

Tony Schwartz, Father of 'Daisy Ad' for the Johnson Campaign, Dies at 84

By Margalit Fox

Tony Schwartz, a self-taught, sought-after and highly reclusive media consultant who helped create what is generally considered to be the most famous political ad to appear on television, died Sunday at his home in Manhattan. He was 84.

His daughter, Kayla Schwartz-Burridge, said the cause was aortic valve stenosis, a condition involving the narrowing of the heart's aortic valve.

"Media consultant" is barely adequate to describe Mr. Schwartz's portfolio. In a career of more than half a century, he was an art director; advertising executive; urban folklorist (in one project, capturing the cacophony of New York streets on phonograph records); radio host; Broadway sound designer; college professor; media theorist; author; and maker of commercials for products, candidates and causes.

What was more, Mr. Schwartz, who had suffered from agoraphobia since the age of 13, accomplished most of these things entirely within his Manhattan home.

Of the thousands of television and radio advertisements on which Mr. Schwartz worked, none is as well known, or as controversial, as the so-called "daisy ad," made for Lyndon B. Johnson's presidential campaign.

Produced by the advertising agency Doyle Dane Bernbach in collaboration with Mr. Schwartz, the minute-long spot was broadcast on Sept. 7, 1964, during NBC's "Monday Night at the Movies." It showed a little girl in a meadow (in reality a Manhattan park), counting aloud as she plucks the petals from a daisy. Her voice dissolves into a man's voice counting downward, followed by the image of an atomic blast. President Johnson's voice is heard on the soundtrack:

"These are the stakes. To make a world in which all of God's children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die." (The president's speech deliberately invoked a line from "September 1, 1939," a poem by W. H. Auden written at the outbreak of World War II.)

Though the name of Johnson's opponent, Senator Barry M. Goldwater, was never mentioned, Goldwater's campaign objected strenuously to the ad. So did many members of the public, Republicans and Democrats alike. The spot was pulled from the air after a single commercial, though it was soon repeated on news broadcasts. It had done its work: with its dire implications about Goldwater and nuclear responsibility, the daisy ad was credited with contributing to Johnson's landslide victory at the polls in November. It was also credited with heralding the arrival of ferociously negative political advertising in the United States.

In interviews and on his Web site, tonyschwartz.org, Mr. Schwartz said he had created the daisy ad in its entirety, an account that was disputed by members of the Doyle Dane Bernbach team. (The ad was modeled directly on a radio commercial for nuclear disarmament that Mr. Schwartz had made for the United Nations in the early 1960s.) What is generally acknowledged is that Mr. Schwartz was responsible, at minimum, for the audio concept of the daisy ad — the child counting up, the man counting down, the explosion — and for producing the soundtrack.

Mr. Schwartz helped develop advertising campaigns for hundreds of political candidates, most of them Democrats, among them Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. (All made the trek to Mr. Schwartz's home to be filmed.) He was also known for creating some of television's earliest anti-smoking commercials.

In news articles and profiles, Mr. Schwartz was often described as an impassioned visionary and occasionally as a skilled trafficker in truisms with a talent for self-promotion. His work was likened — sometimes approvingly, sometimes not — to that of the media scholar Marshall McLuhan, a mentor and close friend. (He was also sometimes confused with the Tony Schwartz who was a co-author of memoirs by Michael D. Eisner and Donald Trump.)

But detractors and admirers alike praised Mr. Schwartz as a pioneer in putting sound to more effective use in television advertising. He was credited, for instance, with being the first to use real children's voices in television commercials, beginning in the late 1950s. (Advertisers had considered young children too intractable to deliver lines on cue; theirs had traditionally been recorded by adult actresses trying to sound like children.)

Anthony Schwartz was born in Manhattan on Aug. 19, 1923. He was reared in New York City and Crompond, N.Y., near Peekskill. As a youth, he was a ham-radio operator and interested in visual art. At 16, he went blind for about six months as a result of an unspecified episode of "an emotional type," as he told *People* magazine. His blindness strengthened his already deep connection to the auditory world.

