

RadioDoc Review

Volume 2 • Issue 1 • 2015

2015-05-06

The Change In Farming: A Review

Neil Sandell

Abstract

The protagonist of the CBC documentary, *The Change in Farming*, is an 89-year-old farmer, called Henry. We learn that his grandson, Adam, has been recording Henry's reminiscences about farming as a way of preserving his family heritage. The program was produced in 1998 by Adam Goddard, a 25-year-old musician and composer, in collaboration with veteran CBC producer, Steve Wadhams.

Adam is more hunter-gather than farmer. He collects found sound, an artist alert to its musical possibilities. He is composing a work using Henry's speech. We hear the elder's reaction. And then, in an indispensable coda, the two of them decamp to the barn, back on Henry's turf once again.

The show piece of *The Change in Farming* is, of course, the musical composition. It is no accident that we have to wait to the end to hear it. In fact, it is testament to the impeccable dramaturgy. It is a master class in the slow reveal. Like all great craft, the attention to detail is well judged and sublimely concealed. *The Change in Farming* excels in 'show, don't tell' exposition.

As storytelling, it upends the conventions of pioneer reminiscences, recombining words and phrases into something with an altogether new meaning. It is anti-nostalgia. And it challenges us. Are Henry's words the lyrics or musical notes? Is Adam hallowing the past or critiquing it?

The Change in Farming juxtaposes an old viewpoint and a youthful one, found sound and the music of an old man's voice, musical abstraction and the concrete reality of cattle bellowing in the barn. This counterpoint creates a satisfying complexity. This work was ingenious in its storytelling nearly 20 years ago. After all these years the novelty has not worn off. This classic remains farm-fresh.

Keywords

radio documentary, audio feature, old age, farming

Recommended Citation

Sandell, N., (2015) "The Change In Farming: A Review", *RadioDoc Review* 2(1). doi: <https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.v2i1.3>

The Change In Farming

Produced by Adam Goddard and Steve Wadhams. CBC, 1998.

Dur: 11'35"

Reviewer: Neil Sandell

1.

Tony Soprano's mother was a scheming, paranoid, nasty piece of work. I loved her, or to be more precise, what she represented. First, Livia Soprano was a stroke of David Chase's storytelling genius. Even as Tony searches for answers at his psychiatrist's office, the key to what makes tick is obvious to everyone but him. It is the serpent-in-residence at the Green Grove nursing home. The second reason I love Livia Soprano is that she shreds the pop culture stereotype of the elderly. Kind, cuddly, and wise she was not. In other words, she was not the cartoonish Grandma and Grandpa Walton.

In North America we are conflicted in our attitudes toward the aged. In my country, Canada, for example, the national pension plans are widely regarded as a public policy success – a safety net that keeps seniors from falling into poverty. Yet, we are also a society that maroons our elderly in suburban rest homes. Isolated from the larger community, they become invisible.

Our discomfort with the aged arises from our fear of death. As youth and beauty slip away, the middle aged eye the elderly. They observe their waxing frailty and waning independence. They see their future and look away. When they do pay attention to the aged, they often compensate with indulgence.

We in the media have trouble honestly portraying old people. CBC Radio has a long history of airbrushing the blemishes. A generation ago, there was a long-running oral history series called *Voice of the Pioneer*. A more recent short-run series called *Ageing Dangerously* also springs to mind. Both were well intentioned.

But they marginalised the elderly as a special group, and came off sounding solicitous.

In its panning for geezer gold, *Voice of the Pioneer* harkened back to ‘the good old days’ even though they often weren’t. Never was heard a discouraging word.

Ageing Dangerously shone a light on the achievements of the elderly. But the tone betrayed another message. ‘My god, how wonderful that you’re still running a business, still having sex, still having a nip of brandy. At your age! What a marvel. And you are still breathing.’ To my ears, it was one step away from saying ‘you are a credit to your race. Your people must be so proud.’

