EPISODE 4: Sing like an American

Brendan: What do you hear most right now? The echo of footsteps in a hallway? The chatter outside? This is the sound of a tenement building; thrumming with the energy of so many people living in close quarters, their lives literally bouncing off one another.

Welcome back to *How to Be American*, I'm Brendan Murphy. Throughout our history, music and sound have helped transform and define our American society. I'm not just talking about the Star-Spangled Banner and God Bless America, I'm talking about the rush of traffic and Latin music in Los Angeles, of quips in Polish and the splashing waves of Lake Erie in Cleveland, and the roar of the subway and Yiddish phrases in New York City. I'm talking about our shared American soundscapes. While it's clear that these soundscapes are a part of our identity, today we're going to explore a deeper question: how have these sounds shaped our lives, our communities and our culture?

Recently the Tenement Museum partnered with the New York Philharmonic to bring a riveting new multimedia musical performance to one of our historic tenement buildings, 97 Orchard Street. *Fire in My Mouth*, created by the renowned contemporary composer Julia Wolfe, tells the story of garment workers in the early 20tth century and the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire that killed 146 of them. It was one of the country's deadliest industrial disasters. For one night, musicians played a version of this incredibly haunting music in our tenement apartments. Throughout this episode you're going to hear excerpts from the Philharmonic's performance, which paint sonic pictures of various elements of the immigration experience. We've placed the excerpts to fit accordingly within the different scenes of this story.

We'll look at this idea of soundscape through two different lenses. The first, through the historical perspective of Bessie Rogarshevsky, a teenage garment factory worker in 1911. Then, through the eyes of Julia Wolfe herself, the artist behind Fire in My Mouth. Let's call it a podcast in two movements.

To learn about the soundscapes of Bessie Rogarshevsky's life and how they influenced her American identity, I sat down with my friend and colleague Sarah Tomasewski. Sarah is a musicologist, as well as a member of the Tenement Museum's education department. We started with the basics.

…….

Brendan: Define for us musicology.

Sarah: So, musicology is essentially music history and musicologists will write program notes and textbooks and teach music history courses. We study the world through the lens of music. So, by looking to other social sciences, we're able to gain a better understanding of the historical moment in which song appeared or a piece was composed. But we can also look at broader ideas too, like what's going on politically or what's going on in other historical moments by better understanding the music from that time period.

Brendan: Can you tell me a little bit about what interests you about that idea of the American soundscape?

Sarah: It's really complicated. I mean, so much of what would be considered American music really comes from the influence of a lot of different factors. For example, there's a huge wave of German immigrants who come to the United States in the mid-19th century. And a lot of those immigrants are professional instrumentalists and singers and conductors and teachers and instrument builders, and when they arrive in the United States, they're continuing to make that music. And essentially, they become some of the first players in the New York Philharmonic, for example. They establish music schools and build instrument factories. And a lot of that influence is part of why we're still listening to Beethoven today when we go to orchestra concerts. The Irish immigrants who arrived during that period too, they're bringing a lot of their music with them and fiddle music was widely popular across the United States, and a lot of that stems from Irish melodies. And eventually that's going to lay the groundwork for bluegrass and country music. You also see the influences of enslaved Africans who bring a lot of their rhythms and music making, which will eventually become blues and jazz and lead into rock and roll. You also see the influence of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who also bring a very rich music making tradition. And they are essentially through Vaudeville and theater are they also become very much a part of Tin Pan Alley and popular music making in the early 20th century. And so, all of these factors come together to create a lot of the music that we're listening to today, particularly on popular music.

Brendan: As Sarah explained, this collision also resulted in new musical cultures being formed. During the early twentieth century, the American soundscape was reborn and popularized in New York City. No other city on Earth would have sounded quite like New York, and Bessie Rogarshevsky was in the center of it all.

Bessie immigrated to the United States with her parents and three siblings from Telsh, Lithuania. The family arrived in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1901. Bessie, the second oldest, was just seven years old. Over the next few years, the Rogarshevsky family welcomed two additional boys, making them a family of eight.

Sometime between 1907 and 1910, the family moved into 97 Orchard Street. Bessie spent her teenage years there, surrounded by the sounds of her neighbors. 22 families in a narrow, five story building.

If you imagine yourself walking up that kind of dark damn interior staircase, what kinds of sounds do you imagine you'd be hearing?

