

Mad Genius Curates The Third Coast Festival: What Def Leppard Teaches Us About Public Radio

Mike Iann has [the kind of voice](#) you often don't hear on NPR: Raw, rough, real and *ridiculous*. He could have been a *Jersey Shore* reject. We were attracted to him immediately. His fear is palpable; his machismo cracked as he shares his tale of Hurricane Sandy survival. The audiophiles at Mad Genius have been playing with samples like Mike's forever, but we agreed last year to accept a bigger challenge: We wanted to tell stories. But they had to be rawer than Ira; more musical than *RadioLab*.

So what will this show sound like? What's missing at public radio? We prayed to our found sound saints for inspiration. Sample-based artists like [Steinski](#), [The KLF](#) or [My Life In The Bush of Ghosts](#). But the gods who provided broadcast guidance time and time again were far hairier: Sheffield, England stadium rock perfectionists Def Leppard and their sound Svengali Robert John "Mutt" Lange. Laugh all you want, hipster; you can't deny these five Leppard lessons worth sharing.



L-R: Nina Totenberg, Carl Kassell, Steve Inskeep, Terry Gross and Ira Glass, circa 1987.

1. Find the Emotion: "Unless you can hear the people inside, it doesn't matter."

The "haters" will say that pop-metal's "Fab Five" were superficial, sugar-pouring posers, but considerate ears know the truth: Def Leppard crafted messages that resonate. While a track like ["Love Bites"](#) was produced for maximum radio impact, the underlying emotions were real to the songwriters. Lead singer Joe Elliott once said that the chart-topping ballad "made (his) mum cry."

The stories at the heart of our work reach for that same universality. The narrative should feel familiar to a public radio listener, but we're searching for something more. We want that subtle piece of pop zeitgeist that produces another layer of emotional fascination. Thus, a Mad Genius production will introduce you to [doomsday preppers](#), [political wingnuts](#) and the [Higgs boson](#).

Sometimes we go overboard. In [“How To Build A Zombie Apocalypse,”](#) we admit the zeitgeist dominated, lurching towards fans of *The Walking Dead*. The tragic heart finally shows itself near the end, when it becomes clear that the news cycle happily ignored the trauma of witnesses. When we get the balance right, however, it’s sublime. Our protagonist in [“The Adventures of Hurricane Mike”](#) remains relatable while tip-toeing the line between sincerity and stereotype.

We purposefully inject a sense of play into our work at Mad Manor, hopefully to a greater degree than other producers, but we try not to lose sight of these fascinating people.



Bob Edwards, in his former life as the producer for AC/DC.

2. Develop the Hooks: “Write a greatest hits album before it’s released.”

Producer “Mutt” Lange’s mission with Def Leppard’s *Hysteria* album was to give every song the potential to be a massive hit. His taskmaster philosophy is well documented amongst musicians, but also works in the public radio world. We’ve christened these bits of wisdom “Mutt Nuggets” and we insist that you frame them on your wall...

“Write bits.” “Break them up into parts.” “Make each part melodic.” “Don’t be too precious with ideas.” “Just because you’ve recorded it, doesn’t mean you can’t erase it.” You can hear these “Mutt Nuggets” in action on 1987’s [“Animal.”](#) In particular, listen to the multitude of guitar parts in the verses. Every jangle, chug and swoon is a unique phrase worming into your brain without overwhelming the heart of the song.

We used this layered approach while working with BBC Radio 4 on a [Higgs boson discovery](#) feature. In lieu of guitars, we employed found sounds directly related to the public’s fascination with Dr. Peter Higgs. Elated applause forms a percussion loop in the background as a piano rendering of Hadron Collider data pushes the chorus along. The BBC’s iconic clock “pulse” modulates as gobsmacked scientists start to dance – “I think we have it.” “Should I say that I’m pleased?” “Magnificent.” “You agree?”

If you haven’t heard our work yet, spoiler alert: We build songs around our subjects using samples from the news and social media. But you don’t have to be a Mad Genius to steal our tactics. Hooks work in narrative storytelling, news packages and even live radio. Be on the lookout during your next production. Some are large and vicious (a car crash, a judge’s gavel), others are bacterial in size (a sigh, a slight breeze). Listen for short verbal phrases, accidental tones found in the field and interesting ambient anomalies. But don’t forget Mutt’s most important Nugget: “Don’t be too precious.” Be ruthless with your audio. If used too often or out front, it can become annoying. Not enough or too deep and it will be

missed. Just right and the audience will crave another listen when it's over. That's the very nature of a memorable recording.



The host for Fresh Air's only got one arm?

3. Prepare for Work: “Do it again, Rick. Do it again, Rick. Do it again, Rick...”

Def Leppard's *Hysteria* sessions were torturous. Elliott reportedly sobbed on mic after endless takes, “I can't sing anymore, I can't sing.” Drummer Rick Allen allegedly knifed drum sticks into the studio wall out of sheer frustration. But “Mutt's” devil was in the details: Brilliant sound production on the radio takes hours and hours of minute work, brutal trials and embarrassing errors.