Puffing up any group for achieving the normal cleaves a divide between ‘us and them.’ The last thing the elderly need is to be considered ‘other.’ They are us. We are them. If we in the media care about the old, we should care enough to allow them to be three-dimensional. That means showing their lives, warts and all. It is a question of respect.¹

This brings me, at last, to the CBC documentary, *The Change in Farming*. Its protagonist is an 89-year-old farmer. No cardboard cut-out, he. This short piece is an object lesson of how to tell a story about old times and old-timers without putting a gloss on them. Along the way, its musical composition turns oral history upside down, forcing us to listen to the recorded recollections of the old with fresh ears.

The story behind the creation of *The Change in Farming* can also teach us lessons about how to incubate creative radio, something of critical importance at CBC Radio today.

¹ See [here](#) for an excellent *New Yorker* essay on representing the aged: “What Old Age Is Really Like” by Ceridwen Dovey.

2.

The Change in Farming was one of the first productions of *Outfront*,² a sandbox of a program that invited experimentation. It was produced in 1998 by Adam Goddard, a 25-year-old musician and composer, in collaboration with veteran CBC producer, Steve Wadhams.³

The story is simple. Adam visits his grandfather, Henry Haws, who still lives on the farm where he was born. The opening scene introduces us to Henry. He is irritated because he finds it hard to read his newspaper. He is annoyed when Adam takes his shoes off at the door. We learn that Adam has been recording Henry's reminiscences about farming as a way of preserving his family heritage.

The next scene takes us to Adam's studio in Toronto. Adam is more hunter-gather than farmer. He collects found sound, an artist alert to its musical possibilities. With the click of a keyboard, he plays samples of a digital watch, a stuck toaster, and then, Henry's voice. Adam is in the middle of composing a work using Henry's speech. Thinking aloud, he weighs his creative choices, trying one musical phrase, then another. Back at the farm, Adam plays his composition to Henry. We hear the elder's reaction. And then, in an indispensable coda, the two of them decamp to the barn, back on Henry's turf once again.

The show piece of *The Change in Farming* is, of course, the musical composition. It is no accident that we have to wait to the end to hear it. In fact, it is testament to the impeccable dramaturgy. Consider how thin the story is. Not a lot really happens. But early in the first scene, the producers plant the seed of mystery. Henry says, 'I thought you were going to play a tape

² Disclosure: I joined *Outfront* as senior producer six years later. I had no hand in this production.

³ With a running time of 11:35, *The Change in Farming* is short compared to many radio features. It was tailored for *Outfront*'s 15 -minute slot. Adam Goddard and Steve Wadhams later collaborated on a one-hour elaboration entitled [More About Henry](#), presented on CBC's program *Ideas* on January 16, 2001.

that you made.’ Adam says yes, he brought a machine to play it with. The scene shifts away from the farm, leaving us with unanswered questions. What could possibly be on that tape? Why is Adam playing Henry something? And what will the old man think of it? Clues to the mystery drop like breadcrumbs on a path that leads us from one moment to the next. It is a master class in the slow reveal.

Like all great craft, the attention to detail is well judged and sublimely concealed. *The Change in Farming* excels in ‘show, don’t tell’ exposition. At Adam’s studio, he mentions ‘piano expansion’. Then we hear the click of a keyboard. No need to explain MIDI and sampling technology. We have what we need -- an image of a guy at an electric piano that plays sounds and voice clips instead of notes. Another example occurs when Adam prepares to play Henry the composition. There is a deliberately placed click of a Play button. It is an essential bit of audio way-finding that helps us navigate between the scene with Henry in it and a musical composition that contains Henry’s voice.

The documentary is also clever in presenting the listener with multiple frames for listening to Henry. There is the Henry we encounter when he is talking with Adam. In the studio, Adam creates a new frame as he describes the musicality of Henry’s voice. We bend in, as if listening with Adam’s ears. Here again, there is a critical bit of decision making. Adam plays a longish unedited clip of his grandfather. What comes later – a polished composition made of fragments of Henry’s speech – only makes sense having listened to his talk unpretified by editing. Henry is repetitive, halting, an old man groping for words. Adam admires his grandfather, but he also grants him respect by showing him unvarnished in his imperfections.

