

Public Radio Exchange
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Producer Profile: Scott Gurian

"...like the British guy on Animal Planet describing the hyenas eating their prey."



Scott interviews veteran catfish noddler Thomas Riggs

Producers live for a piece review this good: "[this is the sort of thing that makes you proud to be a part of the human race.](#)" In fact, Scott Gurian has gotten glowing reviews and high ratings ever since PRX launched.

Scott's been around. He's done reporting for *All Things Considered*, *Weekend America*, *Primetime Radio*, *Free Speech Radio News*, *WMBR* (Cambridge, MA), *WBAI* (New York, NY), *Radio for Peace International* (El Rodeo, Costa Rica) and *WNYC's Radio Lab*. He now works as the news director for *KGOU*, though he continues to produce work independently.

His latest piece on PRX, [Catfish Noodling in Oklahoma](#), was about the sport of catching giant 60 lb catfish with your bare hands, and was received with glowing reviews by PRX's Editorial Board.

PRX: How did you first hear about catfish noodling?

SG: I grew up in New Jersey and have always lived along the East Coast, so this was a completely new phenomenon for me.

When I first moved here, I knew absolutely nothing about this part of the country, so I was eager to find out everything I could and immerse myself in the local culture as soon as possible (and boy, did I ever!).

The station I work at now (*KGOU*) flew me into town to interview me for the job of News Director. On the morning of my return flight, I was having breakfast at a local diner with Jim Johnson, the Program Director, and Jennifer Smith, our former Ops Manager / Morning Edition Host. I recall noticing that all the walls of the place were covered with photos of fishermen proudly their catches. I think it was Jennifer who remarked that some of them have a kind of unique method of catching fish with their bare hands. Along with the oil wells between the airport runways, that was one of those unusual quirks I remembered to tell everyone when I returned back home. Then, shortly after I got the job and moved here, I got a flyer in the mail that the annual "Okie Noodling Tournament and Fish Fry" at Bob's Pig Shop in Pauls Valley, OK was approaching, and I knew this was a story I had to cover.

PRX: When reporting, there's always a constant tension between minimizing one's presence in an effort to maintain the subject as a centerpiece, and being an active part of the story. Where do you think you fit on that spectrum?

SG: I take each story on a case-by-case basis. In some instances, the story seems to completely tell itself, so I'll produce it in an unnarrated, montage style. An example of this is [the piece I did on my father's penchant for karaoke](#). Most of the time, though, I think I try to let my sound speak for itself, and I just pop in from time to time to set the scene and bridge the gaps.

I certainly have no problem narrating in the first person if I feel like I'm truly an important character in the story, and that including my own descriptions (clearly identified as my own) will add something to the piece. There's certainly a danger of getting in the way by including oneself when it doesn't really serve any purpose other than perhaps boosting one's ego. I'm constantly aware of that danger, so I don't think I fall into that trap too often.

There's one final thing I'll say on this subject. I've been influenced a lot by the hosting styles of [Babara Bogaev](#) on Soundprint, [Jad Abumrad](#) on WNYC's [Radio Lab](#) and, yes, I'll admit, [Ira Glass](#). I love how they start out programs and introduce pieces with offbeat stories and observations that immediately draw in listeners and create "driveway moments" from the onset. When I'm producing our monthly public affairs / newsmagazine program we call "Oklahoma Voices," I tend to mimic that style a lot in my own work, often drawing from my own life experiences (since those are the stories I know the best). For example, in introducing a program about weather forecasting, I described the excitement I used to feel as a child when we would get to stay home from school on a snow day. At the beginning of a program about my trip to a local rattlesnake festival, I talked about how I've always kind of disliked snakes, and how my feelings probably come from my mother. In cases like these, I think being an active part of the story by narrating in first person can be quite effective.

PRX: When it comes to radio, what are you worst at (this sounds like a job interview, doesn't it)?