Sarah: So many things. I think the rhythm of daily life for sure. You're going to hear footsteps on the hardwood floors, a door slamming, babies crying, and all of those sounds would have easily resonated through the building is made of pine wood floors and plaster and lath construction. So sound travels pretty readily. In addition, as you know, you're wandering through that space, she would also hear the rattling of pots and pans or cast iron, coal burning stove door opening

and closing as someone's making dinner or lunch. You would have also probably heard arguing and heated conversations, maybe children playing on the landings outside of their apartments. You know babies crying and mother's trying to comfort them maybe through song or maybe another mother that's just sending our kids out to play because they're, you know, there's so many and their tiny apartment. So, I think all of these, like the rhythm of daily life would create a building that could be, you know, raucous in the middle of the day or maybe even peaceful for a moment in the middle of the night.

Brendan: The apartment was awfully crowded with eight people in it - you can imagine a teenager like Bessie wanting to get outside and explore the neighborhood with her friends; or, as she might have put it, her crowd. I asked Sarah to tell me a bit more about what the streets of the Jewish Lower East Side might have sounded like in the early 20th century.

Sarah: We know that the neighborhood was densely populated during that period. We know that there was an estimated -- more than 2000 pushcarts lined the streets every single day. And also, we often think about it as being, you know, a Jewish neighborhood, which it was, but you also have people coming from different parts of eastern Europe. So, you’re also hearing English, maybe broken English, and you’re also hearing Ladino which was a language spoken by Sephardic Jews who were also living in the neighborhood at the time. Maybe you're hearing Polish or Lithuanian and you would've heard the rumble of the elevated train a few blocks away going by. You would've also heard the call of pushcart vendors on the streets selling their wares. Orgon grinders entertaining children…I think the soundscape was very vibrant, very lively. In addition, you've got, during this period, the popular music industry is really taking off and recorded sound is becoming more and more available and accessible to people who are living in the neighborhood. So, one of the ways that Tin Pan Alley or the popular music industry at the time is trying to sell music is by employing song pluggers to be on the streets and try to sell this music. So, you might be walking somewhere and you'll hear a song plugger singing the latest hit with little chorus cards that they're passing out to the collecting crowd, trying to invite them to sing as well. So, you might hear that kind of music making. You may also see the street musicians outside of the Yiddish theater also singing some of those songs too.

Brendan: Can you help us understand Tin Pan Alley a little bit more? You mentioned it as the popular music industry.

Sarah: Sure. So Tin Pan Alley was an actual place, it's in Manhattan, it was on West 28th Street between Broadway and Sixth and a lot of popular music publishers had offices along that stretch of West 28th Street and essentially at the turn of the century as pianos also become more accessible and we are able to print music more accessibly and also more cheaply, they're trying to sell the sheet music and it's a very formulaic way of producing music.
So typically, these are verse and refrain songs that are easy to remember and that are singable and playable on a piano.

Brendan: But, I can't imagine that people on the Lower East Side would have had space to have a piano.

Sarah: I know you wouldn't think so. It's crazy. Right. But there are accounts of people having pianos in their tenement buildings. There are primary sources describing it, they say that the piano gets delivered and essentially, they're using pulleys to lift these pianos through the front of the building and then bring them in the front windows and install them in their parlors. And to have the piano was a really a signifier that, you know, in some ways that you, you were American because you had this piano in your home and a lot of the families might pay to get lessons for one of their children and have the other children around and kind of watching this lesson so they could kind of get some information too. So yeah, piano music making on the street.

Brendan: Bessie Rogarshevsky didn't just spend her days on Orchard Street; she was a wage-earner, too. The 1910 census shows us that Bessie worked in a factory that made women's clothing as a sewing machine operator. Although the Lower East Side was the center of the garment industry for many years, by 1910 most of the large electrified factories were located outside of the neighborhood. We don't know which factory Bessie worked in, but we know it was not the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.

Six days a week Bessie and thousands of young women like her would wake up, put on their favorite hat, and head off to work. Perhaps Bessie took the local elevated train that ran along Allen Street, the next block over from Orchard Street. I can imagine her boarding the train and watching a sea of brick tenement buildings fly by below her. This might have been the only time of day she had to herself, surrounded by a crowd of people but also lost in her thoughts. What would a teenager like Bessie be thinking about?

