

The Oral History of Our Time

by Steve Zeitlin

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Portrait of Joe Gould at the Minnetta Tavern in New York's West Village

"I could see the whole thing in my mind," the eccentric, hard drinking Joe Gould told *New Yorker* writer Joseph Mitchell in the early 1940s, "long-winded conversations and short and snappy conversations, brilliant conversations and foolish conversations, curses, catch phrases, coarse remarks, snatches of quarrels, the mutterings of drunks and crazy people, the entreaties of beggars and bums, the propositions of prostitutes, the

spiels of pitchmen and peddlers, the sermons of street preachers, shouts in the night, wild rumors, cries from the heart ... a vast oral history of our time."

According to Gould, the moment he became inspired to write the oral history, he immediately quit his job to take on the task. In New York today, a cadre of journalists, oral historians, NPR producers, and folklorists, myself included, make it our job to hear those urban voices (Gould, in fact, was using the term "oral history" a decade before it was officially coined by Alan Nevins at Columbia University). Although we earn salaries rather than exchange our stories for free drinks, we're attuned to the urban sounds that caught Gould's ear — subway stories, homeless tales, coarse conversations of the remaining bowery bums, the spiels of Coney Island pitchmen, urban legends, tales of prostitutes, and taxi drivers — and sometimes we feel like Joe Gould, drunk on the city.

"My oral history is tremendously cockeyed in a logical fashion," journalist Don Freeman quoted Gould as saying in 1945 (we read the clipping framed on the wall of the Minnetta Tavern, one of his old haunts). "I'm writing primarily for my own amusement as I happen to be the only Joe Gould in this solar system. By this I don't mean to exclude the possibility that there are probably other systems full of Joe Goulds."

There are indeed Goulds of sorts roaming contemporary New York. Photographer Margaret Morton interviewed Larry who dwells in the tunnel under the West Side Highway. Larry considers his subterranean lifestyle "part

of the New York experience ... There's a lot of opportunity here, and you just have to be there at the right time at the right place. Unfortunately I haven't been able to be there at the right time or the right place."

But even the dozens of folklorists, cultural specialists and journalists currently working collectively to document the City's traditions and culture could never match Joe Gould's legendary oral history. It was, Gould claimed, twelve times longer than the Bible, "taller than himself," and handwritten in children's composition books — two hundred and seventy of them — "tattered and grimy and stained with coffee, grease and beer." Today, our composition books are tape recorders, computers, cameras, and videos. We try to keep the coffee and whiskey off of them as we record the people of New York at work and at play. Gould wrote of collecting "bushwa, gab, palaver, hogwash, flapdoodle, and malarkey" — we would call it urban folklore.

After Joe Gould died on August 18, 1957, his friends called Mitchell and implored him to search for the *Oral History* so it could be deposited at the Harvard Library and the Smithsonian Institution, according to the author's wishes. It was, they thought, safely sealed in the basement of a house owned by a mysterious Long Island widow. Or perhaps it was scattered, a few greasy composition books at a time, in a hundred Village apartments? But the more he searched, the more Mitchell began to realize that the grand oral history never existed, a fact he revealed in the *New Yorker* article, "Joe Gould's Secret" published in 1964, twenty two years after his original piece; thirty six years later, the story is now a marvelous feature film directed by and starring Stanley Tucci.

Even unwritten, Gould's *Oral History of Our Time* (does one italicize the title of an unwritten book?) is an apt symbol of our collective efforts to document the city. Gould once claimed to suffer from "a delusion of grandeur. I believe myself to be Joe Gould." How many of the rest of us — journalists, folklorists, oral historians, thinkers and walkers in the city — suffer from a similar delusion of grandeur — believing we can accomplish what Joe Gould couldn't? No writer can record, and no reader can absorb the full oral history of a time. Joe Gould believed that the task needed to be done — which is why we picked up the flask here at City Lore. Joe Gould wanted to possess New York, to capture it in a giant single tome that could be neatly placed on a shelf. We too want to possess New York — only to find, as Gould discovered, that it can only possess us.