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Editorial Overview, Volume 2, Issue 1

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Abstract

Overview of the nine audio features critiqued by Guest Reviewers, who are themselves eminent producers and curators of audio features. The works reviewed are from the US, UK, Canada, France, Poland and Denmark.

Keywords

audio feature, radio documentary, critical analysis, podcasting, audio storytelling

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EDITORIAL, RadioDoc Review 2 (1).

By Siobhan McHugh, Editor, RadioDoc Review.

The third edition of *RadioDoc Review* (RDR) is a special guest issue, where, instead of the usual collective nomination and voting process, a range of noted practitioners and curators were invited to critique a work of their choice. This has expanded our range to include features in languages other than English. French, Danish and Polish features are analysed, introducing us to the sophisticated European tradition of crafted audio story. Remarkably diverse works from Canada, the US and Australia sit alongside, and we also pioneer an auto-critique, whereby RDR Editorial Board member John Biewen gamely subjects his historical documentary, *Little War on the Prairie*, to scrutiny against the RDR recommended reviewer guidelines.

Two features in French have themes related to tragic outcomes arising from displacement and cultural dislocation, but as sonic works, they are very different creatures. *Qui a Connu Lolita?* - translated not literally as *Who Knew Lolita*, but as *Who Killed Lolita?* – is a ‘brilliant and disturbing work’ according to reviewer Chris Brookes, an esteemed feature maker based in Newfoundland, Canada. Made by a team from Marseilles community radio Radio Grenouille, and Arte France, it investigates the gruesome discovery of a Cape Verde mother and her two children, who have been lying dead in their Marseilles apartment for two months. But as Brookes notes, ‘this is a composition for radio, not a collection of easy evidence for a police dossier’. He deconstructs ‘two gob-smacking scenes which got under my skin, and will stay with me forever’. One is a Beckett-esque moment with a wheedling tramp in a church; the other delves into metaphysical mysteries. *Rien Que Les Os (Nothing But Bones)* also evokes cross-cultural collisions, namely the undermining of the Indigenous Irula tribe of Kerala, in Southern India, by the predations of the modern world. Veteran Radio France producer Irène Omélianenko, ably translated by Simon Elmes, describes the work as ‘a hybrid piece that lies between music and poetic creation’. Made by the French artist Floy Krouchi in collaboration with Nathalie Battus and Bruno Mourlan from Radio France, it is ‘a delicate and deeply moving piece of radio’ that harnesses ‘the cinematic power of sound to create mental pictures’.

Germany’s WDR executive producer Leslie Rosin has selected a dark Danish feature, *Efter Festen*, which she believes is ‘a masterpiece of our

genre'. Translated in English as *After the Celebration*, the Danish title is more ambiguous, 'efter' being translatable as either 'after' or 'based on'. This sets up one of the work's themes: 'What is narrative and what is reality?' Using complex dramaturgy, Prix Italia-winning producer Lisbeth Jessen explores the case of Allen, who had alleged in a popular radio interview that he had confronted his father at his 60th birthday celebration with the devastating fact that the father had abused him and his twin sister, Pernille, as children. 'As a narrator she is in search of truth, but as an author she believes in the power of narrative.' From Poland, Anna Sekudewicz, also a Prix Italia winner, presents a feature which, despite its Holocaust themes, portrays a sense of hope. *Złoty chłopak*, translated as *Golden Boy*, interweaves the story of Abraham Tuszyński, a tailor from Lodz who becomes a cinema impresario in Amsterdam before World War 11, and producer Katarzyna Michalak, also from Lodz. Both have in common a determination to follow their passions – a choice that led to the untimely death of the Golden Boy at the hands of the Nazis. Using Dutch archival recordings and juxtaposing her own story with the tailor's, Michalak achieves 'a profound level of meaning', managing 'to present Abraham Tuszyński not only as a victim of the Holocaust, but as a man who was not afraid to dream'.

