

RadioDoc Review

Soft Life and Ill-advised

Diane Hope, di.hope@live.com

Abstract

A review of *Soft Life* from Somerset House and *Ill-advised* with Bill Nighy, from Eye Pod Studios. One, an innovative and delicious, slow-cooked cordon bleu vegetarian meal and the other a tempting box of chocolates.

Recommended Citation

Hope, D., "*Soft Life and Ill-advised*", *RadioDoc Review* . doi: <https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.1796>

It's wonderful to stretch both the ears and the mind by venturing into deeply immersive and educational audio content. People sometimes ask me what the difference is between informative, sound-rich audio-only content and information-rich video and film documentary content. My most frequent answer is that sound is a deeply intimate medium. Somehow sound seems to go straight into your mind, conjuring mental visuals that might be hard to create on screen. And there's something about the simplicity of listening, either while busy with another task, or by closing ones eyes and relaxing, that is so calming. The time it takes to just listen slows down the apparent march of the seconds, taking one deeper into a vertical, present-moment experience of time that is, for me, uniquely precious.

I just happened to come across two podcasts recently that brought me into this wonderful, calming listening state. Two podcasts quite different in presentation style and content but both deeply relaxing. Most direct in its invitation to a calmer, slower way of life was the *Soft Life* four-episode podcast series from Somerset House in the UK. Billed as '*an artist-led podcast series*, it explores the new ideas, big questions and surprising tangents that emerge from the artistic process' designed to examine how soft approaches in art help us rethink our relationship to time, the body, and the earth. It doesn't fail to deliver.

While not quite narrator-less, the narration is extremely light, which is one reason I immediately warmed to it. There's something so very freeing about diving into a topic with the voices of guests placed front and centre. The topic explored is the premise that we all seem to have subconsciously bought into, that 'ever harder and faster' is the only motto to live by. And that softness is all too often associated with weakness. Keeping us on an endless, gritted-teeth hamster wheel ride that is only accelerating with the pace of constantly evolving technology.

The series is not easy listening in the conventional sense. I don't advise dipping into it while you're driving or performing another attention-intensive task. *Soft Life* is to be savoured, enjoyed in a quiet setting, preferably while at least semi-recumbent, with plenty of time to really let its sounds wash over you and the concepts to sink in.

It seems that you can listen to the episodes in any order you wish, because while united by a common theme, each is fully formed and works as a stand-alone piece. For me, some of the episodes work a lot better than others. The bane of any non-narrated – or in this case very loosely narrated audio feature – is having a free flow while at the same time maintaining, even if only loosely, a narrative arc. I didn't find the unfolding of the content in the episodes *Work* and *The Body* flowed quite so well as they could have. Although there are real 'stand-out' moments in all the episodes.

My ears especially pricked up part way into *The Body* in the segment on how pain is treated very differently depending on whether the patient is Black or White in the UK's healthcare system. The point is illustrated with statistics and gritty first-hand

accounts. It's deeply shocking and highlights just how much the issue needs to be corrected on a widespread systemic level. Also, the brief discussion on the health risks and potentially devastating consequences of exposure to asbestos was compelling and incisive. I have first-hand family experience of the terminal effects of asbestos, but had never thought about it from the point of view presented here. The question of how much importance is attached to something and *whose* bodies matter, was well made. Those affected by asbestos-caused cancers like mesothelioma – dockyard workers, ladders, plumbers, electricians, asbestos-removal teams – don't have a high public profile and are easy to overlook. One worker made the great point that the threat asbestos poses is so long term that it's hard to think of its danger in the same way as getting electrocuted. But like an organismal archive, the body stores up the damage over decades, before the full force of the illness is unleashed.

The segments in *The Body* which didn't work so well for me were about dance. Admittedly it's tricky to represent such a visual medium with sound, but I think that the sound design could have helped more here. The series sound designer Axel Kacoutié has a wonderful ear and a deliciously light touch. I like the way he uses the sparse music to form a string or spine from which the separate element episodes were strung. But in the segments on dance, I think he could have made more use of embellished sound effects to evoke the sense of the dance moves, rather than just some rather faint actual sounds. And in places I really wanted the sound design to swell a bit more. Like a jazz saxophonist taking his improvised solo 'out there' away from the main melody for a minute or two, before returning to the minimalist core. I did love the music overall though – especially that used in *The Earth*, which reminded me of the 2005 album by progressive electronic ambient musician Steve Roach *Possible Planet*, in the way it conjures a futuristic, digitised biota.

