

# Studs Terkel: The Passing of An Icon

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Despite his advanced age, the news came as a shock. An era had passed. On October 31, author, activist, actor, broadcaster, and mensch for all seasons Louis “Studs” Terkel died peacefully at his Chicago North Side home at age 96. Already weakened by other ailments, his health declined further from a fall in his home two weeks earlier.

His son Dan paid tribute to his father. He “led a long, full, eventful, sometimes tempestuous, but very satisfying life.” He was the master of oral history. Calvin Trillin called him “America’s pre-eminent listener” that was “all the more remarkable when you consider that he (was) a prodigious talker.” On jazz to world affairs. His soap-opera days to the state of the nation. Interviews with entertainers, artists, politicians, philosophers and social critics. Figures like Bertrand Russell, John Kenneth Galbraith, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Zero Mostel, and Margaret Mead. Others he knew like Mahalia Jackson, David Dellinger, Nelson Algren, and Eugene Debs. The greats and near-greats but mostly ordinary people, whose lives and experiences he documented in his oral histories. Guerrilla journalism he called them.

What he’s best remembered for. In books like *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*. *The Good War*. *The Great Divide: Second Thoughts on the American Dream*, and his 2007 book, *Touch and Go*. His memoir. Of a professional listener, talker, author, actor, and “conscience of long memory” as *The New York Times* described him. Beloved by many and by his friends. A final book coming out in November. *PS: Further Thoughts From a Lifetime of Listening*. It includes a collection of radio show transcripts, short essays and other writing.

Studs was for the little guy. Our voice of America. Against war and “in-bed-with” journalists. For a New Deal kind of country. More “reg-u-la-tion” as he said. To reign in the kind of abuses now rampant. Hold the powerful accountable. Support the public interest. Do it as our “quintessential American writer” as Congressman Dennis Kucinich called him. Our “Boswell, our Whitman, our Sandburg.” Our one and irreplaceable Studs.

## His Background

Born in New York in 1912, and as Studs put it: “As the Titanic went down, I came up.” In 1922, his family moved to Chicago. From 1926 – 1936, they ran a rooming house at which he credits his worldly knowledge. From its tenants and people who gathered in nearby Bughouse Square. A meeting place for workers, labor organizers, dissidents, the unemployed, and all sorts of others of many persuasions. A place to speak publicly. They did and still do today. A few blocks from this writer’s home.

In 1934, Studs got philosophy and law degrees at the University of Chicago but chose other endeavors. He worked briefly in the civil service in Washington. Then back to Chicago in a WPA Writers Project's radio division. It got him into soap operas, stage performances, and a radio news show.

After one year in the Air Force he was discharged with perforated eardrums. A condition resulting from childhood surgeries. Back home, he wrote radio scripts. Then did news and sports commentary. A show of his own followed, and a television program called Stud's Place. Another radio show called The Wax Museum primarily for jazz, but it also included opera, gospel, country and folk music. He promoted artists like Mahalia Jackson, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie and Burl Ives. Interviewed jazz greats like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday. Wrote about them in his *Giants of Jazz* book.

Interviewing came accidentally on his award-winning Studs Terkel Program. It led to his "transforming oral history into a popular literary form....a serious genre" as New York Times writer William Grimes put it. He had a remarkable ability to get others to talk about themselves, their lives and work. That combined with his diverse knowledge of many topics gained his program widespread popularity.

In the late 1930s as an actor, he dropped the name Louis and decided on Studs. From another Chicagoan. Noted author James Farrell from his fictional Studs Lonigan character.

In the 1950s during the McCarthy era, he was blackballed from commercial radio but found work in the theater. In 1952, he joined Chicago's WFMT. The city's preeminent, and today only, fine arts and classical music station. Its "radio legend" in its words as it devoted all weekend to his memory. To "remember(ing) Studs Terkel in words and music....talking with those who knew and loved him, and (to) listen to some of the vast body of work from (his) many years at WFMT" – 45 in all.

He was honored with many awards. A Peabody Award for excellence in journalism. The National Book Foundation Medal for contributions to American letters. The Pulitzer Prize for *The Good War*. The Presidential National Humanities Medal. The National Medal of Humanities. The Illinois Governor's Award for the Arts, and the Clarence Darrow Commemorative Award among others. Until his death, he was the Distinguished Scholar in Residence at the Chicago Historical Society.

### Tributes and Eulogies

After his death, praise followed. The London Guardian called him a "master chronicler of American life in the 20th century, veteran radical and vibrant soul of the midwestern capital of Chicago." Calling him a "writer and broadcaster" would be like calling Louis Armstrong a "trumpeter" or the Empire State Building an "office block."

Chicago mayor Richard Daley said he "was part of a great Chicago literary tradition that stretched from Theodore Dreiser to Richard Wright to Nelson Algren to Mike Royko. In his many books, he captured the eloquence of the common men and women whose hard work and strong values built" the nation.

Chicago Tribune writer Patrick Reardon called him a "voice (for) the voiceless" and said he was the only white writer to be inducted into the International Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent at Chicago State University. By unanimous approval after being

nominated. The man who did it called "America a better place as a result of Studs Terkel being here."

He "was Chicago and everything good about the literary world...make that the world in general, said Chicago Tribune's literary editor, Elizabeth Taylor, one of Stud's good friends. Toward the end, he was aware "the shadows were closing in" but rarely used the word "dying." He preferred the euphemism "checking out" and said he wanted to be cremated and have his ashes mixed with his wife's (in an urn in his living room). Then have them scattered in the Bughouse Square he loved. "Scatter us there," he said. "It's against the law (so) let 'em sue us." It was pure Studs to the end. We'll miss him so. An era has passed.

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