Sarah: She's relatively young and then she's working in a garment factory and within that space she's granted a certain amount of independence each day to leave the family's apartment and go to work. And so, her can you to work is going to be filled with lots of things. And maybe she's hearing some of those song pluggers on her commute. Maybe if she just, she takes the train or maybe, you know, she's walking the neighborhood and she hears them on the corners and then once she gets into the factory itself, I wonder how much she's trying to fit in with the culture of the factory.

Brendan: These new factories where Bessie worked had high ceilings, and big windows to let in more air and light. Many of them are now insanely pricey loft apartments. 100 years ago, those same buildings would have hummed with the sounds of garment work. Only certain jobs were available to women, and these were the jobs that paid less than those available to men. Workers often had to pay for their own supplies, were fined for broken sewing needles, or even had to rent their own chair. In spite of these obstacles, women like Bessie forged new identities at these factories. They refused to let the sound of the sewing machines drown them out.

Brendan: Can you talk to us a little bit about the sounds that we might hear were we in a factory? Aside from the whirl of those sewing machines.

Sarah: Yeah, I think the whirl of sewing machines for sure. And I can only imagine the clatter of, of all of those machines together. In addition, I think you're hearing these Tin Pan Alley songs,

but you might also hear folk songs, women singing songs in Italian for example or in Yiddish. We also have primary source accounts of women describing that, singing love songs, for example from eastern Europe. And you're hearing a song that maybe you recognize that you haven't maybe heard in a while since you arrived in America. And so maybe it's that song that takes you back. And again, it's signaling to the community a little bit about who you are and where you came from.

Brendan: Is it possible that Bessie would have been singing in the factory?

Sarah: It is. We know that in some instances the girls weren't allowed to talk to each other, and they might be fine for doing so. And there's this wonderful primary source quote where this woman is recalling her time in the sweatshop. And she describes how one girl in the line would start humming and the others would join in gradually until the foreman could finally hear it. And then he would try to discover who it was that was singing. And once he figured out who it was, he would to up three hours of pay from her, from her paycheck. And the woman goes on to describe how hard it was to be quiet for those full 11 hours while she was at work as a teenager within the factory space.

Brendan: Can you talk more about how music created kind of a collective or created a community inside of those factories?

Sarah: Yeah, I mean, we also know that for a lot of these factory girls, they felt devalued. They considered the clothes that they were making to be more valuable than they were themselves as the workers. And we know that they're doing things like reading romance novels during their lunch break and some are going out on the streets and even dancing during their lunch breaks. And within the factory floor, I think music is a way to bring the community together in a variety of ways. And number one, if you're not allowed to sing its kind of a protest really, if you decide you're going to start humming or singing the songs. In addition, if you know the words to the song and you can join in, we'll then you're a part of that community too. And even if you don't know the words, we also have evidence of women describing how certain songs with signal, what time it was in the work day. So even if you haven't learned the words yet, but you hear the melody that you recognize, you know that the workday might almost be over. So, you're also able to participate just simply through understanding. And so, music is creating these boundaries, these almost framing these communities within these spaces for these girls in which they might feel a sense of belonging.

Brendan: Do you know any of those songs that were signaling songs?

Sarah: We have a primary source quote from a girl saying that there was a song called *The Fatal Wedding.* One of her coworkers started to sing and it signified that it was towards the end of the workday for the girls that were there. In doing a little research, *The Fatal Wedding* was one of the early Tin Pan Alley sons. It came out in the 1890s written by an African American songwriter whose name was Gussie L Davis. And so, this song it's interesting, comes out in the 1890s. It's one of the very early melodramatic tear jerker songs.

Brendan: What about that collision of sound made these factories American spaces?

Sarah: I think, again, going back to what we were saying at the very beginning, it's this idea that it's all of these sounds, it's the pluralism that is our American soundscape. All of these different sounds from all these disparate places coming together to create this shared community through shared experience. Really what's bringing these factory workers together if most of them are, are immigrants themselves. I think there's this understanding of missing home or feeling like maybe you don't quite belong in this new place and you're forming this new community with the people you see every day.

Brendan: How might being a participant in this factory and in this community of women shape Bessie's American identity?

