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magazine

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eMusic Q&A: Scott Brick by Todd Burns

Golden Voice. It's not just a compliment, it's also an award — one among many that Scott Brick has received in his short yet highly successful career as an audiobook narrator. Brick began narrating in 1999 and has quickly racked up an impressive resume, filled with high-profile books from authors like [Tom Clancy](#), [Kurt Vonnegut](#), [Isaac Asimov](#) and more.

It's a career that was never planned, though. Brick was happy as an actor in Los Angeles until his love for old-time radio spurred him to call in some favors to get some time in a recording booth. The rest, as they say, is history — a history now dotted with 40 Earphones Awards and a Golden Voice. Todd Burns caught up with the narrator recently to talk accents, suspicious white powders, and the narrator for his debut novel.

You came to audiobooks through acting. How has your background in theater helped you when you stepped into the recording booth?

It's funny, I was just teaching my first class in audiobook narration and I kept talking about my theater experience. And as I left, I was like, "You want to do some homework? Go do classical theater." It helps in so many ways. I mean, when you're doing an audiobook, it's a long-form technique. It's a marathon, not a sprint. So voice control is everything. And that's what you learn in the theater.

You have to be able to project; you have to speak to the back row; you have to be able to speak loudly for three hours if you're doing something like *Cyrano* or *Hamlet* and not lose your voice. So that's one aspect. And then there's diction, enunciation, pacing: you learn all of these tools that an actor needs to do on the job, and you learn that every night that you walk out on the stage.

You say it's a marathon and not a sprint. What do you do in terms of keeping your voice controlled over the course of a session?

I work on that not just when I'm in the studio, but when I'm out of the studio. I'm working on that twenty-four hours a day. I baby my voice. I'm not singing along to the radio. I'm not singing karaoke when my buddies get up and they've had one too many at the bar. When I go to Dodger stadium and I'm rooting for my team, I can't be loud. I did those things earlier in my narration career and paid for it the next day. When I'm in the studio, first of all you can't talk for too long before taking a break. About every hour, hour and fifteen minutes, you've got to get up and take a break and not talk. I've got all sorts of liquids with me, because, you know, your larynx is a muscle. And like any muscle it needs to be hydrated or it will fail you. So, I do two pages at a time. That's what's up in front of me on the little music stand in front of the microphone, when I get done with that and it comes time to flip the pages, I take a sip of water, or I take a sip of Throat Coat tea — it's an herbal tea, a preventative measure. It's really good when you have a sore throat, but it's also really good for preventing them.

Is there anything else that you have in there with you? I read that you sometimes have cough drops and lip balm. What are they used for?

Yeah, there are other things I do, not so much for my throat as for my lips. What those things do is cut down on cotton mouth. Because you can't read for more than four or five minutes at a time without getting really pasty. I've found that if I use some breath mint drops that I can easily get rid of cotton mouth. And then I get lip balm, which I dab on very lightly. It's really great for when you hit the consonants. When you hit the P, certain consonants, it'll go into the mic sound if you're too loud, and Blistex really cuts down on that.

How long did it take you to learn all of these tricks?

Some of it was a learning process, some of it I picked up in school. I used to use salt before the breath drops, because salt also gets rid of cotton mouth. I'd learned that in high school speech tournaments. I remember one time I had to speak for ten minutes, and I had to drink a glass of milk, and I was just completely pasty in my mouth, and a buddy of mine gave me some salt and I put a dab of it on the tip of my tongue and I got rid of it. So I did that for the first two or three years of my audiobook career.

What's funny is, I guess nobody in the industry had really seen this before. It was an old speech tournament trick, but hadn't made its way to the audiobook world. So everybody kept saying to me, "Dude, what's the deal with you and this white powder?" *[laughs]* And people I didn't even know, who I'd never worked with, literally said, "So what's the deal with the salt?"

Your career took off pretty quickly after you did your first book.

It's interesting: after I did my very first book, which was for Dove Audio, I remember going into that thinking, if I could do another one of these that would be great, but if I

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only do one, that's fine. I really had wanted to do this for so long that I thought, if I only had a chance to do one, I could be satisfied, just knowing that I'd done one.

Why did you want to do one so badly?

I'm a fan of old-time radio. And this is the closest thing that we have left to that. Old-time radio was great because, I think, we as performers, or we as artists of any kind — if you're an actor, a writer, a director, if you're a producer, I think it comes down to one thing: you want to tell stories. I can't speak for everybody, but I think that's true, I know it's true for me. I did this because that's what I want to do. I want to tell stories. And old-time radio gave a preference to that. It was just the performer or the performers doing a play, it was their mouths and the listener's ear, and very little in between.

How much collaboration is there between the author and you for an average audiobook?