SG: Part of it is probably that I'm incredibly shy and constantly afraid of looking like a weirdo with my giant shotgun microphone (especially when I have the zeppelin), my clunky headphones and so forth. And I often feel especially out of place because I'm not from here, and I still have a tad of a New Jersey accent. So for me, it sometimes takes an incredible amount of courage to walk up to random strangers (especially in more rural areas) and start asking questions.

The other thing I sometimes worry about is that I'm approaching all of my narration like an anthropologist. In other words, that my descriptions to set the scene might sound too analytical and disconnected from the action -- like the British guy on Animal Planet describing the hyenas eating their prey.

In her review of my catfish noodling piece, Transom.org's Vicki Merrick wrote, "The amusing thing about this piece is that the narrator is SUCH a contrast to the protagonist voice. The stable guiding voiceup next to a force that is teeming with gusto. You want to know more of the noodler, but the narrator somehow pulls you back to the subject at hand. Irresistible."

I guess I'm supposed to take credit for how ingenious I was when writing and voicing this piece, but to be honest, that's just how I write, and that's just how I speak. So it was entirely unintentional. Perhaps it worked well in this piece, but I fear that it wouldn't necessarily work in another story or that it could get old real quickly.

PRX: You've said you love to travel. What are the craziest hijinks you've gotten yourself into in a foreign land?

SG: I once spent an afternoon searching for Pez dispensers in Biarritz, France, I've dodged tear gas in the streets of Quebec City, and I've zip-lined over the cloud forest in Monteverde, Costa Rica, but my craziest and most exciting adventure was when I went to Mexico in 2001 to cover the march of the Zapatista Indians for "[Democracy Now!](#)" and several community stations.

I was still in school at the time, so when I told friends I was going south of the border for spring break, they assumed I meant Acapulco or Cancun - not across Mexico following an indigenous rebel group!



Scott during a stopover in Cuernavaca, Mexico

The Zapatistas were in the midst of a two-week journey across the country to make a series of demands on the government. I had some filmmaker friends from Boston who had gone down to make a documentary, so I decided to catch up with them on the second week of the caravan. I had been to Mexico once before as part of a foreign exchange in high school, but my Spanish wasn't great, and I had never reported from abroad. I called Gerry Hadden -- NPR's Mexico Bureau Chief at the time -- and he gave me some good advice. As far as communicating with folks back home, he suggested renting a cell phone at the airport. That was a decision I would totally regret at the end of my ten day trip, when I received a two thousand dollar phone bill, but that's a story for another time.

After flying to Mexico City and spending the night at a hotel, I hopped in a cab and asked to go to the bus station. But first we had to stop at the airport so I could go back to the phone rental place, since I was having some problems getting it to work. Once that was solved, we had to stop at a local electronics place to get a special headset adapter for my phone so it would sound better for the radio. The first place didn't have what I needed, so we made another stop at a local Radio Shack (why didn't I think of that in the first place??). My cab driver was incredibly friendly because he realized, of course, that his meter was ticking the entire time! I eventually arrived at the bus station, several hours later and fifty dollars shorter than I had expected! But I didn't know my way around Mexico City, and with all my luggage, I guess I didn't really have a choice.

I knew from the schedule I had printed off the internet that the Zapatistas were just concluding a weekend stopover at the National Indigenous Conference in the small town of Nurio, in the state of Michoacán. I didn't know exactly where that was, and it wasn't on any maps, so I bought a bus ticket to Morelia, the capital of Michoacán. I figured that someone might know more once I got there.

After sitting on a bus for several hours, I arrived at Morelia and started asking people in broken Spanish where Nurio was, but no one had any clue what I was talking about. I should explain at this point that with my giant hiker's backpack, an enormous, khaki duffle bag on one shoulder and a smaller, gym-type bag slung over the other, I probably looked like the epitome of gringo-ness. And I was clearly lost. I spoke to everyone from ticket agents to bus drivers to passengers, but no luck. I finally found one woman selling tickets who said she knew where it was, but that the last bus of the day that would take me there had already departed and that I would have to wait until the following morning. I asked how far it was, and she told me something like four hours. That didn't sound right. I figured that even if the last bus of the day that would take me directly there had already left, there must at least be another bus that would take me closer, so it wouldn't be as long of a trip if I had to set out early the following morning. I took out a map and asked her to show me where it was, but she looked confused and shook her head. I got the sense she didn't know how to read a map.