Back at the farm we finally hear the composition. It begins at 7.47" of a documentary of less than 12 minutes. It delights on so many levels. As music, it has a catchy beat, a hummable refrain, and it builds to a climax. It is short, but complex. Goddard turns mechanical found sound into rhythmic loops that give the piece a quirky, off-kilter pulse while at the same time, resonating with

Henry's talk of farm machinery. As storytelling, it upends the conventions of pioneer reminiscences, recombining words and phrases into something with an altogether new meaning. It is anti-nostalgia. And it challenges us. Are Henry's words the lyrics or musical notes? Is Adam hallowing the past or critiquing it?

I had not listened to *The Change in Farming* for many years. But I found myself thinking, that was fun. May I listen one more time?

Once the music is finished, Henry is pleased, though quizzical. 'Why all the repetitions?' And then, not quite getting Adam's explanation, 'As long as you know what you're doing, that's the main thing.'

The Change in Farming juxtaposes an old viewpoint and a youthful one, found sound and the music of an old man's voice, musical abstraction and the concrete reality of cattle bellowing in the barn. This counterpoint creates a satisfying complexity. This work was ingenious in its storytelling nearly 20 years ago. After all these years the novelty has not worn off. This classic remains farm-fresh.

3.

The creation of a work of art is something of a miracle – the timely convergence of talent, imagination, and opportunity. Like tumblers in a cosmic combination lock they fall perfectly into place in order to make something out of nothing. There is an element of mystery in all this, in what ignites the spark. What is no mystery is the recipe. It usually includes the guiding hand of teachers, mentors, and editors; attention to craft; hard work; and someone or some institution ready to nurture a work in progress. This is the recipe, at least, that made *The Change in Farming* possible at CBC in 1998.

Think of it as the happy result of a daisy chain of experimentation that spanned three decades. In 1967, CBC Radio commissioned the classical pianist Glenn Gould to make [*The Idea of North*](#), the first of his three adventures in making radio documentaries. A

leading interpreter of Bach, Gould described his documentaries as contrapuntal, meaning they were explorations in juxtaposition. As Steve Wadhams said in a 2003 lecture to the International Features Conference,

'I believe he's still alive and well - and lodged in the psyche, in the brain stem - in the ear if you like - of many Canadian radio producers - especially the Anglophone ones. I think Gould's legacy to us is the idea that a radio documentary is basically a musical form. This has encouraged many of us when we come to making features to explore ways of making music with speech and also look for the intrinsic musicality of the spoken word.'⁴

Gould died at the age of 50. In 1992, on the tenth anniversary of his death, CBC commissioned works to acknowledge his legacy and build on it. Toronto composer Christos Hatzis created *The Idea of Canada* in collaboration with Wadhams and another CBC staffer, sound designer Laurence Stevenson. A second words-as-music documentary, [*Footprints in New Snow*](#), followed and won Prix Italia in 1996.

The 1990s were early days for digital editing and MIDI. In 1994 the CBC invested in the Experimental Audio Room (EAR) to explore the possibilities. It installed Stevenson – a musician, composer, and sound engineer – at the console. The tumblers of the lock were clicking into place.

A few years later, Hatzis was playing Gould's *The Idea of North* to his composition class at the University of Toronto. One of the listeners was a first year student who had been recording his grandfather, an old farmer. Until that point he hadn't quite known what to do with the material. Upon hearing Gould, a light went on. Goddard's professor introduced him to Stevenson at CBC. As Goddard recalls, Stevenson...

⁴ 'Gould to Goddard', a lecture by Steve Wadhams at the International Features Conference, Toronto, September 2003. Speaking notes courtesy of Steve Wadhams.

‘... set me up with a temporary security pass and gave me access to his studio after hours. For the rest of the year, I’d show up after 5:00 pm and work through the night in Laurence’s studio [the Experimental Audio Room]. Some nights I’d work right through to the morning. I continued on the same path and my last composition of that year was a shorter version of what ended up being *The Change in Farming*.