Sarah: I think it's certainly shaping her world view, because Bessie's experience because she has been granted that independence is going to be different from that of say her mom who we know her mom doesn't learn English, she's a Yiddish speaker her entire life and her mother, like many tenement housewives, her primary space is at home and within the context of that neighborhood. So, for Bessie Rogarshevsky to go out and work every day, she's going to just be inundated with all of these new things that she's seeing and experiencing. And I think that's going to change the way that she sees the world's royal and response to it. She's going to meet women from different neighborhoods, from different parts of the world. And as they get to know each other and share their stories, it might change the way that she's perceiving different communities. Maybe she becomes friends with some of these women, maybe, you know, they become part of her crowd. She goes to the pushcarts in the evenings or goes to the movie theater, right? And starts kind of exploring her own independence.

Brendan: Sarah, this has been incredible. Thank you so much for sitting and talking with me.

Sarah: My pleasure, Brendan.

…....

Brendan: These soundscapes were integral in shaping the various facets of Bessie's American identity. The sounds she heard in her home reinforced her identity as a daughter and a Jewish person, while the sounds she heard in the street shaped her as a teenager consuming pop culture, and the factory opened her eyes and ears to the diversity of New York and the power of community. After exploring Bessie's story with Sarah, I wanted to learn how Julia Wolfe turned this incredible slice of history into "Fire in my Mouth," a piece performed by orchestra and vocalists, which is called an oratorio. To make it contemporary, she also used multimedia elements like archival photos and video. How exactly did Julia use music and sound to recreate, and shine new light, on this history?

To recap: Sarah is a musicologist. I am not. When we met with Julia Wolfe, Sarah thankfully did most of the talking.

Sarah: I spoke to Julia in her Manhattan apartment and asked her about her process and what inspired her to create the piece. Fun fact, Julia lives in a renovated caviar factory.

Julia: I am Julia Wolfe and I'm a composer living here in New York City.

Sarah: And we're talking today about your most recent work *Fire in my mouth*, which the New York Philharmonic premiered in January. And I'm wondering for those who didn't have the opportunity to hear the piece, could you just give us an overview? Like the movements, instrumentation.

Julia: Yeah, it's a hard thing to describe in a way because there's so many moving parts and so many visual elements as well. The first movement is immigration. This second movement is factory, the third movement is protest, very straight-ahead titles. And the fourth movement is fire. And the forces for the piece are full orchestra, in this case it was the incredible New York Philharmonic.

Sarah: There were so many things that struck me about this performance and one of the things was this perpetual energy and the sense of urgency that existed in all four of the movements.

Julia: I think a lot about, what you just said, a lot about energy and intention and what builds tension. And it's hard to put your finger on what builds tension, but I guess it's a certain kind of focus and rhythmic drive that I think a lot about and is in a lot of my music. I mean, often people describe it as relentless or driven or hard driving or whatever. So, it's interesting that it’s transforming, even into this piece.

Sarah: Yeah. And I think it's interesting too, because it took on different forms throughout the piece. Like, at first it was the water and it was just kind of, I felt as the girls were leaving and immigrating and coming to the United States. Then later it's, it's the movement of the machines in the factory. It's the movement of the protest. It's the movement ultimately of the fire and just this constant build and each thing kind of surges and builds into the next.

Julia: Well, yeah, motion is really important because when you think about it, these women did not sit still. They were not women of luxury, you know, so they're not like sitting on a cruise ship. They're actually on this huge boat in third class. It's noisy, it's lively. And they're coming to God knows what and they just don't know what they're coming to. So, this kind of energy is, you can't really fall asleep at the wheel. You're coming to a place; you don't have the language. And so, all of these issues, I think, find their way into the fabric of the music.

Sarah: Yeah. And I think to your point, so the other thing I was really interested in was this idea of soundscape and it’s something that we've been talking a lot about at the museum recently, just how different sounds can help to define-- tell us sort of the neighborhood that we're in, for example, or our own songs and music that’s part of our own experience as just a person. And so, you, I felt in this composition are evoking these, these spaces and one of the most effective was the factory floor. And I'm wondering if you could just talk a little bit about, first of all, what you were trying to pull into that sound?

Julia: The way I got to that place of factory, first of all, what I was doing was trying to emulate the sound of what that factory floor could have sounded like. As far as I know, there's no actual sound recording, but there are descriptions and people would say you'd enter the factory floor and there'd be the roar of these machines. I mean, we're talking about these long tables, hundreds of sewing machines. It must've been an incredible sound. And you know, I don't think they really thought so much about quiet machines back then. You know, now people go, well, what's the quietest air conditioner I can buy? Or what's the quietest, you know, dishwasher I can buy? Well, they just, that's just the sound they made.