More often than not, you're not talking to the author. But it's getting more common to speak to the author, which is terrific, and it really makes the job turn out so much better. I think when I did a *Dune* audiobook — that might have been the first time I ever spoke to the author. But when I realized how much better it was getting, I realized that if we're working on a science fiction series, or fantasy series, these are genres in which the author is going to be making up these words, and it's not appropriate for me to guess how they should sound.

I'm doing the Thomas Covenant [fantasy series] right now for my own company [Brick by Brick Audiobooks], and I went to the author, Stephen R. Donaldson, and I told him that I wanted to do with his books what I did with the *Dune* books. I said, "I want to make an official audio glossary." And he said, "Well, I don't think there is an official way of saying it." And I said, "Well, there has to be." And he said, "Well nobody's ever made one." And I said "Yeah, but isn't there a way that, in your mind you hear the word?" And he goes, "Well, that's the way it is in my own mind," and I said "Well, that's the official way."

Little by little it's happening with more authors: I'm hearing from guys like Joe Finder, and [Brad Meltzer](#), and even Dennis Lehane. Brad, specifically, really takes a lot of time to make sure that if there's any question that he can answer, that he will. He called me one time from Germany, he was on the tarmac in Germany, and he looked at his watch and did the mental calculation, and realized I was on my way to the studio. He called me up and said "Hey, I just wanted to make sure that you knew that this one particular section, you realize that this girl is making kind of a ghetto reference, so put a little *grr* onto it." And I was like, "Yeah, I got that." And I had known it, but I love the fact that he went to that effort.

Why do you think that's changing?

Whereas audiobooks used to be just an adjunct, a part of publishing that authors weren't paying much attention to, I think authors are really waking up to the fact now that this is not just a new medium, but a new voice. The authorial voice. There's an entire subset of the population that because of need, or because of desire, doesn't read anymore. Maybe they're injured, maybe they're blind, maybe they have a disability, or maybe they just don't have time. And ordinarily, these people would be cut off from literature. But now audiobooks are a way to keep them plugged in. And I think authors figuring that out, and trying to take advantage of this new medium, this new art form, as much as they can, which is great.

Let's talk about accents. How do you approach a book where there are characters speaking from another land? Are you creating voices for them? Do you go to the author and say, is this an appropriate accent?

Sometimes I will. The *Dune* series was interesting, because there was a lot of playing around in the Dune universe before I got there. There was the movie by David Lynch; there was the miniseries on television. In the film, Lady Jessica, if I recall, was British. So I made Jessica sound British, because in her situation, she could never marry the Duke. She was his bound concubine, she was his wife in everything but name. And she acted so regal because of that. She was so lovely and magnificent a character, that I thought, what if nobody else spoke as though they were regal around her, and yet she did? It would be kind of the opposite of what her stature in life was, that it was coming out through her voice, rather than through her marriage. So yeah, I would start making artistic choices like that. I love it when there's accents involved, provided that it's an accent that I have.

What's an accent that you don't have access to?

There's very few that I don't have access to, in the sense that there are tapes out there that I can listen to. And usually if I can hear it, I can do it. That said, I don't want to do it for an entire book, and I had to do two or three books so far with Australian characters who were main characters. At that point I had to go out and get an actual instruction manual, specifically for Australian accents.

There's a few accents out there that really kind of blend together after a while. If you ever have a guy from Ireland, and a guy from Scotland in a book, it can be a nightmare for me. Those accents sound very different when you hear them at different times, but if you hear them back to back, boy they blend in together.

You're also writing your debut novel. How is it coming?

I am. The problem is that I keep getting busier and busier with this whole narration thing, which I don't want to seem like I'm complaining, but it makes it very difficult to take time to rewrite. I finished the first draft; I sent it off to my agent; I sent it off to two technical advisors of mine — they both live and work in the city where it's set, back in Connecticut. So at this point I'm just very slowly working my way through it and doing the rewrite to revise all of that stuff out of it. That said, I hope to have it done in the next few months.

Who's going to be doing the honors for the audiobook version?

It's interesting, because, in audiobooks, they're very gender- and ethnicity-centric. If

you're a white male, you're going to be read by a white male. If you have a black woman as a narrator in your book, then a black female narrator is usually going to read your book.

The main character in my book is a woman. That said, it doesn't matter: I could have written the main character as a woman from the Caribbean islands, and it wouldn't matter. Nobody's going to touch that book but me.

Is there one you wish you could have back?

Oh boy. I'll tell you what, if there's one book I could have back, it's a tie, between *What Makes Sammy Run* and *Blade Runner*. I would have them back only so I could do them again. I would have them back just so I could redo them year after year after year. Because they never get old for me. I read from them when I go out on the road and do appearances at library conferences and whatnot. They're just classics. *What Makes Sammy Run* was written by Bud Schulberg who wrote *On the Waterfront*. He wrote it in 1941 and it's just a classic about early Hollywood, and it's written in 1940s, staccato-burst, rapid-banter kind of style.

That's got to be fun to read.

Oh my God, I did the whole book like it was a radio show, it was fabulous.

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