Sidedoor S7 Ep. 6 Chiura Obatas Glorious Struggle Final Transcription

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

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Lizzie Peabody: There's a painting that hung on the wall of Eleanor Roosevelt's bedroom until the day she died. It's a watercolor painted on silk. To me, it has sort of a dreamlike quality.

Rihoko Ueno: It does. And I think just at a glance, you would think "This is just a very pretty calming landscape."

Lizzie Peabody: But there's more to this painting, which is why it hung on the former First Ladies' wall. Rihoko Ueno, Archivist at the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, describes it for me.

Rihoko Ueno: It's an evening landscape. There's sort of a full moon on the top left corner of the painting. The top edge of the painting is blue and that sort of fades into a cream color. And then you see the blue outline of the mountains in the distance. And then below that you see the black outline of barracks and a guard tower, and the fencing running along the perimeter of the Topaz camp.

Lizzie Peabody: Topaz camp was one of 10 incarceration camps that held Japanese Americans during World War II. Over the course of nearly four years, the U.S. Government forced 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry into these camps. Most of them, American citizens. One was a man named Chiura Obata. He painted this painting 'Moonlight Over Topaz' while imprisoned there.

ShiPu Wang: Kind of like the artist was trying to capture the beauty of the moment. But at the same time, the way he positioned himself also shows that he understands where he is.

Lizzie Peabody: This is ShiPu Wang, professor of Art History at the University of California Merced.

ShiPu Wang: And so that's a very interesting juxtaposition of still trying to see beauty under really difficult circumstances, but not losing sight of that.

Lizzie Peabody: The painting was later given to Eleanor Roosevelt, in thanks for speaking out in defense of Japanese American Civil Rights during the war.

ShiPu Wang: And the fact that she kept it in her own apartment, shows how much she treasured this painting.

Lizzie Peabody: Chiura Obata believed in the power of art to sustain him in life's most difficult moments. Even under armed guard in the middle of the desert, he found beauty and he taught others to find it too. So, this time on Sidedoor, we retrace the brushstrokes of Chiura Obata's extraordinary work. To learn how art can bring peace, even in the darkest times. That's coming up, after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Chiura Obata was about 20 years old and just getting out of bed, when the great earthquake of 1906 shook San Francisco.

Chiura Obata: [foreign language 00:04:20]

Carlo Watanabe: My chimney came down and dropped into the room.

Lizzie Peabody: This Obata in an oral history, he recorded for UCLA's Japanese American Research Project in 1965.

Carlo Watanabe: After that I knew something really serious had happened. So, I grabbed as many sketch books as possible and walked in the direction of the downtown to see what was the situation.

Chiura Obata: [foreign language 00:04:43]

Lizzie Peabody: Obata had moved to the U.S. only a few years earlier. He'd come from Japan where he'd studied painting from a young age. As a teenager, his painting was recognized with a prestigious award and he was already getting paid commissions. But Japan felt too small for him. So, when he was about 18, the young artist set off for the United States.

Noriko Sanefuji: As Obata was immigrating, there were Japanese immigrants coming into mostly the West Coast. The Pacific North. Most of them were farmers.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Noriko Sanefuji, Curator at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. She says the climate Obata was entering at the turn of the century was not friendly toward Asian immigrants.

Noriko Sanefuji: If you're coming from Europe, it's an easier of an assimilation. But if you're coming from Asia, there was ideas about you're unfit for this country. "What is a desirable immigrant and what's an undesirable immigrant?"

Lizzie Peabody: So, he would've been one of those undesirable immigrants?

Noriko Sanefuji: Yes. So, called Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: And Obata felt the hostility. Like one day, not long after arriving in the U.S., he was walking home from a job when he passed a group of railway workers. And when they saw him, the men started calling out racist slurs. As he passed them, one slapped him in the face.

Chiura Obata: [Foreign language 00:06:13]

Carlo Watanabe: Although I felt humiliated, I tried to ignore them, just pass. However, the third one spit on me. I thought this is too much humiliation. Especially in America, in this country of freedom and equality. If someone behaves in this way in plain daylight on a public street, I thought I should fight back. I made up my mind.