Sarah: *Fire in My Mouth* is a musical piece, but Julia didn't simply want to recreate the sounds of the factory. Instead, she wanted to reinvent them. Julia walked me through the process, starting with the violins.

Julia: Your left hand is holding the instrument and that's on the neck of the violin. And you're finding the notes, but if you don't press down and you just rest your fingers on the strings, you mute the sound so you get a non pitch. So, you might get a *click click* sound. And the right hand has the bow. And if the bow press is really, really hard while the left hands meeting and the bow press is really, really hard on the strings, can be on any of the strings, you can get this series of clicks or pops. So, it'd be like, *click* and when you string them all together you get *(violins)*
And I was like, that's it. That's a perfect sound. It really amazing. It's, that's pretty cool with one string playing it and especially if you're right up close to it. The sound of a whole group of people doing that is really amazing and such a great sound. But if I brought in a big group, like I've read an all the first violins going, all the second violins and the violas cellos to the down to the bases you had this spacial sweep across the strings and, it was just really fun to hear that.

But moving on to another instrument, the percussion is a sound I've worked with before with my own group, with The Bang on a Can All Stars. So, the percussionist of Bang on a Can, David Carson and I've several times I've written for him to roll on the rim of a drum. So often you'll roll on the, on the drum head, you know, which is also beautiful sound. But if you roll on the rim, you get *(drum sound).* I think that's actually the closest to the sewing machines, is the rim rolls on the on the drums. So just having all four of them do that together. First, they'd kind of alternate rolling on the rims, and then they kind of do these big group rolls on the rims and that was a really beautiful sound. And then all the brass players are actually blowing air through their instruments. And that's a sound I've heard before. But there's a way that they can blow through their instrument and just get the sound that like *(blowing sound.)* And we'd do that in these kind of regular intervals so that it's again, some kind of machine. I don't know what machine it is, is it the steam iron that they ironed the clothing with? I don't know, but it's not, it's the way the section is somewhat literal and also fantastic at the same time. Like not completely literal. So, building this whole world of these tacks and sounds that could be imaginary factory sounds was really an incredible process.

Sarah: During our discussion of the instruments Julia used, she mentioned percussion. She told me that anything can be a percussion instrument as long as you can bang it on something. With

this spirit in mind, Julia used nontraditional instruments to help recreate the sounds of the factory. One of those nontraditional instruments was a pair of really big scissors.

Julia: And so, some of those are simulated, but then there are these very literal sounds and one of them is the scissors and that's in the score. So that's not a theatrical thing we added. It's actually written out in time in the score. And I knew I was going to have to figure out where am I getting these scissors from and what do they sound like. So, I did do a little scissor hunt and went to two stores in the garment district. And so there it was, we went to the store and this wonderful man named Sid spent hours with us. He very patiently brought out all these different scissors and it was just a great experience. And he was laughing because I said, look, I don't really care how they cut and they just have to sound good.
These are the 12 inch. I bought both the 12 inch and the 10 inch and then as well as a few other smaller scissors, but the 12 inch beat everything terms of what they've looked like and what they sound like. So these are the 12 inch. *(Scissors clipping).*

Sarah: For Julia, this piece wasn't only about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. It was about the women who were affected by it, it was about their lives before, their lives after, and what they might have experienced during the fire itself. Julia made sure that her audience didn't think of these women as anonymous victims. She wove the names of the women who worked in the factory and the music they may have heard during their workday into the piece. She used their American identities as musical notes.

Thinking about the factory floor, so there's the first, you know, I got the literal sounds of the sewing machines, but then you have all of these women who are bringing their own stories to this space. And it was such a beautiful moment to when you're hearing the Yiddish and the Italian songs, can you talk about that?

