HOST: We have another caller who is eager to weigh in on this.

PETER J. BAILEY: "Making do" with minimal assets and compromised advantages is a necessity so common to Elkin protagonists as to practically define their condition. Character after character presents himself as being in some way deficient in personal substance (15).

HOST: Agreed. Yet under these circumstances, we need to account for the exuberance—the arrogance—of utterance. The self declaimed, disclaimed, and proclaimed at the same time. In the case of Dick Gibson . . .

PETER J. BAILEY: Dick wants his name to become synonymous with the American ordinary, a sense of extremity held off and the extraordinary routinized, a sense of the normal and the everyday sustained and preserved. To become the sound of that sense of American well-being is Dick's goal, for he hopes that, in becoming its oral embodiment, he will personally be able to transcend it (55-56).

HOST: And by “it,” you may include “them,” the Mail Baggers, the callers-in and hangers-on.

STANLEY ELKIN: . . . those yeasty populations of the unknown, there by accident, to whom we talk and talk and talk (Boswell 217).

HOST: And there’s Elkin’s own paradox: to exalt the quotidian through revved-up rhetoric encourages its translation out of the quotidian or at least exposes an impatience with what’s presumably being honored. Indeed, while *The Dick Gibson Show* is predicated upon the value and validity of focusing attention, love, and career upon the ordinary, one cannot help but recognize its implicit refutation of the ordinary. The man is at once detached from all others and uniquely in touch with them. On the one hand, Dick wants to be the voice of the common American. On the other, he privately asks . . .

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: Who broadcasts to the brutes? he wondered ardently. Who has the ear of the swine? (92).

HOST: Thanks. I’d prefer that it come from you.

SCREENER: We do have someone else on the line.

HOST: With a gloss on Dick Gibson’s commitment to connecting the exceptional with the ordinary. Go ahead.

RAYMOND OLDERMAN: He is the spokesman for the particular American consciousness which believes our source of energy is monolithic, explicable, and endlessly exploitable, which believes energy can only be created when the wild and unpredictable are refined to the normal and usable (131).

HOST: The “particular American consciousness,” eh? That’s either a warrant for or a warning against arrogance. You’ve put a patriotic spin on egotism, it seems. America as His Master’s Voice! So what we tend to perceive as verbal paroxysms or attacks of ecstasy among Elkin’s protagonists are more appropriately understood as incursive strategies, at least in the case of this novel. The political repercussions alone are enough to require a separate show.

RAYMOND OLDERMAN: Dick Gibson is an outsider who wants in. He wants to make his voice the perfect voice, the absolute American voice. In pursuing this he makes himself the absolute American (128).

SCREENER: More on this issue on Line Three.

HOST: I’d say this was getting excessive, but considering the source . . . Go ahead, caller. Something about the Americanness of Elkin’s heroes in general?

THOMAS LECLAIR: Because their obsessions arise from areas of mass fascination and because they expend their energies within recognizable—if sometimes dislocated—systems of value, their private thoughts and public careers reveal truths particularly relevant and available to the American present (147).

HOST: So it's not only that these peculiar obsessions are American but that obsession, or rather the capacity to enact obsession on a broad scale, is peculiar to America.

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: Drive drives the world . . . (64).

THOMAS LECLAIR: Dick's obsession is a constant, an index to social change in America. Without realizing it, "heroic" Dick Gibson does double duty as the antenna of the race: he sends the signals of conventional wisdom and receives the messages of repressed American realities (155).

HOST: I think we have time for one more caller.

CHARLES MOLESWORTH: As for the theme of free will . . .

HOST: Yes. Go ahead.

CHARLES MOLESWORTH: Gibson uses a number of aliases while working for a string of small radio stations, but finally calls himself Dick Gibson in an act of autonomous power, able to control his destiny while simultaneously, ironically, becoming a personality, the self-less moderator of other people's stories (55).

HOST: With apologies to Martin Buber, who couldn't be here today to speak for himself, there must be a Thou (if not Thous by the thousands) to authenticate the I. Identity is indentured, I guess. Dick Gibson finds himself in and as that moniker, and it is in that state that the divine Host is consumed by his devoted listeners.

THE DICK GIBSON SHOW: He would never not be Dick Gibson again. . . . [H]e had at last found his format (257).

GULDENSTERN: All this strolling about is getting too arbitrary by half—I'm rapidly losing my grip. From now on reason will prevail.

PLAYER: I have lines to learn (69).

HOST: Amen. I see that we are just about out of time. Before signing off, I just want to take a moment to thank our guests and to acknowledge our sponsors:

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