Lizzie Peabody: It was one artist against eight railway workers. The rail workers started throwing bricks and Obata got in one good hit before the police showed up and arrested him. He was charged with attempted murder, but after a month-long lawsuit, found innocent. Obata wasn't just facing discrimination, although he'd worked as a painter in Japan, he struggled to find work as an artist in the United States. So, he took odd jobs as a domestic helper or farm worker, but he was always drawing. And the morning of April 18th, 1906 was no exception. At dawn when the ground shuttered and buildings started to tumble, he headed straight downtown.

Chiura Obata: [Foreign language 00:07:19]

Carlo Watanabe: I saw many American women among the guests still in their night robes, wandering around scared. I wanted to describe, as a third person, how the earthquake affected people. So, I walked around the area with my sketchbook.

Chiura Obata: [Foreign language 00:07:36]

Lizzie Peabody: He drew buildings collapsed on their sides. Rubble piled in the streets.

ShiPu Wang: I love those sketches, especially because they're small. So, they're very immediate. So, you get the sense that he was right there. He wanted to capture that almost like using a camera, but with his pen or a brush.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Art Historian, ShiPu Wang again.

ShiPu Wang: And so, you can see almost like he was thinking about himself as a reporter and his visual language was to capture those scenes.

Lizzie Peabody: After the earthquake, Obata started to get jobs here and there as an Illustrator. Gradually his network expanded as he got more and more work.

Kimi Hill: And he was establishing gradually but over the years, very close relationships with Americans. Non-Japanese.

Lizzie Peabody: This is his granddaughter, Kimi Hill.

Kimi Hill: And he was developing this very deep respect and gratitude toward the nature of California. And the beauty that he found that was inspiring him in his paintings.

Lizzie Peabody: If you're looking for beauty in California, there are few places as awe inspiring as Yosemite. And in 1927, Obata took a two-month sketching tour of the High Sierra. It made a big impression.

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Kimi Hill: He said, "This event was the greatest harvest for my whole life and future in painting." And it really, for him, was the time that he developed his philosophy of great nature. Of respecting 'Dai Shizen'.

Lizzie Peabody: 'Shizen' is Japanese for nature, and 'Dai' is great.

Kimi Hill: This profound, spiritual source for his artwork would be there as something that he would find, but also that he wanted to share with his fellow artists and fellow humans.

Lizzie Peabody: In the mountains, Obata sat silently for hours at a time. Dipping his brush in the water of a stream painting until two AM, as the moon rose and coyotes howled in the dark. At the end of the trip, he brought home nearly 150 paintings.

ShiPu Wang: I think when an artist is deeply immersed in the environment and had the desire to capture, appreciate, interpret what he or she sees. It's a form of claiming. I am here.

Lizzie Peabody: In this way, Obata claimed his place in America, and he also really impressed his traveling companions. One of them, an Art Professor named Worth Ryder.

ShiPu Wang: Worth writer saw that, "Oh, we could probably hire him for UC Berkeley." And so he was the one who really introduced Obata to the department and got him a job as a Lecturer at first. And eventually he became an Art Professor.

Lizzie Peabody: What can you tell us about how he painted?

Kimi Hill: The style painting that he was most adept at or most famous for is the 'Sumi-e', or Japanese ink and brush style of painting. What he had to do first was to become from a place of just deep concentration.

Lizzie Peabody: Obata taught his students that to capture the essence of what you're painting, you first need to become calm. Before you even touch brush to paper, your mind should be as tranquil as the surface of an untouched lake. Your posture must be straight and tall and your breath should move with your brush. Otherwise, he said...

ShiPu Wang: "If you breathe out in the middle, your brush will die halfway. It will be like the tail of a dog recovering from an illness."

Kimi Hill: Right? His students also told me that he really did have a sense of humor. And he did like to tease his students like that, so.