From North America come two more playful works: *The Change in Farming*, a short (12minute) experimental work from CBC, and *Everything, Nothing, Harvey Keitel*, first aired on BBC Radio 3 but very much emanating from New York, where its producer, Danish-born Pejk Malinowski, is based. Adam Goddard, a young composer, teamed with senior CBC producer Steve Wadhams to make *A Change in Farming*. The story itself is simple, notes fellow-Canadian and eminent producer Neil Sandell. Adam visits his grandfather, Henry Haws, who still lives on the farm where he was born, and invites him to reminisce about how farming has changed in his lifetime. But he then subverts this small family exchange by re-casting Henry's voice as a musical composition, blended with mechanical found sound and electronic notes. Anchored by the unfolding relationship between Henry and Adam, the work is 'a master class in the slow reveal'. It also functions as a nuanced exploration of ageing. '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?' In a similar way, Malinowski's piece has an

ostensibly simple core – his brush with fame when he realises actor Harvey Keitel is in his meditation class – but its clever treatment evokes deeper themes, such as the workings of the mind, the impact of celebrity, and the nature of story. While the premise of the piece is ‘cringingly *American*’, Malinovski avoids the clear threat of self-indulgence, says reviewer Sarah Geis, managing director of the Third Coast Audio Festival. Instead, he delivers a work that ‘plays with and questions Hollywood storytelling conventions’ and... ‘through his singular voice, playful sense of humour, and impeccable sound design, Malinovski tells a story that makes the listener laugh, feel, and consider the intertwined nature of storytelling and happiness.’

The two final contemporary works in this issue share a theme of the disastrous impact of colonisation on Indigenous peoples. In *Little War on the Prairie*, aired on *This American Life*, producer and RDR board member John Biewen tells the story of the U.S.-Dakota War, ‘a bloody Plains Indian war that broke out in the summer of 1862 in southern Minnesota. That six-week conflict took the lives of hundreds of people... Most of the dead were white settlers, though the U.S. government’s reprisals in the aftermath of the war killed up to several thousand Dakota Indians. A grim highlight of that payback was the simultaneous hanging of thirty-eight Dakota warriors, the largest mass execution in U.S. history, on the day after Christmas, 1862, in Mankato, Minnesota. Which happens to be my hometown.’ Perplexed that he had never heard the story growing up, Biewen embarks on a journey, in the company of Dakota historian Gwen Westerman, to reclaim this overlooked – or wilfully forgotten – history. At my request, Biewen agreed to undertake an ‘auto-critique’ of the work, applying the Recommended Radio Documentary Review Guidelines developed by me and RDR board members Michelle Boyd and Gail Phillips. This was intended to ‘test’ their efficacy in evaluating an audio documentary, and although Biewen found it ‘a curious exercise, reviewing one’s own work’, at least, he notes drily, ‘I don’t have to speculate as to the maker’s intentions.’ The result is richly revealing. Biewen describes the iceberg nature of making radio documentary: the mountain of work that lies beneath the audible tip, or end product, the thoughtful positioning of himself as narrator, the deliberate retention of historical ambiguities and avoidance of a didactic line, the respect for Indigenous culture that led him to not record key moments, the balancing of individual artistry and authorship with the need to fit with a collective *This American Life* sound, and the relief and

reward of knowing that what you have made might actually cut through and affect listeners. (RDR Reviewer Guidelines [here](#): scroll down.)

The British feature *Not Quite Cricket*, made by the ‘musician, inventor, composer, improviser, educator and entertainer’ Jon Rose, reclaims the colonial past in a completely different way. Framed as a ‘historical intervention’, its focus is the tour of England in 1868 by an Aboriginal cricket team. Rose ‘challenges the assumption that this was a glorious moment for Indigenous sportsmen... he views it as a titillating racial freak show, a historical record of racism, exploitation and brutality’, says reviewer Jane Ulman. Ulman, an accomplished producer who has won five Prix Italias and numerous other accolades, deftly unpicks the multi-layered creation of this virtuosic political artist. ‘His work has a message. His method is deft and his touch light; often provocative, always playful, iconoclastic, radical. His tone is never dour... Though there are plenty of well-aimed jibes and some good-humoured clowning, this work is nothing if not serious. The collision of humour and horror is breathtaking.’ The slyly humorous argot of the Indigenous voices punctures the pomposity of Rose’s oily MC in a work where parody, performance and linguistics underpin ‘a wide knowledge of the tour itself and the progress and effects of white colonization in Australia’. Rose makes particularly adept use of music. ‘It is a narrative strand... The instrumentation is innovative, the effects often quirky. Its function is arterial, delivering information, conjuring images with clarity and immediacy. It’s also an energetic driving force; sweet and sour, carnival, whimsical, ominous, religious, dolorous, military and deadly by turns.’

To conclude this wonderfully eclectic issue, we will be treated to a review of Morton Wishengrad's *The Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto* (NBC 1943), by Tim Crook, a scholar of radio drama and documentary, based at Goldsmiths, University of London. It will be posted separately as our Historical Spotlight.