Julia: I was trying to figure out how to, to bring that information into the piece because the two primary groups, of course in the triangle factory were Eastern European and Russian Jews and Southern Italians. Just having the names in, so in the names you can hear the ethnicities, you can hear the Eastern European names, the Italian names, and they're all very colorful and multisyllabic. And so, I really wanted to, in this movement factory, really wanted to represent those two cultures. And so, I found this old Yiddish song that is about sewing. And then that's a very mournful tune that kind of floats above this factory sound. And then in comes this very crazy, feisty kind of Tarantella from the very most southern part of Italy and it's just, a crazy kind of dance form. And it was mostly, I think, thought to ward off like the poison of a spider bite. But, but the text is more about love and, kind of elicit love or kind of sneaking off to have love, whatever. But, these two together, we're just really fun to make a counterpoint between the two because one is this floating kind of mournful cry and the other one is this wild, hysterical kind of song. So, all that is happening with the factory. I would read conflicting things and, in some factories, it sounded like there was a lot of singing and other places they didn't allow singing. They didn't want any singing. You guys quiet down there. It seemed like there was some singing in the Triangle Factory because there's an account of the song that was sung before the fire broke

out. So, I'm guessing there was some singing. But who knows how much and whether it was hushed or are not.

Sarah: Back to what you were saying about feeling like an outsider and how to feel as though you're part of a community here in the United States. And a lot of times popular culture was kind of that route in, whether it's the clothes that you're wearing that are, you know, essentially trendy and cool or your interpretation of the way that you're speaking or romance novels or Tin Pan Alley songs. These things played out on the factory floor as well as these women were creating a community there. And often music is an expression of that too, in when you were scoring that protest section, I think during the part where it's like, “I want to be American.” It was, that was sung in unison, right?

Julia: It is. It's sometimes harmonized but it’s in unison rhythm so that you'd get this kind of force coming at you. Like “I want to.” And after a while you don't even need to hear the, “I want to,” but the verb is really important. “I want to laugh like an American” “I want to..” so some of some of the things are very straight forward and positive. I want to, I wanted to talk like look like, dream like, but then they get a little darker cry like, bleed like burn, like, so there's a gradual kind of getting into all kinds of questions about the problems that you have here in this country we've had over the history of this country that aren't so pretty. And although for the most part, I think it was an incredible relief everyone to come to this country in this context.

Brendan: Bessie Rogarshevsky lived a life that would have felt very familiar to the many of the young women who died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. Most of the women who died were her age, her ethnicity, her neighbors. She, too, might have wondered how to laugh like an American. The soundscape of the Lower East Side, of Bessie’s home, shifted through its grief. On March 27th, 1911, just two days after the fire, a funeral procession journeyed down Orchard Street. The scene was described in the *Evening World* newspaper, “As the hearse was passing the synagogue at No. 82 Orchard Street, it was halted for a moment by congestion at the crossing. A venerable man with a long white beard and the impressive carriage of a rabbi pushed his way out of the crowd and mounted the synagogue steps. In a great, vibrant voice he recited the prayer for the dead in Yiddish. Thousands of men and women stood silent with bowed heads until he finished...” Bessie and her family lived at 97 Orchard, just about a half a block north of this scene. Despite not working at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, Bessie would have been there as a witness to both the anguish, and the silence that followed.

Sarah: In my conversation with Julia, she spoke about how it was especially difficult to compose the Fire movement. To make this piece true to the personal stories, but not to get lost in the tragedy.

Julia: But there was one description we had were with other bodies coming down in and the sound the bodies made on the ground, like thud dead, thud dead. That's the way the article described them. And I thought, I'll put that in the piece. And I just couldn't put it in the piece. It was too, it was too much, you know. And so, I just made it in a way that most intense part of the fire movement is just music. It's the roar of the orchestra and just a simple text: “I see them

falling." So, you know, that people are coming out, jumping, jumping from the windows. But I didn't want to, I don't know, can't, they didn't want to make it melodramatic and I didn't want to somehow make it less than it was.

I took me the longest to write that last movement. One thing I should say also is that a lot of the text is from firsthand accounts or oral histories So in fire, well actually in several of the movements, I'm using people's direct words. So, in fire, some of the description is actually from the trial. So, there was a trial following the fire and the description of "I see the trail of her dress or the ends of her hair began to burn." And so just the beginning of, oh my gosh, what's happening here? There's -- this is fires igniting and those are just words that someone actually said. And then some snippets from speeches from Roche Schneiderman's speech. That's a whole nother subject. Just capturing the fierceness and vitality of these women leaders is probably in a way that one of the most central parts of the piece.

Sarah: Again, as an audience member, I never, I felt like it was, it's giving voice to all of these stories. They weren't made into victims, in the sense like that wasn't the focus. Like, yeah, this terrible thing happened. But also, like this is about empowerment too.