Lizzie Peabody: For Obata teaching was more than a job, it was a mission. He even taught the public, through art demonstrations. So, tell me a little more. What was the purpose of the demonstrations? And I guess it's just not something I'm really familiar with.

Kimi Hill: Painting demonstrations?

Lizzie Peabody: Yes.

Kimi Hill: Both my grandparents realized pretty early on that the Americans pretty much knew nothing about Asia.

Lizzie Peabody: By this time Obata had met Haruko Kohashi. Another Japanese immigrant living in San Francisco's Japan Town. They got married and started a family. Haruko was a skilled artist of Ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging. Another art form requiring a clear mind to create beauty from the harmony and balance of plant forms. Chiura and Haruko did joint public art demonstrations, because Obata...

Kimi Hill: He felt that in spite of this xenophobia, that he could reach an empathy and a sympathy. An appreciation for Japanese culture and by extension Japanese people through the Arts.

Lizzie Peabody: I didn't realize that there was that element of cross-cultural understanding that factored into those demonstrations. It wasn't like a career move. It was really about fostering understanding and peace.

Kimi Hill: Oh yes, absolutely.

Lizzie Peabody: By the early 1940s, Chiura Obata was living a busy and comfortable life in Berkeley, California. Over the course of four decades, he'd built a successful career as a professional artist. He had a close circle, artists and academics. Four children, a full-time Professorship at UC Berkeley and his exhibitions were earning him national attention.

Kimi Hill: Even Time Magazine said he was one of the more important artists on the West Coast at the time.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow. But all of that would change.

Radio Clip: Flash, Washington! The White House announces Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor!

Radio Clip:

Lizzie Peabody: That's coming up after the break.

Radio Clip: It has been an attack!

Radio Clip: Japanese have attacked the American Naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Lizzie Peabody: On December 7th, 1941, Japan attacked the U.S. Naval base of Pearl Harbor.

Radio Clip: Secretary early informed all correspondence and then rushed to the White House to be with President Roosevelt.

President Roosevelt: A State of War has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.

Lizzie Peabody: In response, the United States declared war on Japan. Officially entering World War II.

Radio Clip: When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, our West Coast became a potential combat zone. Living in that zone were more than 100,000 persons of Japanese ancestry.

Lizzie Peabody: Fearful of more attacks on the West Coast, two months later, President Franklin D Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9. 0. 6. 6. Which authorized the creation of Military Exclusion Zones, meaning the Military had the right to kick anyone out of these zones who might be a threat to national security. California was declared an Exclusion Zone and that Spring, anyone of Japanese heritage was officially called a threat.

Noriko Sanefuji: The executive order was issued on February 19th of 1942.

Lizzie Peabody: Historian Noriko Sanefuji says signs went up on lamp posts and public buildings declaring "All persons of Japanese ancestry, living in the following areas, pack your bags".

Noriko Sanefuji: Pack whatever you can carry, and then you're going to somewhere. Very little notice. So, people had no idea what to pack.

Lizzie Peabody: People didn't know where they were going. And they also didn't know how long they'd be gone. Many families only had 48 hours-notice to sell their house, their car and whatever belongings they couldn't carry with them, which Noriko points out was not a lot.

Noriko Sanefuji: The suitcases are much smaller back in the days. So, it's not a giant suitcase. So, you can only carry so little with you, and there's no wheels and things like that.

Rihoko Ueno: We have these sketches of the moving trucks that came to take the belongings of Japanese Americans during the forced removal from their homes and Berkeley and...

Lizzie Peabody: In the middle of the commotion, there was Obata was with his sketchbook. Oh, wow.

Rihoko Ueno: Right side or these sketches right here.

Lizzie Peabody: At the Archives of American Art, Rihoko Ueno shows me a handful of quick ink drawings on pocket size, blue lined paper. The kind you'd make a grocery list on. They show crowds press together on the sidewalk. People climbing into buses. They're hands full of luggage and boxes. It just seems like a really kind of a chaotic scene. Like it all happened really fast.

