

**RadioDoc Review**

**Volume 10 • Issue 1 • 2025**

# **Monocultures, Concrete and Tree Stumps: A Record of the Response to BBC Radio 4's Decision to Axe Short Cuts**

Save Short Cuts, [saveshortcuts@gmail.com](mailto:saveshortcuts@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

Last year, BBC Radio 4 decided to axe its multi-award-winning programme *Short Cuts* after 13 years on the air. In response, a group of audio makers formed Save Short Cuts, writing an open letter urging the BBC to reconsider. Despite 1568 signatories, the effort wasn't successful, *Short Cuts* wasn't 'saved'. Here, the group reflects on *Short Cuts* and the audio industry at large with the help of some of the hundreds of testimonials written by listeners and makers alongside the open letter. The responses serve as both a celebration and archive of *Short Cuts* and its impact, as well as a lament for—and battle cry against—an industry in crisis.

## **Keywords**

radio, documentary, feature, BBC

## **Recommended Citation**

Save Short Cuts, (2025) "Monocultures, Concrete and Tree Stumps: A Record of the Response to BBC Radio 4's Decision to Axe Short Cuts", *RadioDoc Review* 10(1). doi: <https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.1661>

In November 2024, BBC Radio 4 decided to axe its multi-award-winning programme [Short Cuts](#). The show first aired in 2012, produced by Eleanor McDowall and Alan Hall from Falling Tree Productions, alongside Nina Garthwaite from In The Dark Radio. Nina presented the programme for the first two seasons before the comedian Josie Long took the mantle.

The idea for *Short Cuts* grew from an observation that interesting, and often more personal, short-form audio work was being made around the world, yet no space existed for it on the BBC, whose longer programme slots in the schedule were filled with weightier subjects that could sustain their broadcast minutes. To begin with, *Short Cuts* mainly licensed existing work, until they eventually commissioned original pieces. Over the years the team grew to include other producers and curators, such as Axel Kacoutié, Alia Cassam and Andrea Rangecroft.

After the news of the BBC's decision, Save Short Cuts, formed of a group of international audio makers, wrote an [open letter](#) urging the BBC to reconsider. However, despite 1568 signatories and hundreds of personal testimonials, the BBC held firm in their decision. In the weeks following the letter, we sent these testimonials to BBC commissioners in batches, but until now they have never been publicly shared. All 35 pages together create a chorus; a unified voice of listeners and makers alike – something that is simultaneously a celebration, a lament, a battle cry, and an archive of an industry in crisis.

There are too many testimonials to publish in their entirety, but with the writers' permission, Save Short Cuts have collated here some of the most repeated protests, as a public record of what has been lost.

## **A Beacon across the Airwaves**

13 years since its first broadcast, *Short Cuts* came to represent so much to so many. It was a “beacon”, a “lifeline”, a “succour”, a “delight”, a “refuge”, a “friend”, a “public good”. The programme was “expansive”, “vibrant and kaleidoscopic”, “progressive”, “original”, “transformative”. It formed deep bonds in its audience, emotional ties that were impossible to locate within any statistics or figures. This is most powerfully observed in the testimony of Redzi Bernard, a contributor and listener:

Josie Long was with me at eight months pregnant, up a stepladder, painting my unborn baby's room. Short Cuts allowed me to travel through time and space. To meet friends when in reality I was trapped under a feeding baby, alone at 3am, 4am, 5am.

Short Cuts is one of the few radio programmes that ever pins me to my car seat, unable to get out and get on with my day until I've heard to the end of the episode. I never wrote in my appreciation. Never shouted about it on

social media. I'd probably never show up in any quantitative figures you might have used to reach your decision. But its qualitative value is - or should be - immeasurable.

## Continuing Legacies

*Short Cuts* has become synonymous with a bold, avant-garde type of audio making. It's less of a fixed style, and more of a mosaic, built from the creative choices of hundreds of artists that they've worked with throughout the years, glued together by the production team's distinct sensibilities and love of the medium.

In the testimonials, many wrote that *Short Cuts*' innovative audio storytelling served as a continuation of a legacy that the BBC should be proud of, and wary to give up. To Yasmine Dankwah, *Short Cuts* fed into the BBC's long history of "investment in experimental audio formats" that unleashed innovative and avant-garde sound forms. These included, as she noted, the Radio Ballads genre created by Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger and Charles Parker in the late fifties — features clustered around the words of ordinary working peoples — and, as podcast critic Benjamin Cannon writes, that of Delia Derbyshire and the sound effects Radiophonic Workshop, best known for the Doctor Who theme tune. Benjamin continues:

To snuff that out is to acknowledge that there is no longer a place for expansive, progressive approach to radio making at [Radio 4], and with that, surely, at the BBC as a whole.

## A Seedbed for New Makers

Another refrain was of *Short Cuts* as a place for inspiration and support, particularly for newer makers. Many established audio makers, including Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists, cited *Short Cuts* as an important springboard for their professional development. Professors and staff from over 40 international academic institutions signed the letter, many testifying that *Short Cuts* was part of their curriculum. It's upsetting to read that students are being taught how to make creative, bold, innovative audio documentaries, and yet the avenues to broadcast such work are closing.

To quote Benjamin Cannon again, "it is a means for the curation and formation of emerging audio talent. To revoke support is to nip the growth of the next generation of the medium well below the bud, rendering things inert." Ge Styles writes: "At a time of intense consolidation and major barriers to entry for early career and independent producers, *Short Cuts* was a breath of fresh air in the radio world - a place for creativity that pushed the boundaries of audio form, which is becoming increasingly hard to find." And from Sarah Geis: "How lucky for the BBC that *Short Cuts* recruited, trained, and enthused a new generation of feature makers, as well as

invigorated that burnt-out set. How sad for the BBC that this pipeline is now closed, and the decade + of expertise incinerated!”

