



Eric Marcus, Sara Burningham, Nahanni Rous et al. *Making Gay History: The Podcast*. New York: GLSEN, 2020.

Reviewed by Averill Earls (Mercyhurst University)

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Commissioned by Robert Cassanello (he/him/his) (University of Central Florida)

The click of the tape deck door, the grind of play and record pressed at the same time: every episode of *Making Gay History* opens with a sound that will be familiar to anyone who ever owned a tape deck. These simple but effective touches in the sound design of *Making Gay History* let you know from the start that this is not your average interview radio show. What Eric Marcus and his team give us in this short-form podcast is an invitation into the lives of the people whose labor, organizing, blood, sweat, and tears made gay history in the United States.

The show is built from the oral histories that Eric Marcus collected in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Marcus is a journalist with a BA in urban studies and master's degrees in journalism and real estate development. Though he has several history and queer studies students on his production team at *Making Gay History*, the majority of those working on the project are in media, with no formally trained historians on staff. Marcus's twelve published books deal with issues that are close to his heart: LGBT rights, life, and history, and suicide. He is an openly gay man who was in his thirties at the height of the AIDS pandemic, and both his father and sister-in-law committed suicide. His closeness to these issues is a strength of his work, and comes through in powerful personal stories and connections.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Marcus traveled the United States and interviewed a wide range of individuals who had been instrumental in the LGBT movements. He collected the stories of founding members of America's first gay rights groups, like the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis, the rioters of Stonewall like Marsha P. Johnson, and the sexologists, writers, musicians, journalists, pornographers, book shop owners, and community activists of the movements that made gay history. The archive itself, and the work that went into his book, *Making Gay History*, is a monumental service to this history. In 2016 Marcus and his colleague, Sara Burningham, pitched the idea of turning this impressive sound archive into a podcast, and the show was born.

In almost every episode we are granted access to skillfully edited stretches of original interviews. Journalists and oral historians have much in common when drawing stories from interview subjects. But beyond the standard open-ended questions and murmured encouragement, Marcus is also very much present in the interview tapes. He jokes and laughs with interviewees, observes moments of silence when remembering lost friends, and asks pointed questions that steer the conversation. Sometimes he reveals little bits of his own history as a member of the community. In a particularly moving interview with Morty Manford,

Marcus discusses his fear as a young gay man who came out in New York City, where it seemed everyone was contracting AIDS.[1] As Marcus's friends died around him, he couldn't believe how fortunate he was never to have been positive. These moments allow us to see how Marcus gained access to these stories. He was able to leverage his own identity to draw out the painful, shared experiences from those he interviewed.

In a typical episode, we aren't thrown into the deep end of the interview. Instead, Marcus takes the time to set the scene, bringing us with him into the homes and front porches of his interview subjects. He cues us in to the atmosphere of the room, the tension or ease that he felt as the interviewer, the demeanor of the people he engaged in oral histories. It's an intimate experience. The introductions are enhanced with some light ambient music, one staccato note plucked on a violin, sometimes laid under a long, warm pull across the strings. When he starts the interview recording, though, these post-production touches are absent, and it's just Marcus and his interview subjects. After the clip, which usually runs between ten and twenty minutes, Marcus will often return with those post-production touches to give further details about the interviewee—where they are today, what they went on to do, other ways they contributed to the LGBT movements.

What makes *Making Gay History* special is that we get to hear the stories of these individuals in their own words: Larry Kramer talking about the feeling of isolation and guilt as a gay man and attempted suicide, Edyth Eyde's delightful lesbian comedy songs, Bayard Rustin's perception of how his sexuality impacted his work in the civil rights movement, and so much more.[2] The majority of the episodes are constructed around Marcus's interview collection. Some, like those featuring Bayard Rustin, include interview clips that were donated to the archive. Rustin passed away in 1987, before Marcus began his interview project. In the Rustin episodes featured in seasons 4 and 7,

the recording is one that Rustin's partner, Walter Nagle, donated to the archive.

Season 4 is a departure from the standard that the *Making Gay History* (MGH) team had perfected in the first three seasons. In addition to episodes featuring audio clips that Marcus did not collect himself—with Bayard Rustin and Ernestine Eckstein—there are two episodes in this season that travel even further afield. No recordings of German gay rights activist and founder of the Institute for Sexology in Berlin Magnus Hirschfeld's voice survive. Instead of following their standard format, the MGH team constructed Hirschfeld's story instead out of Marcus's narration and interviews with historian Dagmar Herzog, the Schwules Museum's Dr. Kevin Clarke, and several other experts.[3] Similarly, in an episode on trans and gay rights activist Reed Erickson, the MGH producers built the story from interviews with people who knew Erickson as well as Morgan M Page, host of the trans history podcast *One from the Vaults*. [4] While interesting and well done (the MGH team is unsurprisingly exemplary in sound design), these episodes can feel like they belong to a different show. Many podcasts are successfully telling the stories of individuals through secondary-source narration and sound effects. What makes most of *Making Gay History* stand out is the foregrounding of the voices of those history-makers.

For educators, this podcast is an incredible resource. In many ways it resembles an edited primary-source reader. Students can hear firsthand clips of oral history primary sources, with the very important context from the historian expert. The website boasts complete transcripts for every episode. Many podcasts with similar levels of accessibility and clear educational goals often provide lesson samples or testimonials from teachers who use the episodes in their classroom. It is surprising that a podcast that has earned so many education-focused grants has not developed those kinds of resources yet, particularly as the

website is otherwise quite a well-organized virtual space to access the podcast. It is available on all the standard podcast platforms, including Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, NPR One, Overcast, Pocket Casts, RadioPublic, Stitcher, Spotify, TuneIn, and via their website, makinggayhistory.com.