It is with regret that we farewell Seán Street, who penned RDR’s very first review, of *Poetry, Texas*. Theoretically ‘retired’, Seán needs more time to pursue his many endeavours, from writing poetry to writing the new [Historical Dictionary of British Radio](#). This issue I particularly thank Alan Hall of Falling Tree Productions, for being an active and enthusiastic new Associate Editor, and Steve Ahern and Mia Lindgren, for their valuable support as ongoing Associate Editors.

Since our last Issue, I have been visiting audio feature makers and fans in the US and Europe, and observing the continued surge in podcasting fever. In fact I edited part of this issue from a Global Editors Network media summit at Barcelona, where I was [speaking](#) on a panel on Podcasting: The Next Generation of Audio Storytelling, with Dana Chivvis, producer of Serial. Dana shared some of Serial's behind-the-scenes secrets, and modestly suggested that a lot of its success could be attributed to a happy coincidence – that Apple developed its purple Iphone podcast app just as Serial launched. I pointed the large international attendance to what we do at *RadioRoc Review* (where most of the critiqued works can be accessed as podcasts) and was delighted to find that my message - that the best crafted audio works have a unique and powerful capacity to evoke empathy, engage attention, invoke imagination and forge intimate connection with listeners – was very warmly received, particularly by delegates from Latin America and Africa, who have not had much exposure to the form. Some of our points were [published](#) by our co-panellist Francisco Baschieri, who comes from the business end of podcasting. My less than cerebral throwaway line, that 'podcasting is God's gift to ironing', caused laughter and a flurry of tweets.

As it happens, I am writing this on 30 September, designated #International Podcast Day – and this handle is trending on Twitter. Since Issue 2, Barack Obama's [famed podcast](#) from the garage of comedian Marc Maron has triggered another plethora of articles on podcasting. But having attended the New Media Exposition at Las Vegas in April 2015, with its tens of thousands of delegates, and immersed myself since among podcasting gurus and start-ups of all kinds, two things are clear: (1) 90% of podcasts are NOT crafted audio storytelling; some of the top-rating ones in the US are 'as live' talk shows about sport, tech/gaming shows, cars, science and commerce (2) podcasts range from excellent to awful, and as they proliferate, an evaluation of quality over quantity is increasingly important. A few online sources now provide this guidance. This is pleasing, but while blogs and hobbyists have immediacy on their side whereas *RadioDoc Review* only publishes two issues a year, it will always play a significant role because of the integrity of the process of selecting works for review, and the eminence and diversity of the reviewers – so evident again here.

AUDIOGRAPHY RADIODOC REVIEW: ISSUE 3

Reviews contain full production details. Links to audio works reviewed are also posted at the end of the reviews. Please note that reviews need to be downloaded as pdfs. The Abstract page contains only a short summary and metadata. English transcript is with full review.

NOT QUITE CRICKET by Jon Rose (UK, 2012), 29.07mins.

Reviewer: Jane Ulman

http://www.jonroseweb.com/sound/h_radio_not_quite_cricket_extract.mp3

THE CHANGE IN FARMING by Adam Goddard and Steve Wadhams (Canada, 1998), 11.35mins. Reviewer: Neil Sandell.

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

LITTLE WAR ON THE PRAIRIE by John Biewen, (US 2012), 60mins.

Reviewer John Biewen.

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/479/little-war-on-the-prairie>

EVERYTHING, NOTHING, HARVEY KEITEL by Pejk Malinowski (UK, 2013), 18.19mins.

Reviewer: Sarah Geis

<https://soundcloud.com/fallingtreeproductions/shadowplay-slow-movement-everything-nothing-harvey-keitel>

ZŁOTY CHŁOPAK (GOLDEN BOY) by Katarzyna Michalak (Poland 2013), 42mins.

Reviewer Anna Sekudewicz.

<http://moje.radio.lublin.pl/31-08-2013-reportaz-katarzyny-michalak.html>

RIEN QUE LES OS (NOTHING BUT BONES) by Floy Krouchi, Nathalie Battus, Bruno Mourlan (France, 2015), 56.40mins.

Reviewer: Irène Omélianenko.

<http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-l-atelier-de-la-creation-rien-que-les-os-2015-03-05>

QUI A CONNU LOLITA (WHO KILLED LOLITA) by Anouk Batard, Mehdi Ahoudig, Olivier Apprill (France 2009), 50.47mins. Reviewer: Chris Brookes.

http://www.arteradio.com/son/491214/qui_a_connu_lolita___/

EFTER FESTEN (AFTER THE CELEBRATION) by Lisbeth Jessen. (Denmark 2002), 47.06mins. Reviewed by Leslie Rosin.

<http://bit.ly/1OvQoDs> English transcript: <http://bit.ly/1GaFFiE>