Backstage with the creators of *Serial*, Sarah Koenig and Julie Snyder

Launched in 2014, *Serial* became the fastest podcast to reach five million downloads in iTunes history. The first season of the podcast presented a 12-part series on one legal case, captivating an audience that downloaded the episodes more than 300 million times (and counting).

In their live presentation, co-creators Sarah Koenig and Julie Snyder take the audience backstage in this cultural phenomenon, using some of their favorite tape to narrate personal stories about the ups and downs of creating a new form of modern storytelling.

*Photo by Elise Bergerson*
Biographies

SARAH KOENIG

Sarah Koenig is the host and co-creator of the award-winning podcast *Serial*. Launched in 2014, *Serial* is credited with bringing mainstream attention to the podcast format and has been downloaded more than 300 million times, making it the most listened-to podcast in the history of the form. Among other honors, *Serial* won the 2014 Peabody Award, the first time the award has been given to a podcast. In 2015 Koenig was named one of *Time Magazine’s* “100 Most Influential People.”

Koenig began her career as a newspaper reporter—her first reporting job was at her weekly hometown paper. She lived in Moscow, Russia, for several years, where she worked for the *New York Times*, and once she returned, went to work for the *Concord Monitor* in New Hampshire. She did stints as a crime reporter and then as a political reporter—the same beats she’d go on to cover at the Baltimore Sun.

In 2004 Koenig became a producer at the radio show *This American Life*. She has guest-hosted *This American Life* several times, most memorably for the *No Coincidence, No Story* show; she has also produced and reported some of the show’s most popular episodes, including *Switched at Birth, Dr. Gilmer and Mr. Hyde*, and *Habeas Schmabeas*, a Peabody Award-winning show about Guantanamo Bay. Koenig is co-creator and executive producer of *S-Town*, a seven-part non-fiction podcast from Serial Productions hosted by Brian Reed that premiered in March 2017. *S-Town* was downloaded more than 10 million times in the first four days of its release—setting a new record in the podcasting world.
JULIE SNYDER

Julie Snyder has been the guiding force behind two of the most successful ventures in audio broadcasting: she is the co-creator of the podcast Serial, which debuted in October 2014 and has been downloaded more than 300 million times, making it the most listened-to podcast in the history of the form, and for many years, she was the senior producer of the public radio show This American Life, which is heard by more than 4 million listeners each week.

Snyder began working at This American Life in 1997—almost from its inception—and along with host Ira Glass, has set the editorial agenda for the program, winning four Peabody Awards along the way. She has produced many of This American Life’s most entertaining and memorable episodes, including 24 Hours at the Golden Apple and Notes on Camp. In addition, she has also headed the program’s most ambitious and topical programs, notably episodes covering the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, health care reform, and urban violence in Chicago.

In 2013 Snyder began talking with her This American Life colleague Sarah Koenig about trying something new: making a show that doesn’t follow the usual format of a different story every week, but instead making a show where they would cover one story over the course of an entire season. At the time, smart phone technology was making podcasts more accessible for the public, and the on-demand nature of podcast listening meant listeners could follow a story in a serialized way, following each chapter of the story as it unfolded week by week. The format was appealing to both Koenig and Snyder because it meant they could use all the tools of narrative journalism to report an in-depth story that featured twists, turns, tangents, and suspense along the way.

After a year of reporting, with Koenig as host/reporter and Snyder as editor, Serial became a sensation. Slate headlined “Serial Is Like Nothing I’ve Ever Heard or Watched Before;” Buzzfeed wrote “Serial Is the Best New Crime Drama (And It’s Not on TV);” and The New Yorker declared Serial “the podcast we’ve been waiting for.” Among other honors, Serial won the 2014 Peabody Award, the first time the award has been given to a podcast. Snyder is co-creator and executive producer of S-Town, a seven-part non-fiction podcast from Serial Productions hosted by Brian Reed which premiered in March 2017. S-Town was downloaded more than 10 million times in the first four days of its release—setting a new record in the podcasting world.
While in Blacksburg this week, Sarah Koenig and Julie Snyder participated in this informal question-and-answer session with Virginia Tech students in journalism and English.

Special thanks to Bernice Hausman, Andy Lautenschlager, Erika Meitner, and Aileen Murphy

LEARNING GUIDE QUESTIONS
The Moss Arts Center Learning Guide is a resource for educators, students, and anyone who enjoys digging deeper into our programming. To engage even more fully with our season performances, view the full Learning Guide at bit.ly/LearningGuideMAC. Please use the following questions to spark your own contemplation about today's performance:

• In form, *Serial* tells a single story in episode installments over an entire season. What makes this format ideal for the stories Koenig and Snyder explore? What do you imagine are the challenges of constructing a serialized podcast?

• In a 2016 *Washington Post* op-ed on season one of *Serial*, Robert Gebelhoff writes, “some have already suggested that journalistic series such as *Serial* are changing the way people view criminal justice in the United States—and more than that, are upending cases that seemed settled long ago. Is this a threat to the legal system, or is it simply a healthy and intellectual form of entertainment?” What are your thoughts about the role of series like *Serial* in relationship to the criminal justice system and the “court of public opinion?”

• If you have listened to *Serial*, think back to a particular moment in season one or two that was memorable to you. What was it? Why did it resonate?
In the Galleries

OPENING SOON: SoundScapes
May 17-June 9, 2018
Miles C. Horton Jr. Gallery and Sherwood Payne Quillen ’71 Reception Gallery

An immersive listening space—field recordings, voice, found sounds, digital and analogue synthesis, and more

SoundScapes presents an evocative world of sound art by five leading figures in experimental music and sound art, featuring multi-channel sound works from the United States and beyond. Curated by internationally acclaimed sound artist Stephen Vitiello, this exhibition features works by Olivia Block (Chicago); Maria Chavez (New York and Lima, Peru); Marcus Fischer (Portland, Oregon); Robin Rimbaud, a.k.a. “Scanner” (U.K.); and Jana Winderen (Norway).

JOIN US
Reception and Gallery Talk: Stephen Vitiello
Thursday, May 17, 2018
Reception: 5-7 PM; Talk: 6 PM
Miles C. Horton Jr. Gallery
Free

GALLERY HOURS
Monday-Friday, 10 AM-5:30 PM
Saturday, 10 AM-4 PM
To arrange a group tour or class visit, please contact Meggin Hicklin, exhibitions program manager, at megh79@vt.edu or 540-231-0840.