## Monocultures

The cancellation was felt by the audio-making community in particular as a continuation of the general homogenisation of podcasts, radio and audio production that has been happening over the past few decades. For example, in 2007, after over 60 years of broadcasting, Danish Radio [cut its flagship montage department](#), and in around 2016 ABC [phased out their Creative Audio Unit](#), cancelling their programmes *PocketDocs*, *Soundproof* and *Earshot*. Meanwhile, the success of the first season of *Serial* in 2014, a podcast hosted by Sarah Koenig investigating the murder of Hae Min Lee in 1999, caused a hunger for multipart true crime series with prescriptive twists and turns. Stephanie Stafford, a former BBC producer, called *Short Cuts* “a lighthouse of inspiration in a sea of increasingly standardised formats”.

Unknowingly continuing the ocean metaphor, Matt Frassica writes:

In a sea of sound-alike true crime podcasts and all-too-familiar formulas, *Short Cuts* is one of the only remaining shows with major institutional backing that is willing to take risks — to ask its listeners to lean in, listening actively, with the reward of experiencing original and transformative art. Its loss would make it even harder for listeners to find the unexpected, the delightful, the personal, in audio documentary. I have to believe an audience exists for remarkable, original work of the kind that *Short Cuts* showcases, even if it will never top the charts.

Kirsteen McNish notes:

We do not need arts programming that is merely a facsimile of [the] commercial sector or formulaic but programming that is of high quality challenging and makes one think or enriches. ... We need variety, deep listening, and stories we don't forget and not just from people in the public eye, or whatever is the zeitgeist at any given time. *Short Cuts* made you stop and listen hard in a frenetic culture of flux.

Jon Tjhia laments:

The form of the serial podcast has achieved dominance over the short-form one-off to the detriment of everybody. ... *Short Cuts* allows for each story to be made and heard on its own terms, which broadens the possibilities of communicating between people – of sound that holds a moment and allows listeners to feel for themselves a form of understanding, one different to

thinking, and one vastly different from being told.

Another former BBC producer believes that:

[T]he mainstream of a system (art world, audio world, the BBC) is only as interesting, brave, innovative, as its fringes. ... And while it may not be obvious right now it will be having a ripple effect impact on the ecosystem of the BBC. ... It will be subtly making the BBC and the talent that work with the BBC more innovative, more delightful, more surprising, with a different type of depth I cannot see anywhere else in the schedule.

Furthermore, the axing of *Short Cuts* comes off the back of a string of layoffs, company closures and show cancellations around the world in the last couple of years: in 2024 Audacy's Pineapple Street [laid off 25% of its staff](#), Malcolm Gladwell's production house Pushkin Industries followed, anecdotally we should say, with [over 30%](#); [Sony Music ended their partnership with Broccoli](#). Spotify axed their in-house productions, including [Connie Walker's Pulitzer Prize- and Peabody Award-winning show \*Stolen\*](#) about the residential school system in Canada. In the same fiscal quarter, the tech company gave Joe Rogan [a \\$250 million non-exclusive deal](#).

Making time-consuming, thoughtful work is most often not profitable. That's why to many, the decision felt particularly disappointing from the BBC, which isn't directly driven by profit and numbers, whose own charter states that it "should take creative risks, even if not all succeed, in order to develop fresh approaches and innovative content". In the words of Ariana Martinez, of "all the losses in the audio world, this one cuts the deepest."

### Concrete and Tree Stumps

Many made comparisons between an attitude of commercial gain and 'progress', which relies on the destruction of sustainable ecosystems and natural worlds. Erin Anderson tells the beautiful story of a brick stable building in her neighbourhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, one that was "special in ways that are difficult to describe". However, she writes:

Two years ago, I woke up to the sound of a man with a sledgehammer knocking the boards out of the doorways, and I almost threw up. I ran out in my pajamas and tried to stop it, but the backhoe was already on its way. I got as far as the principal's office of the school that now owns the property and cried and pleaded with them not to tear it down. I was furious and so incredibly sad but also so deeply confused about why they couldn't see what they were doing and what a tragedy it was. All they could see were the six

new parking spots they would have if they tore it down. So they did, and I cried every day for a week. I still feel sick every time I think about it.

This is pretty much how I felt when I woke up to the news about *Short Cuts* a few days ago. As I'm sure you're hearing from many people, that programme is beloved and irreplaceable. It's a seedbed for so much beauty and invention and risk-taking in a world where spaces for beauty and invention and risk-taking have become very hard to come by.

I'm sure there are plenty of reasons you might have decided you need to invest your resources elsewhere. And I'm sure resources are stretched, and this is not a decision you've come to lightly. But I really hope you're able to recognize your mistake before it's too late to walk it back. I can't imagine it will ever be worth however many parking spots you'll get if you tear it down.

In the same vein, listener Gerard Hodge writes:

[*Short Cuts*] has been an absolute gem of a programme for years. I can no more understand the axing of this than I can the axing of the Sycamore Gap in Hadrian's Wall except that both are acts of vandalism.

Despite everything, we at Save *Short Cuts* are glad that the programme existed for 13 years, and are grateful to Falling Tree for the love and care they dedicated to the programme and the craft. *Short Cuts* is not gone completely, all 248 episodes are currently available on [BBC Sounds](#) or at [Falling Tree's website](#), and it's also wonderful to see the show continue to be commemorated with a Tribeca show — [a live retrospective celebration](#) on 11th June 2025 in New York.

While *Short Cuts* wasn't 'saved', we are hopeful that audio creativity and experimentation will continue to flourish outside of public broadcasters, legacy media, tech companies and Amazon subsidiaries, like little saplings that peek out of the gaps of the concrete.