Julia: Yeah, that's very important to me. And it's interesting because when I first was talking to people about the subject, this is the subject of the piece and I'm trying to start to build the piece. People say, your write the piece about the triangle fire. And I'd say, well, no, it's, that's part of the piece that's going to definitely be in the piece. But it's about these women and what they did because huge change came after the fire, but huge effort happened before the fire. So, in 1909, there was the uprising of 20,000 and all these people, largely, mostly women, hit the streets and were out protesting because of the conditions. And some change came after that. Not at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, but at other factories.

And so, all of that protest and then this tragedy, which unfortunately is the way people wake up. But it's not until that point that people wake up and feel the pain and then big change. So all of these incredible changes came about. Almost every fire could we have in place today is, it was from that moment, it was funny because having done a renovation where I live in an old loft, you know, you kind of like roll your eyes, oh my gosh, you have to think about that exit or why is the window I have to be, what's, what are all these things that you have to think about? And then all of a sudden doing this piece, I was like, well, of course you need two exits. Of course, you need that fire escape, but it has to work, you know, those fire escapes at the Triangle Factory didn't work. They burned and melted. They weren't strong enough.

And so, all of this change came about because of these incredibly gutsy women. And, I definitely highlighted, well in particular, Clara Lemlich, that the title of the pieces from a line that she said. Someone had interviewed her years later and asked her about her youth and she said, oh, then I had fire in my mouth. I don't think she even to say consciously thought about the fire, but she meant I was, you know, outspoken. And then this beautiful painful speech of Roche Schneiderman after this tragedy had happened. "I would be a trader to those poor burned if I were to speak of good fellowship. I have tried you good people of the public and I have found you wanting," and this was such an intense line. I just found that so poignant because, you know,

yes, there were bad factory owners and they were negligent people, but really, it's kind of a community, communal guilt. And that's what she was saying. I've tried you good people, the public, because there are a lot of layers. There's government, there's anybody voting or whatever, paying attention. I think everyone felt collectively responsible. I mean angry too at the lack of governance, but also collective kind of guilt that how could we not have paid attention to these young women. And so that was interesting just to see.

Sarah: As Julia imagined this national tragedy, she put the sounds of hope, work and suffering into the music. She imagined the soundscape of the lives of the workers who died on March 25th 1911, and of those that survived. She thought about the roar of the speeches given in their community, and the scratches of pencil from journalists writing hundreds of miles away and from the historians writing a century later. She didn't limit herself to a single moment. She made all the sounds we make, and the things we do, relevant to larger moments in our collective history.

Brendan: Learning more about Bessie Rogarshevsky and the women of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory made me realize just how much sounds connect us. We make them and we absorb them. Sounds broadcast who we are and frame and shape our communities. The people who hear our sounds are part of that community, and that means your community might be far broader than you initially thought. We don't even have to love all the sounds that we hear, they still connect us to a moment in our lives. There is no opting out of this collaboration.

When I think about New York, and my neighborhood in Brooklyn, I can imagine how the sounds I hear during my day could be written down and collected as part of the history of our city. On my morning subway ride I hear English, Russian, and Bengali. I hear the crinkle of newspapers and the sounds of kids laughing with their friends on their way to school. When I leave the subway near the Tenement Museum, I hear a man playing a Chinese string instrument. Sometimes he plays the Star-Spangled Banner. I hear the sounds of different cultures clashing and combining over the steady beat of eight and half million people moving through the streets.

These soundscapes are not the same across the country. In Kansas, the sound of the wind blowing through the field or the mooing of cows is as significant as the honk of cab horns in Manhattan; the sounds of waves crashing and club music in Miami, the silence of the New Mexico desert. Songs and sounds are part of who we are, where we've been, and where we're going. Without question, immigrant communities have always been participants in the American soundscape. Ours is one of many languages, songs, and experiences.

CREDITS

Thanks for listening to How to be American.

Join us next time for a conversation about immigration, comic books, and the American Dream.

How to be American is a podcast created the Tenement Museum. This episode was produced by Max Savage Levenson. Craig Kepen is our editor and composer.

Special thanks to: Sarah Tomasewski, Julia Wolfe, Ava Robinson, the New York Philharmonic and Pineapple Street Media in Brooklyn, New York.

If you liked this episode of How to be American, you can subscribe to the podcast and leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. To explore more stories like the ones in this episode, visit tenement.org. Consider donating or becoming a member to support us in telling stories that illustrate what it means to be American.

I’m Brendan Murphy. Thanks for listening.