Rihoko Ueno: Right. And he managed to capture it, so he has that sort of photographic eye.

Lizzie Peabody: Yes. April 30th, 1942. That was the day Chiura Obata and his family had to leave their home in Berkeley.

ShiPu Wang: You see that he's documenting almost like he's picking up a camera and just taking a shot of that moment. This is what's happening and this is what's happening to us.

Lizzie Peabody: The Obata family was sent to Tanforan Racetrack, a stadium designed for horses. Now converted into a temporary detention center to contain Japanese Americans from the Bay Area while more permanent incarceration camps were being built in remote locations.

Kimi Hill: The forced relocation was so shocking. The reality didn't set in until they were in the confines behind barbed wires at Tanforan.

Lizzie Peabody: At Tanforan, eight thousand Japanese Americans ate in communal mess halls. Showered in communal bathrooms and many, like the Obata family, slept in horse stalls.

Kimi Hill: And my grandmother sat down and just started crying. And she said she had never cried like that before in her life. So, this is a Faculty Wife who had just a few months ago was giving Ikebana demonstrations to the San Francisco Garden Club. And now she's living in a reeking, stinking, horse stall. And what are they all going to do? That was such a huge, question in everybody's mind. "Now what?" And for Obata, his first thought is "I'm going to start an Art school."

Lizzie Peabody: With all normalcy out the window, Obata was most concerned about how the children would fare with no school and no structure in this strange, new place. He lobbied the camp administration for permission. And a month later, with art supplies donated by friends outside the camp, he opened an Art school. On the first day of school, Obata wrote that it rained and rained. Rihoko read to me from his account in the Archives of American Art.

Rihoko Ueno: "The storm had started the night before and on the morning after it was still a raging furiously, and I was somewhat discouraged...

Carlo Watanabe: Discouraged over the terrible gloomy weather. I took out my heavy fishing boots, raincoat and rain hat. And I cut through the Tanforan Racetrack along the Eucalyptus tree groves. I wondered if students were going to come at all. I looked over towards the Art building and saw three tiny girls standing on the doorsteps of the Art building. I ran down to open the door. I noticed their little rubber boots and rains were drenched. I asked the youngest girl, six years old, "Do you like to learn to paint?" With smiles and sparkling eyes she responded, "Sure I do." In my heart, I thank the mothers for their bravery in sending their beloved children over in such storms. I thank the heaven for having started this movement."

Lizzie Peabody: The Art school was successful by every measure. Classes were offered from morning until night. There were 16 teachers, all Japanese American incarcerates. They taught over 600 students from the ages of five to 78. The students at the Art school even held an Art show. Almost everyone in the camp attended.

Kimi Hill: It was first all something to do, but it was also so impressive. This outpouring of creativity and expertise was really shown. And they're very proud of it.

Lizzie Peabody: But about four months after arriving at Tanforan, the whole population of the camp was loaded into trains and deported to a more permanent facility, way out in the middle of the Utah desert. This was Topaz, stark rows of military style barracks surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers. At night, it was frigid. The shoddily built barracks full of cracks that led in the cold and the dust.

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Kimi Hill: The alkaline soil was like a powder. So, the wind would blow and the dust, which is not being held down, just permeated everything. And they felt like they were dumped into a big vat of white flour. And they were covered with this dust and breathing it too. Right?

Lizzie Peabody: Kimi showed me an ink sketch that Obata did of the family barracks during a dust storm. Like most of his work from that time, it's in black and white.

Kimi Hill: My grandmother is at the window trying to keep the dust out. And my mom is putting newspaper all over the bed. The other interesting thing in this sketch is they have a very small Ikebana on the little shelf.

Lizzie Peabody: Yes.

Kimi Hill: Yes. You could see that the Obatas are trying to keep some kind of semblance of normalcy.

Lizzie Peabody: Days stretched to weeks, to months. For many, it would be years before they'd see anything but the desert. Obata restarted the Art school at Topaz and continued to teach. His hope was that the calm required for painting, that clearing of the mind, would help Japanese Americans to weather this purgatory in the desert.

