



## MY BEST SHOT

by Lisa Ross

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## SNUFF RADIO

Its drive time, and the soothing voice of suave Ray Suarez announces National Public Radio's newest contribution to the nation's educational zeitgeist: snuff radio.

Tonight, he tells us, San Diego's public radio station KPBS will play the unexpurgated audio tape of a 1984 Georgia execution.

But, not to worry—the station would wrap the historic airing in a round table call-in discussion, the kind only NPR could stage with a straight face.

For those who skillfully navigated around this opportunity for enlightenment by watching the homicidal Soprano's, you could have caught it two nights later if willing to shun the two-hour Survivor show.

I failed to escape snuff radio by unhappy accident because I happened to be driving that night.

OK, so I listened. As it turns out, in the race for insensitivity between the bureaucratic, drum beat description of the electric chair execution by a prison official or the pathetic attempt by NPR to make this obviously lurid pitch for attention and listeners, it was a photo finish.

Thinking about the thinking that went into this strange decision to be the first to air an execution, I can't imagine that the high minded conversations in the editorial room regarding the public's "right to know" weren't laced with pitches from sales staff (pardon me, fundraisers) about running the thing during pledge week, public radio's bi-annual radiothon and the only programming more numbing than academics and a guy on a cell phone El Cajon talking about violence and capital punishment.

For my humanitarian friends, this was the consummate anti-capital punishment road show—a

horrifying spectacle guaranteed to change the hearts and minds of the solidly 68 percent of America who are fine with capital punishment as long as its not conducted on innocent people, a circumstance made less possible with DNA testing. Others liked the crime deterrent possibilities inherent in airing executions on Court TV.

But, for most of us who are uncomfortably ambivalent about capital punishment, translated into political terminology as "persuade-ables," the show accomplished neither high minded purpose, but only served to make the ending of a life as banal as a cereal commercial. Sort of the same way America loves Tony Soprano and regrets that he has to take someone out from time to time.

And, it appears that the idea of using this airing as an impetus for a national discussion on capital punishment and the public's right to see condemned people fry up close and personal on television fell as flat as an old Pepsi. From what I could discern from the news and talk shows over the weekend, income tax reform and the shadow Presidency of Vice-President Cheney chewed up most of the talking head time.

Perhaps the fizzle of the sizzle happened simply because the condemned man was no one in particular, just a retarded loser who killed a faceless victim. Fox Television would never have made that mistake—as we speak, they are likely engaged in a frenzied bidding war for the rights to air Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh's demise.

I think enough of the class act Ray Suarez to imagine him tied to a stake with bamboo shoots inserted under his nails by some 30ish hotshot NPR news director while he recorded the sincerely felt commercials (excuse me, public announcements) for the "Execution Tapes." But, I have no doubt that Walter Cronkite would have sniffed the stench of snuff radio and walked away