My favourites episodes were *Time* and *The Earth*, the latter perhaps because of my background in ecology and environmental science. I've listened to these two episodes several times now. The ideas and perspectives presented are so refreshingly different, layered, at times dense, that you hear something new on every playback.

What influences how we experience time? Why are busyness and speed so highly prized in our society? Who 'owns' our time and how much control do we have over it? Is it time for the notion that 'fast-paced' is good to be replaced by the metric that having plentiful free time is a measure of success? Do clocks measure time or produce it? These are the fascinating questions explored in the *Time* episode of *Soft Life*. Artist Shenece Oretha mainly works with sound, exploring the relationship between the unfoldment of sound and the time it unfolds in. She describes how listening opens up space for practices like grieving, relaxation and how taking time to listen is act of kindness. It's interesting that Oretha mentions 'space' repeatedly. In

the ancient Vedic tradition of India, the five elements, earth, air, fire, water and space are understood to each be connected to one of the human senses. Hearing is the sense connected to space. No wonder then, that Oretha talks so much about space. As any field sound recordist will tell you, there's a deeply meditative quality to the practice of going outside and recording sound – be it in an urban or a natural setting. It's as if a completely different dimension unfolds, as the map of the world changes, completely.

The sound design is wonderfully elegant in this episode – in mixing fragments of Oretha's sound works with the dialogue. Elsewhere using tiny, textural sounds (of the artist gardening in her allotment) which encourage you to quieten down and listen more carefully. In recent articles (2024 and 2025) Dr Ruth Ogden has interrogated the notion that we're living in a rapidly accelerating society, caused by technology. She contrasts how the linear Western idea of time is so linked with productivity, in contrast to Latin America and parts of the Global South, where time is treated as cyclical and more linked to the past and future. She ponders, can we allow time to unfold in a more relaxed way and stop looking at the clock so much? Time is not linear, or cyclical, 'it's sloshy, with puddles', 'secreted in relation, not outside of relation', says Dr Bayo Akomolafe (2022) a post humanist thinker, poet, essayist, and author.

What does it mean to have free time in the digital age, asks sociologist Judy Wajcman (2024), who points out that no one talks about periods of time when they're not doing something with associated 'markers' of productivity. Again the sound design fades in and out with rapid, free jazz-style percussion, emphasizing speed, in contrast to the slowness being advocated for.

The take home message from this episode is that time and productivity need to be decoupled. Ruth Ogden suggests that we would all benefit from stepping back from 'the hardness of grind cultures', instead perhaps learning to value time depending on how much we're enjoying it, rather than what we're 'producing' in it. Of course, in the view of some spiritual traditions, non-duality for example, the received wisdom is that there is no time, only the present moment. And that time is a vertical dimension, rather than a horizontal one. As Eckhardt Tolle points out in his book *The Power of Now* (2001), you can only experience the past as a memory in the present, and the future as an ever-receding chimera – an idea being projected from the ever-present now moment. So, in a way, any attempt to uncover the reality of time is a futile task. But it's so very interesting to hear these artists and thinkers try.

Scientists may have a vast understanding of how our ecosystems work, but it often takes artists to interpret it all in an impactful way. 'The Earth' focuses on a deeply Daoist principle – that 'soft forces' are inherently, subtly, one might say subversively, very powerful. Artist Sam William's description of earthworms and

connecting that with the human body is stunningly poetic. Linking climate change with the endless drive for growth is not at all new. But systems theorist Nafeez Ahme argues that the old industrial operating systems are failing *because* they've become incompatible with the emerging, decentralized technologies. And with the planet's carrying capacity. This big picture perspective is cogent and powerful.

