

The Greatest Baseball Announcers: Bob Sheppard & Vin Scully

by Richard Kostelanetz (April 2015)

For Clayelle Dalfares, The great NYC classical music “disk jockey.”

BOB SHEPPARD (1910-2010)

Whenever I went to Yankee Stadium more than a decade ago, I would advise those beside me to listen appreciatively to Bob Sheppard, the Stadium’s legendary public address announcer. His most extraordinary talent was not just enunciating every syllable clearly but speaking so patiently, pausing after every phrase, typically repeating uniform numbers both before and after announcing a player’s name.

Every time other people tried to imitate Sheppard, even some Yankee players who had heard him thousands of times, I noticed that they weren’t talking as slowly as Sheppard did. They couldn’t. His real esthetic achievement (as a sometime speech teacher) was speaking slowly without losing his listeners. No other public address announcer ever heard by me could talk so slowly so successfully.

A half century ago, the great audio comedians Bob and Ray had a routine, perhaps based on Sheppard, where one interviewed the other about his organization, the Slow Talkers of America, “The S...T...O...A...,” whose agenda the interviewee exemplified. Laughs came from the interviewer’s becoming more frustrated with the interviewee’s attenuated responses. However, because Sheppard’s pacing was so impressive, no one dared satirize it.

An athlete in his youth, Sheppard played football and baseball in college. The Yankees magazine once published a photograph of him as a lifeguard in the oceanside beaches of the New York City Rockaways, wearing a swimsuit that covered his chest like a tanktop. (This must have been in the 1920s.) Not unlike other speech masters, Sheppard was a literary gent. He reportedly liked to recite from the Bible in his (Catholic) church. He wrote poems that ought to be collected.

When National Public Radio interviewed him on the job several years ago, the reporter discovered him reading books during games, which have a lot of down time as commercials are broadcast between innings and elsewhere. Sheppard boasted that he never failed to respond to the occasion to announce again. The tome then before him, according to the NPR reporter, was the *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, who realized in print higher elegant phrasing much as Sheppard did in elocution.

He worked at Yankee Stadium through 2007, well into his late nineties, more than 55 years after he began doing it, refusing to reveal his age publicly, though everyone knew he was pushing 100. Friends who hadn't visited Yankee Stadium for a while were always surprised and relieved to hear yet again from the beginning of the game his unique verbal style. Those visiting for the first time would recognize how different Sheppard was from public address announcers they'd heard elsewhere.

However, when I went to Yankee Stadium after 2008, I heard his unique voice only in a recording he left behind in a private agreement with Derek GEE-ter, which was played whenever the star shotstop came to bat. Now that Jeter has retired, Sheppard's voice will no longer resound through Yankee Stadium. His successor Paul Olden, once Bob's long-time substitute, likewise along in his years, has been okay, but not Bob Sheppard. He didn't, probably couldn't, talk slowly enough. Nobody could, except the de facto chief of the S.T.O.A. Fortunately, samples of Sheppard's inimitable performance are available on YouTube.

VIN SCULLY (1927-)

Among those who speak over radio, rather than public address systems, none can equal Vin Scully, who is reportedly returning this coming spring for his 66th year at the microphone for the Dodgers (once Brooklyn, now LA). Much like Sheppard, Scully must be heard to be believed. At live radio/tv announcing, he has long been the master artist. Last season I (in NYC) heard him over the Internet (mlb.com) working alone for the entire game, covering not only play by play but adding "color commentary," which is to say bits of background information that are customarily provided by some sidekick commentator, usually a retired player.

For his solo performance, Scully, reluctant to travel far, nowadays covers only games no further away from home than Colorado and San Francisco. When the Dodgers play yet further away, two and sometimes three youngers guys are employed to do the work of one. (On Dodgers radio, which is easily accessible via the Internet, his television commentary is heard simultaneously for only three innings. Afterwards, two other guys take over the radio portion.)

Always Scully's tone is measured, his diction clear, his information reliable, his voice intimate. He pauses frequently, in contrast to announcers who feel obliged to chat every second. Often the lack of background noise makes me believe that he's actually broadcasting from another space, much as, say, Ronald Reagan used to do during the 1930s; but I'm informed that Scully is indeed at every game.

His information retrieval is particularly impressive. Either he remembers the statistics of thousands of players, including rookies fresh to the major leagues; or he is surfing his computer as he talks. As the latter seems unlikely to me, given Scully's age, my hunch is that he has assistants out of earshot who print out necessary information from their computers, resulting in papers that are handed to Scully to digest before he reads.

He speaks with such definitive authority that I'm reminded of the American boss at RIAS in West Berlin telling me some thirty years ago how he envied the BBC. If it announced, he explained, that the end of the world had come, every listener would believe the BBC. If RIAS did likewise, listeners would telephone the station to ask if the news were really true. Scully is likewise never doubted.

How Scully manages not to sound his age is just as impressive to me as his face when it occasionally appears on screen—his skin devoid of age splotches, his smile wide, and, yes, his hair red. I listen to him and I watch him whenever I can, even if I don't much care about the Dodgers.

From time to time the National Endowment for the Arts rewards older artists who have realized careers of unique achievement. Though Vin Scully probably doesn't need more trophies or more money, he deserves some high recognition for mastering the art, as no one else can, of narrating spontaneously over public media.

Individual entries on Richard Kostelanetz's work in several fields appear in various editions of *Readers Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers*, *Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*, *Contemporary Poets*, *Contemporary Novelists*, *Postmodern Fiction*, *Webster's Dictionary of American Writers*, *The HarperCollins Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, *Directory of American Scholars*, *Who's Who in America*,

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