The next year, I received a call from Judy McAlpine⁵ who was working with Laurence and Steve on launching *Outfront*.⁶

It was early in 1998. Radio management was creating a new program with a mandate to take risks, and nurture creatives from outside CBC. Goddard was teamed with Wadhams, who helped him develop the storyline. *The Change in Farming* was first broadcast on March 16, 1998. The next year it won the *Prix Italia* and Spain’s top award, the *Premios Ondas*. The wins provided a resounding affirmation for the managers who took a risk, and a persuasive reason to sustain *Outfront*.

During its eleven-year run (1998-2009), *Outfront* collected a trophy case full of awards, including another *Prix Italia* for *Voice Box & Flute*⁷ and the *Premios Ondas* for *Middle C*⁸. Wadhams and Stevenson mentored hundreds of radio makers, myself included.

Like the Oscar winner who forgets to thank his spouse, attempting to list the many CBC successes that followed risks omitting those deserving of mention. Even so, *The Wire: The Impact of Electricity on Music*⁹ is worth singling out as a milestone. *The*

⁵ Judy McAlpine was the founding executive producer of *Outfront*.

⁶ Email correspondence between Goddard and Sandell, March 9, 2015

⁷ Produced in 2004 by: Lisa Hebert, Carol Spendlove Script: Sarah Green, Paul Green. Exec Producer: Lynda Shorten.

⁸ Produced in 2007. Producers: Tristan R. Whiston, Carma Jolly. Exec producer: Neil Sandell

⁹ Produced in 2005 by Jowi Taylor, Paolo Pietropaolo, and Chris Brookes in 2005, *The Wire* won a Peabody Award, *Prix Italia*, and the Director’s Choice Award at the Third Coast International Audio Festival.

Wire pushed the boundaries of audio storytelling in the best CBC tradition. In it I hear the influence of Gould and those who followed. That was in 2005.

Today? Globally, these are the best of times and worst of times for radio storytelling. Podcasting has entered a period of exuberant creation. Despite budget cuts, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation funds the Creative Audio Unit, a deep dive into the audio unknown.

On the other side of the ledger, my professional home for 30 years has suffered devastating budget cuts. The Radio Drama department is long gone. Radio features are an endangered species. With News dominating the corporate culture, the range of radio content has narrowed. So too has the production of stylish radiophonic documentaries. Tight money means less risk-taking. If there is a ray of hope, it is a one-time special fund for training new documentary makers with Steve Wadhams' hand at the tiller.

Yet Radio Talk is under new management. Most are TV people with an avowed enthusiasm for radio, but little experience making it. That need not lead to disaster. But what to make of a staff memo in which the top radio executive touts her new lieutenant's ability to 'help us with the visuals'? The phrase may hint at an initiative to create online stories. There is nothing wrong with that, per se. But one questions why a ravaged radio service – one that needs to protect the core – would over-extend itself by opening a new front. It could be that the plea for visuals is based on the assumption that young people will only listen on their smart phones and tablets if there is something to look at. Surely the popularity of podcasting has laid that chestnut to rest.

But there is a second possibility. Maybe I have totally misread the remark. Maybe 'help us with the visuals' refers to radio's capacity to conjure images in the mind's eye, to go places no camera can go. Maybe it is a poetic call for storytelling that depends on the creative use of sound, for radio that is proud to be radio.

Yes, that would be it.

THE CHANGE IN FARMING

[AUDIO HERE:](#)

Or paste <http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/library/10-the-change-in-farming>

NEIL SANDELL

Neil Sandell is a Canadian journalist. He was a senior producer at CBC Radio where his career spanned three decades. Sandell has won more than a dozen international awards for his documentaries. In 2011, Sandell was named the Atkinson Fellow in Public Policy, Canada's most prestigious journalism fellowship. He spent the year researching and writing about youth unemployment for the *Toronto Star*. Sandell is proud of his work as a mentor and teacher. He has given radio workshops in Oslo; Amsterdam; Chicago; Nuuk, Greenland; and Kilfinane, Ireland. Most recently he has been advising the *Prix Italia*. In 2014, Sandell left CBC to take up residence in Nice, France. His fractured French continues to amuse locals who, he tells himself, are laughing with him, not at him.