Our early pieces for public radio [bordered on montages](#). Poor Art Silverman at NPR didn't know what to do with us: “Obviously you have a good touch on putting audio together, but I don't see how we can use it. Thanks anyway.” Art had a point. The sublime balance we described earlier hadn't been achieved yet. Where were the people, their humor and grace?

It took a shooting to wake us. The Trayvon Martin story had all the Mad Genius elements waiting to be found: A victim and witnesses who could easily be you, razor-sharp audio and social media reaction that helped build the music. We reviewed those [911 tapes](#) for hours, picking up patterns, colors and emotions.

“Oh my god.” “Oh my god.” “Oh my god.” The main hook revealed itself early as did the musical mood. The verses were like pulling teeth. A tug-of-war ensued between building a climax and being true to events. But once we edited that last anonymous caller, it was clear: What she had to say could silence 10,000 pundits. [“Someone's Screaming Outside”](#) took three weeks of rewrites and editing until we realized the sound in our heads. And even now there are still things we'd like to tweak (the floating key for one thing).

We encourage more independent producers to stubbornly carve out their niche. From our vantage point of *This American Life* clones and “zombie” *Car Talk*, it's desperately needed. But be prepared for long nights with “Mutt” Lange in your head: “Do it again... Do it again...” Not to mention a 95 percent rejection rate. Don't just learn from your setbacks, producer, adapt aggressively, market fearlessly and your allies will soon emerge.



Ira, showing his best stage moves. He still does this today, you just can't see him.

4. Establish Unique Influences: “The rhythm just got me going.”

Our version of the story goes like this: Singer Joe Elliott was washing his torn, whitewashed jeans when a hot young thing walked up with her boom box. She put the stereo aside and tried out her latest pick-up lines, but our hero was having none of it. He was hearing only the rhythm emerging from her ghetto blaster: Obscure African beat-maker [Burundi Black](#). That loop informed Def Leppard’s greatest moment, the 1989 single [“Rocket.”](#) A dose of African glitter-funk-rock, it sounds like nothing else.

So let’s cut to the chase. Who’s your Burundi Black? If it’s Ira Glass, the Kitchen Sisters or *RadioLab*, may we humbly suggest looking further? We dug deep into our DNA and rediscovered the cassette dubbing and indie mags of our youth. We aimed to imbue NPR with this aesthetic and find like-minded ears. Story is king here, but why can’t these stories be told with the joy of a worn out mix tape? So we married the narrative with an aural world closer to Portishead’s [Dummy](#) or The KLF’s [Chill Out](#). We looked for the humor of the [Shut Up, Little Man!](#) tapes and the comic timing of [Carl Stalling](#). Listen hard and you can hear these ghosts in our subtle Supreme Court piece, [“Amend the Constitution!”](#)

We strive to be more [Paul’s Boutique](#) than Paul Harvey. Who are you? Or more importantly, who aren’t you?



Nina Totenberg and All Thing Considered producers at a 1988 staff meeting.

5. Leave Them Wanting More: “In the dark. Anticipation. Big rock show. Here we go...”

The sex in sound comes from climax and release. We've discussed the former, but how do you build the latter? Once again, the man named "Mutt" writes the gospel on this subject. Listen again to the mystery at the end of "Love Bites," swallow the stop-start sugar hits that close "Animal." But release isn't just sex; it's *revelation*. We take our cues from a *Hysteria* deep cut, "[Gods of War.](#)"

As the track winds to its close, fighter jets launch attacks in both channels then wipe out the rest of the song. Ronald Reagan is left alone to deliver his moral from [a 1986 speech on Libya](#). "He counted on America to be passive. He counted wrong." It's still chilling 27 years later.

Our stories often come with a moral. But by leaving them in the hands of the protagonists, things become ambiguous. It's their belief. Do you share it? "[Hurricane Mike](#)" reflects on the role of family at the moment of death. [Dr. Peter Higgs](#) celebrates the imagination. But our favorite finalé belongs to the anonymous woman at the end of "[Someone's Screaming Outside.](#)" As the phones hang up one by one, she's left alone to wonder, "I wanna know what happened. Why... Why would somebody kill someone like that?" The awful truth comes when she also hangs up: There might not be an answer.

Are you able to accept it?

Please accept this: We believe the public radio listener is capable of digesting a feast of sound, not just a voice and occasional soundbite. We share their appetite for information, a plate currently served with entertainment on the side. But we think these ingredients should all be baked together in the main course. We believe you've had enough cooking analogies now. Sorry, we understand NPR listeners [love talking about food](#).

Download Mad Genius tracks, [free for a limited time at SoundCloud](#). Share your sounds with us, both there and at [our Facebook page](#). We don't pretend to have all the answers; we're just getting started. So let's talk about the sound *we* would like to hear, then perfect it like a Leppard.

"Cause the best is yet to come..."

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From the Merry Halls of Mad Manor