ShiPu Wang: They are living under such uncertain circumstances.

Lizzie Peabody: This is ShiPu.

ShiPu Wang: That making art would provide a focus. A way to have discipline, to have structure. So, you can achieve a sense of calmness, so that you can overcome any challenges.

Lizzie Peabody: To ward against despair, Obata himself turned to the beauty of the natural world.

Chiura Obata: [Foreign language 00:23:49]

Carlo Watanabe: Although we were in a huge 75 miles wide severe desert and a place where almost no living thing exists, the rising sun in the morning and the sunset is very calm. With a complex mixture of color, which is beyond description. If I hadn't gone to that kind of place, I wouldn't have realized the beauty that exists in that enormous bleakness.

Lizzie Peabody: Obata captured fiery sunsets. And in his painting for Eleanor Roosevelt, a glorious moon rise. Still, he didn't shy away from recording the suffering he saw either. One painting called 'A Sad Plight', shows a family huddled on cots against the cold. So. it's, I mean, how do we reconcile... You have 'Moonlight over Topaz', this beautiful sort of transcendent image of serenity in the context of this horrible situation. But then you have on the other hand, 'A Sad Plight', which is really highlighting the misery. So how do we reconcile these images?

ShiPu Wang: I don't know if we need to reconcile them because that's part of the complexity of the situation. You move through a spectrum of emotions and experience as you are being forced into a situation like this. And I think the fact that he produced so many works, allows us to see the full extent of the emotional journey.

Rihoko Ueno: And I think it's important to remember that the Japanese Americans inside the camps weren't allowed to have cameras or take any photographs of their experience, so.

Lizzie Peabody: Really?

Rihoko Ueno: Yes. So, it's aesthetically very pleasing, but it has a documentary function as well.

Lizzie Peabody: In the spring of 1943, Obata documented a tragedy. On April 11th, another incarcerate, a 63-year-old man named James Wakasa was taking an after dinner stroll around the perimeter of the camp when a guard shot him dead.

Noriko Sanefuji: And it just penetrate the heart and then he fell to the ground. So, there's a lot of investigation about this case.

Lizzie Peabody: The guard claimed Wakasa was trying to climb through the barbed wire fence to escape. But Noriko says nobody believed that. Although Obata didn't witness the shooting, he made a painting of Wakasa, doubled over and falling to the ground. The painting called 'Wakasa Shot by MP' is at the National Museum of American History.

Noriko Sanefuji: It just kind of sums up the situation, the climate, the racism, the war hysteria. Just in a nutshell, in Obata's drawing.

Kimi Hill: He knew that historically this was proof that the guns were aimed inside. That the Japanese Americans were completely vulnerable to the whims of the military.

Lizzie Peabody: Tensions were rising inside the camp. That Spring, the War Department gave out a questionnaire. Testing the loyalty of all the adult prisoners by asking them to forswear any allegiance to the Japanese Emperor.

Kimi Hill: This created so much tension within the camps. Who was Pro-Japan? Who was Pro-American? Really the anger, it was toward the government for having put them there in the first place in these camps. And yet there's no recourse for that. So they began to attack each other, both verbally. And then in this case for my grandfather, physically.

Lizzie Peabody: One night, Obata was walking back to the barracks from the communal showers. When out of the darkness, someone swung a piece of metal at his face.

ShiPu Wang: Someone attacked him with a piece of metal above his eye. And can you imagine an artist losing one eye in that situation?

Lizzie Peabody: The injury left Obata in the camp hospital for 19 days, with 10 stitches over his left eye. Didn't know who attacked him or why, but he suspected it was due to a rumor that he was with the FBI, because his work with the Art school made him look too cozy with the camp administration. Whatever the reason, it was a turning point for Obata.

ShiPu Wang: He realized that he and his family were somewhat in danger and he wouldn't want to put his family in the same situation.

Lizzie Peabody: In May of 1943, Obata was released from Topaz camp, with his family for his own safety. Was he able to be released because he was a high-profile enough person? Artist?

