

# WIND AT YOUR BACK AND A WORD IN YOUR EAR

## JACK THURSTON AND THE TRANSCENDENTAL PLEASURE OF BIKE RADIO

BY JUSTIN BERGER  
PHOTO BY FIFI FONTANOT

**PEOPLE TURN TO** Jack Thurston for analysis: you can read him in the *Manchester Guardian*, or hear him on *BBC Radio Four* talking about agriculture, trade, and the European common market. But Jack Thurston has other theories too, including this one about creativity and bicycles:

“It’s natural that people who are creative ride bikes. The sort of prosaic reason is that artists don’t have a lot of money, but the more exciting dreamy reason is that there’s something about being on a bicycle which is thrilling and stimulating to people who are creative, and who are oriented visually particularly. It’s sort of a collage, a real-time collage of sights you see as you ride around the city.”

But Thurston’s own creative cycling project is all about sound.

“You’ll hear the birds in the trees or the rustle of leaves blowing around or that kind of sticky sound of the wheel—the rubber on asphalt, or you’ll hear the clanking of my bike if it’s not been very well maintained. What you don’t hear, amazingly enough, is wind: it’s an amazing talent of the RE-50 Microphone that it seems to insulate pretty well against wind even up to about 20 miles an hour.”

The sounds recorded with Thurston’s microphone are broadcast on *The Bike Show*, a half-hour radio program that airs Monday nights on Resonance FM, a community station in London, England. Thurston points out that he sees a connection between the bicycle and the radio.

“I think they are both subtle technologies, and gentle technologies.”

“Television shouts, whereas radio is just a word in your ear. I think a bicycle compared to a car is the same kind of thing. There’s a subtlety the bicycle shares with radio.”

There are dozens of radio shows and podcasts devoted to bicycles and bicycling, but *The Bike Show* is perhaps unique in the way it uses the stimulating effect of cycling to make stimulating radio. Many of the show’s best moments are recorded while riding. Thurston explained why this approach makes for better listening.

“You get somebody into a studio, and they see a whole bank of technology and they are stuck there. They get terrified. They start talking like a kind of scared rabbit. People suddenly think they are on radio and suddenly stop talking in a conversational way. They start talking like talk show hosts, which is not what I wanted. I wanted to have a conversation like it is in real life.

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You can find the complete archives of the Bike Show at [thebikeshow.net](http://thebikeshow.net)

You can also find the Bike Show podcast on iTunes or Podcast Alley

“When you get out on the road, you suddenly disarm your interviewee and you put them at their ease. You’ve got riding the bike to think about, and you’ve got the route to think about, and so they just happily idly chat away and as you go different places and different things pop into people’s minds — you’re really out there in the world you are talking about rather than trying to recreate it in the barren confines of the studio.

“I did an interview with psychologist Rosie Walford about why you are more creative when you are riding your bike: the way you get these alpha state brainwaves when you are doing a repetitive activity like cycling or swimming, and which can trigger more creative thoughts and get you out of that very limited beta state. I don’t know if that’s happening when we are riding around — if people are able to think more eloquently and have more creative insights.”

Rolling interviews may encourage creative

exchange, but Thurston admits it adds some new challenges to making radio.

“It’s about being able to ride one-handed, which is rather tricky, and being able to reach out far enough with your microphone to reach your

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guest’s mouth and getting them to speak up. We are in the city of London, and there is traffic, so every now and then we get honked at by delivery van drivers who don’t know why we are conducting an interview going around Hyde Park

corner or the Hammersmith Roundabout.”

*The Bike Show* has a strong sense of place: between the accents and the cultural and geographical references, it’s always apparent to the listener that the show is based in London. The range of the FM broadcast is tiny, but thanks to the Internet, *The Bike Show* now has a worldwide audience. “I think it’s remarkable. The idea that this show is being picked up and broadcast in Halifax, Nova Scotia at 4:30 on a Tuesday morning just after Radio Goethe is hilarious and brilliant. There is some universality to the cycling experience. I think I would listen to a bike show that came from Bombay, Hong Kong, Capetown or anywhere else. I think ultimately what I’m trying to get at is the transcendental pleasure of the bicycle.”

*Justin Berger is a lapsed bike courier, semi-competent knitter and community radio producer who looks as if he walked off the set of a Jean Pierre Melville remake of Pride and Prejudice.*

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