I also found the attempt to refocus to a non-human-centric view of nature presented by the artists here very refreshing. Artist Natalie Sharp's practise of ecosex was one intriguing version of this. She explains what she means by ecosex is 'not shagging trees' but rather having a more physical, intimate relationship with nature, where nature is the 'dom' and humans are the 'sub'. And that this making love to nature could be 'something as simple as forest bathing'. Perhaps calling it eco-intimacy would've been a less loaded term, but labelling the concept as ecosex is certainly guaranteed to get peoples' attention. And she mentions spume. When have you ever heard of anyone talking about spume? If you don't know what it is, look it up. And if you live by the coast, go down to the beach after the next big storm has rolled through to experience it for yourself.

In the same episode, Jamaican-born poet Jason Allen-Paisant makes the fabulous point that the Anthropocene represents centuries of ideology placing humans in a controlling role, viewing 'all of nature as a standing reserve, for our pleasure and exploitation', and that 'slavery and exploitation is a cornerstone of that mindset.' His dialogue here segues beautifully into Nafeez Ahmed's explanation of what colonization and human expansion has meant for the planet. His conception of global phase shifts is well-informed, and it's great how he takes that beyond earth systems, into our social, political, and cultural systems. Urging that human choices at points of phase change can be powerfully influential – for bad or good. 'We can't keep growing' and 'capitalism is based on everything that's against soft life' says Jason Allen-Paisant. He suggests that we re-envision ourselves as intimately entwined collaborators with nature – and that *this* is living the *Soft Life*.

While not a perfect podcast, *Soft Life* is a beautifully made one that provides so much food for thought. Along with permission to ease off the throttle, kick back, and live life differently, in a way much more in tune with the planet that we are all an intrinsic part of.

After having my mind stretched by the radical ideas in *Soft Life*, I happened to coming across a listening experience that provided the complete counterpoint, while remaining in that soft, soothing zone. Something that is light and easy on the ear, but every bit as classy and well produced. Promised for ages, the *ill-advised* podcast with actor Bill Nighy finally dropped in October 2025. And it's a listening delight. It 'had me at hello' with an introduction which includes the words: 'This is a space for

the clumsy and awkward. If you are socially adept and enjoy healthy relationships, there's nothing for you here'.

Ill-advised is very much a promotion of Nighy's well-honed way of living. But delivered with such a light touch and delicious, low-key humour, that it's like a very good box of chocolates. You start off intending to listen to *just one* episode – and find out by the end of the evening that you've polished off the lot. The format is based around Nighy answering recorded questions sent in by listeners, which is fun. As well as a book recommendation and a themed music play list at the end of every episode.

If *Soft Life* is an innovative and delicious, slow-cooked cordon bleu vegetarian meal of a podcast, *ill-advised* is a tempting box of chocolates – or if you prefer, a welcome gin and tonic after a long day at work. Don't miss either.

Soft Life is produced by Alannah Chance and Axel Kacoutié, with sound by Axel Kacoutié and additional music by Ellen Zweig. It is available at <https://www.somersetshouse.org.uk/channel/podcasts/soft-life>

ill-advised with Bill Nighy is produced by Eye Pod Studios and available on most major streaming platforms.

References

- Akomolafe, B. (2022). The Times are Urgent: Let's Slow Down. <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/the-times-are-urgent-lets-slow-down>
- Ogden, R. (2025) Emotions change our perception of time – as demonstrated on The Traitors. *The Conversation*, 24 January, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.7tayw3msx>
- Ogden, R. and Vigo, D. E. (2024) Boeing Starliner astronauts: what six months stuck in space may do to their perception of time. *The Conversation*, 16 August 2024. <https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.arjy5gs94>
- Ogden R. and Thompson, J. (2024) How nature can alter our sense of time. *The Conversation*, 25 March, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.yaj5gaggi>
- Tolle, E. (2001). *The Power of Now*. Hodder Paperback.
- Wajcman, J. (2024). Digital timescapes: technology, temporality and society. *Space and Polity* 28(2): 1-3.DOI:[10.1080/13562576.2024.2385127](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2024.2385127)

Author Details

Diane Hope Ph.D. is a former research ecologist, who for the last 20 years has been making immersive, sound-rich audio documentaries, as well as museum and web-based audio guides. She also consults on sound design and show development, along with researching and writing for a variety of outlets, on topics ranging from the world of sound to science and travel. You can find out more on Instagram: @inthesoundfield and at her website: <https://www.dianehope.com/>