Certainly much of the show's success is owed to the sound production expertise of the team, and the fact that it is a clearly well-supported indie podcast. While the website advertises funding drives, it also lists a range of big-name sponsors who have contributed to the show. Unlike most independent podcasts, which run on shoestring budgets out of their homes, it's clear that Marcus is recording in a studio space, that he has a team of people helping him produce the show, and that those team members are compensated for their time. With sponsorships from Netflix, Con Edison, and Christopher Street Financial, and funding secured from the Jonathan Logan Family Foundation, the Calamus Foundation, Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, the Ford Foundation, and the Arcus Foundation, all that seems to separate *Making Gay History* from an NPR show is the public radio connection.

As perhaps evidenced most acutely by season 4, the original format of *Making Gay History* has some limitations. Were the producers to focus exclusively on the stories contained in Eric Marcus's interview library for his book, the people represented would be predominately white, East or West Coastal, and urban, like Marcus himself. About half the stories included in the current seasons are of women, including a handful of trans women, but trans folks are less represented than cis folks. These were the people whom Marcus had access to through his personal and professional connections. There are very few people of color in any given season, maybe two or three at the most in seasons with as many as thirteen episodes. Even fewer Latinx, Asian American, Native American, or immigrant stories are included. Some individuals are featured several times, appearing in differ-

ent seasons. This is a delight when we get to hear more of Edythe Eyde's songs, or dive back into Morty Manford's story. At the same time, when the stories of Perry Watkins, Marsha P Johnson, and Bayard Rustin are used a second time, when they were the only people of color the first time they appeared in a season, it is easy to see the thin edges of the project.

It seems clear that the producers are aware of these limitations, as evidenced by seasons 4 and 5, which have episodes that are not built around archival oral histories. It does raise the question, though: why dedicate a special kind of episode to Magnus Hirschfeld instead of Gladys Bentley or James Baldwin? Marcus frames that season as hearing "from the activists and visionaries who got the ball rolling for LGBTQ civil rights."^[5] The opening five episodes of season 4 are the white men and women whom the producers identified as most important: Hirschfeld; Harry Hay; Billye Talmadge; Dorr Legg, Martin Block, and Jim Kepner; and Stella Rush. Trans activist Reed Erickson, civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, and Ernestine Eckstein, the only African American woman at the earliest homophile movement protests, are profiled in episodes 7, 8, and 9. Though seemingly a minor point, the order of episode release is also the order that listeners will be introduced to this history. While the broader inclusion of women and lesbians in this podcast's stories does much to counter the dominant narrative that the gay rights movement was led by men, the continued centrality of white narratives in this podcast is problematic. Particularly in public-facing projects like this well-funded educational podcast, we must do our part to de-center white narratives.

Season 5 continues to depart from the show's standard, with four episodes dedicated to Stonewall's fiftieth anniversary. Seasons 6 and 7 return to the stories in Marcus's archive. Season 8, the most recent, draws on recordings from the impressive Studs Terkel Radio Archive in Chicago. With this most recent foray into archival material

beyond Eric Marcus's recordings, it is clear that the possibilities for the show are nearly endless. Perhaps they will tap into one of the exciting trans oral history projects that have been developed in New York City, Iowa, Louisiana, and elsewhere.[6] Perhaps they will seek out the expertise of E. Patrick Johnson, who conducted oral histories of gay Black men in the American South.[7] No matter what the future holds for *Making Gay History*, it is an incredible platform, beautifully crafted, with important stories to tell.

Notes

[1]. Eric Marcus, "Season 3, Episode 11, Morty Manford," in *Making Gay History*, produced by Sara Burningham, Josh Gwynn, and Pineapple Street Podcasts, podcast, MP3 audio, 16:41, <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/morty-manford/>.

[2]. Eric Marcus, "Season 7, Episode 2, Revisiting the Archive: Edythe Eyde," in *Making Gay History*, produced by Sara Burningham, podcast, MP3 audio, 3:49 <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/revisiting-the-archive-episode-2-edythe-eyde/>, and Eric Marcus, "Season 3, Episode 6, Larry Kramer," in *Making Gay History*, produced by Sara Burningham and Pineapple Street Media, podcast, MP3 audio, 5:29, <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/larry-kramer/>.

[3]. Eric Marcus, "Season 4, Episode 2, Magnus Hirschfeld," in *Making Gay History*, produced by Josh Gwynn and Pineapple Street Podcasts, podcast, MP3 audio, <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/magnus-hirschfeld/>.

[4]. Eric Marcus, "Season 4, Episode 7: Reed Erickson," in *Making Gay History*, produced by Sara Burningham, Josh Gwynn, and Pineapple Street Podcasts, podcast, MP3 audio, <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/reed-erickson/>.

[5]. Eric Marcus, "Season 4, Introduction," in *Making Gay History*, produced by Sara Burningham, Josh Gwynn, and Pineapple Street Podcasts,

podcast, MP3 audio, <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/season-4-introduction/>.

[6]. Transgender Oral History Project of Iowa (TOPI), University of Iowa Libraries, <https://historycorps.lib.uiowa.edu/exhibits/show/topi>; Louisiana Trans Oral History Project, T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History, <https://www.louisianatransoralhistory.org/interviews>; The Tretter Transgender Oral History Project, University of Minnesota, <https://www.lib.umn.edu/tretter/transgender-oral-history-project>.

[7]. E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South—An Oral History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

Editor's note: This review has been corrected to reflect that it was Marcus's sister-in-law, not sister, who committed suicide and that the interviews used in *Making Gay History* are edited.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-podcast>

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