Mr. Schwartz earned an undergraduate degree in graphic design from the Pratt Institute, followed by service during World War II as a civilian artist for the Navy. Afterward, he worked as an art director at ad agencies and later ran his own agency, the Wexton Company, which later became Solow/Wexton.



An image from the “daisy ad” made for Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidential campaign and broadcast on Sept. 7, 1964.

Mr. Schwartz bought his first wire recorder around this time. Slinging it heavily over a shoulder, he began to harvest the intoxicating sounds of the city: foghorns and folk singers; street vendors hawking their wares; a shoemaker plying his trade; a Central Park zookeeper waxing poetic on the care and feeding of lions; hundreds of taxi drivers; and a host of ordinary New Yorkers, just talking.

Mr. Schwartz also built an important archive of folk music, recording young artists like Harry Belafonte and the Weavers performing in his home. Through correspondence with other, far-flung audiophiles, he augmented his collection with their recordings of music from around the globe.

During the 1950s and afterward, Mr. Schwartz produced more than a dozen record albums, most for the Folkways label. Among them were “Sounds

of My City”; “1, 2, 3 and a Zing, Zing, Zing,” featuring the songs and games of New York children; and “A Dog’s Life,” which captured the sounds in the first year in the life of a real dog. (Many of these recordings are available from Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, folkways.si.edu.)

Because of his agoraphobia, Mr. Schwartz confined his fieldwork to his neighborhood on Manhattan’s West Side. One result was the recording “New York 19” — the number denoted the district’s old postal zone — which documented the “music” Mr. Schwartz encountered there, from street performers to immigrant speech to a pneumatic drill singing its achingly familiar aria.

For 31 years, from 1945 to 1976, Mr. Schwartz was the producer and host of “Around New York,” a radio program on WNYC. He was also a sound designer for several Broadway plays.

Mr. Schwartz was a shrewd observer of mass communications, in particular advertising. The aim of advertising, Mr. Schwartz said, should not be to introduce viewers to new ideas, but rather to bring out ones that were already lurking subconsciously in the mind.

“The best political commercials are Rorschach patterns,” he wrote in his book “The Responsive Chord” (Anchor Press, 1973). “They do not tell the viewer anything. They surface his feelings and provide a context for him to express these feelings.”

Mr. Schwartz also wrote “Media: The Second God,” published by Random House in 1981. He taught media studies at several universities, including Fordham, Columbia, New York University and Harvard, using a variety of technologies to conduct classes from his home. He liked to say that he had delivered lectures to every continent but Antarctica, all without leaving the house.

Besides his daughter Michaela Schwartz-Burridge, who is known as Kayla, Mr. Schwartz is survived by his wife, the former Reenah Lurie, whom he married in 1959; a son, Anton; a brother, Lasker, known as Larry; and one grandchild.

Among Mr. Schwartz’s most famous television ads is one he wrote and produced for the American Cancer Society; it was first broadcast in 1963, a year before the Surgeon General’s warning on the dangers of smoking was released. The ad showed two children dressing up in adult clothes. The announcer’s voice said, simply: “Children love to imitate their parents. Children learn by imitating their parents. Do you smoke cigarettes?”

He later produced an evocative television ad in which Patrick Reynolds, a grandson of the tobacco magnate R. J. Reynolds, named the members of his family who had died of cancer, emphysema and heart disease.

Mr. Schwartz’s commercial clients included Coca-Cola (for which he created the well-known TV ad featuring a sumptuously sweating bottle with the sound of pouring liquid as the only audio element); American Express; Chrysler; Kodak; and Paine Webber, among many others.

In 2007, Mr. Schwartz’s entire body of work from 1947 to 1999 was acquired by the Library of Congress.

To the end of his career, Mr. Schwartz was often asked about the daisy ad. To the end of his career, he defended it.

“For many years, it’s been referred to as the beginning of negative commercials,” Mr. Schwartz said in an interview with MSNBC in 2000. “There was nothing negative about it. Frankly, I think it was the most positive commercial ever made.”