Scott interviews three drunk guys in the back of a pickup truck in the Mexican city of Xochimilco.

After searching around for maybe another half an hour, I was ready to give up hope when I ran into a really nice Mexican guy who spoke pretty good English. He had heard about the National Indigenous Conference on the news, so he said he knew where Nurio was. I followed his directions and got on a second bus for another hour or so. When I arrived at my destination, someone told me Nurio was actually closer to a different city, so it was on to a third bus! The stations were getting progressively smaller, and it was getting later and later, but at least I kept traveling west, so it's not like I was going in circles or anything.

Eventually, as dusk came, we pulled into a small station that a ticket agent told me was just down the road from Nurio. He knew where it was, and he said there were definitely no more buses going that way that night. Unlike the previous people I had spoken to, he seemed like he really knew what he was talking about, so I took him at his word. He pointed to a row of seedy-looking motels with blinking lights across the street and suggested that I stay the night and leave on a bus departing at 5 the following morning. Shuffling under the weight of my bags, I started walking down a series of stairs, heading towards one of the motels, when I came upon a row of taxis waiting to pick up passengers. Just for the heck of it, I decided to ask one of them how much it would cost to take me to Nurio. Twenty dollars. Considering I had spent fifty bucks on a cab ride earlier in the day, why not? So off we went.

It might have normally taken about 25 minutes, but we got kind of lost, so it took a bit longer. The town was so tiny and out of the way that even my cab driver didn't know quite where he was going! He had asked for directions from a fellow cabbie before we left, but those turned out to be slightly wrong. As we went, we made a series of turns off the main road, going from pavement to gravel to dirt and entering a poor, remote area where the people had very dark, indigenous skin. He stopped and asked for directions in a tiny village where graffiti about Che Guevara was scrawled on the walls in bright, red ink. It kind of looked like a set from a Rage Against the Machine music video.

We had passed the turnoff, they told us. So we backtracked, wondering how we could have missed it. It was pitch black by now. We rounded a grassy hilltop and slowed down, searching in the moonlight for the path we were supposed to take. A pickup truck came along the road in the other direction, and my driver flashed his headlights to get the guy to stop. He went about fifty feet past us, then backed up to ask what we wanted. "Where's Nurio," we asked? He pointed to a long, steep and rocky dirt road, unmarked by any lights or signs, and pretty much in the middle of nowhere. It took about ten or fifteen minutes to travel down the road, driving a slalom course around huge potholes that a taxi cab was never meant to maneuver. Finally, we rounded a corner and there it was: a poor, indigenous village with rows of tin shacks, dozens of buses of Zapatistas and thousands of their supporters from all over the world. I paid the cab fare and grabbed my bags, amazed and relieved that I had arrived after traveling all day.

Now that I was there, I suddenly realized I didn't know what to do or where to go, there was little hope of finding my filmmaker friends among the thousands of people, and I still didn't speak much Spanish (though it was nothing short of a miracle that I had made it this far!). Luckily, the villagers were very kind. I was pretty hungry by this point, so one family let me eat tacos they were cooking over a campfire in front of their house. They only charged me the

equivalent of about a dime, though I offered to pay much more. The little kids who couldn't have been more than 6 or 7 years old laughed at me suffering from the ridiculously spicy hot sauce they downed like lemonade. And then I rolled out my sleeping bag on the concrete floor of some random people's home, and I got a very good night's sleep.

The next morning I woke quite early, packed up my things and started walking through the village as other people were waking up. By some extraordinary chance, I happened to find the bus on which my friends were traveling. They couldn't believe it when they saw me. "How in the world did you find us?" they asked.

I laughed.

"It's a long story," I said.

PRX: Has PRX been good to you so far?

SG: Yes.

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