Kimi Hill: Yes. Well, he was attacked because he was high profile, right? It was just too dangerous for them to stay.

Lizzie Peabody: The Obatas went to stay in Missouri, outside the zone of an exclusion for the remainder of the war. But as soon as the war ended in 1945, Obata returned to California.

Kimi Hill: Many of the Japanese were leaving the camps had nowhere to go. They didn't have homes anymore. They had lost farms. There was just so much loss, but he was able to return to his job. And he had friends who found housing for him. He was very, very lucky.

Lizzie Peabody: So, what did change for Obata then after the war? Do we see any changes in his style?

ShiPu Wang: I don't think the change in his art after the war is too visible or dramatic. But what I saw was an enthusiastic return to full colors and the places that he loved before the war. He went back and he depicted them. And in some paintings, you really see the full blossoming of all the plants and flowers.

Lizzie Peabody: Obata continued to teach and exhibit his work. And as soon as it became legal in 1952, he applied for U.S. Citizenship. In 1954, after more than 50 years in the country, he became an American citizen. Obata painted until the end of his life. He died in 1975 at the age of 89. He left behind him an expansive collection of work. From enormous colorful landscapes to small black and white sketches. And he left a legacy among his students who told Kimi...

Kimi Hill: "You know, your grandfather really taught me how to see. He taught me how to see, how to appreciate nature, just how to be a keen observer."

Rihoko Ueno: Some people might question the purpose of art, but Obata never really doubted its power. And art could help you cultivate peace of mind. And that's just a precious commodity because it's something that can't be taken from you.

Lizzie Peabody: Throughout his seven-decade career as a painter, Obata turned again and again to nature, as his greatest teacher. Near the end of his life, Obata made an ink painting of an ancient Sequoia forest in a powerful wind. It's called 'Glorious Struggle'. When he presented the painting, he gave a speech saying...

Rihoko Ueno: "Since I came to the United States in 1903, I saw, faced..."

Carlo Watanabe: I saw, faced, and heard many struggles. And the sudden burst of Pearl Harbor was like the Mother Earth on which we stood was swept by a terrific force of a big wave of resentment from the American people. Our dignity and our hopes were crushed. In such times, I heard the gentle, but strong whisper of the Sequoia giganteum. "Hear me, you poor man. I stand here more than 3,700 years in rain, snow, storm, and even mountain fire. Still keeping my

thank full attitude strongly with nature. You do not cry. Do not spend your time and energy worrying. You have children following. Keep up your unity. Come with me.""

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Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

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Lizzie Peabody: For images of Obata and all the artwork we talked about in this episode, subscribe to our newsletter. You can find it at si.edu/Sidedoor.

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Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks this episode to Kimi Hill for her generous help, digitizing and translating Chiura Obata's oral history. Kimi's book 'Topaz Moon' document Obata's incarceration at Tanforan and Topaz through his sketches and paintings. Thanks also to ShiPu Wang who curated the Traveling Exhibition: 'Chiura Obata: An American Modern'.

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Lizzie Peabody: Thanks also to our colleagues at the National Museum of American History, especially Noriko Sanefuji and Valeska Hilbig. Big thanks to Rihoko Ueno at the Archives of American Art. Thanks also to Laura Bapiste, Katie Hondorf and Lauren Kolodkin at this Smithsonian American Art Museum. Thanks also to Carlo Watanabe for reading 'Obata's Translated Oral History' and thanks to Izumi Kurokawa and Julie Conquest.

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Lizzie Peabody: The Smithsonian has hundreds of Obata paintings, sketches, and personal papers in the collections that you can peruse yourself from the comfort of your own home. We'll point you in the right direction by linking to the collection in our newsletter. Obata's oral history comes to us from the Japanese American Research Project Collection in the Library of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library Area at UCLA.

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Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is James Morrison, Nathalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tami O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch and Sharon Bryant. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please visit Sponsorship@PRX.org.

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Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.