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The Affective Power of Audio

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The Affective Power of Audio

Abstract
Oral historian Siobhán McHugh talks us through the primal and intimate nature of soundscapes, sharing her favourite ‘driveway moments’ and showcasing the power of audio storytelling. With carefully curated links to some of the most powerful and affecting moments she’s experienced in the medium, this piece just might convert you to the spoken (but unseen) word – if you’re not hooked on it already.

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It's a great time for audiophiles — Sheffield, one of the world's top documentary festivals, have just announced an inaugural audio documentary award. As I tweeted: *at last, the word 'documentary' is not assumed to mean 'film'.* I'm not here to put down film and TV — I love *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* as much as anyone else — but I do want to affirm the power, subtlety and complexity of AUDIO.

Many of you no doubt already listen to the fabulous audio stories available from all around the world, since 2005, via the miracle of podcasting. What a change from the days when you had to stay home to catch your favourite show. My rhythms revolved around the Radio National schedule — Sunday evening, I'd chop vegetables to the soothing tones of Alistair Cooke's *Letters from America*, those masterpieces of social commentary served up as story. It was story, and Cooke's reassuring voice, that made the *Letters* so captivating they ran for over 50 years — and it's those simple but essential elements, story and voice, I'd like to share.

I'll start in the Kimberley in North West Australia — and a warning that you may hear the voices of deceased Indigenous persons.

In 2000, I went to Broome to interview Pat Dodson about his Irish–Aboriginal heritage. While there, I met an extrovert Aboriginal broadcaster called Mark Bin Barka, who told me I should interview his mother, as she'd been raised by Irish nuns. I had to break it to him gently that I'd left Ireland largely to get away from Irish nuns. But of course what he was really telling me was that his mother, Phyllis, was one of the Stolen Generations. Their voices were then rarely heard. Academics and politicians discussed the policy, and a Royal Commission had been held, but in public, we rarely heard the actual voices of those affected. So here's one, Daisy Howard, who was raised in Beagle Bay near Broome — though of course that wasn't her Aboriginal birth name.

She's talking here about her mixed feelings about what happened. And listen out for the little girl in the background — her grandchild, who to me is almost the embodiment of the toddler Daisy was when she was taken. The sound quality is far from perfect — there's a man nearby fixing up Daisy's
Oral historian **Siobhán McHugh** talks us through the primal and intimate nature of... 

house, because a cyclone had just ripped through Broome. The compromise was that he'd put away his power tools – hence the hammer. But sometimes you have to seize the moment rather than wait for the perfect acoustic and I think Daisy’s story comes through clearly. She starts by saying how her mother is lost to her.

1. AUDIO – DAISY

I can’t remember my mother...

... I cry too.

DUR: 1.53

It’s simple heartfelt emotion that audio captures so well. We’re not distracted by how someone looks – are they old or fat or ugly, black or white. We can focus on their essence – their voice, their tone, their words, even their breathing. Daisy has restraint and dignity, but there’s no hiding the sadness.

Her friend Phyllis has one memory of her mother. Phyllis was three when her mother took her to a hospital in Derby when she had a fever. The doctors passed her out the back door to the authorities, and she was raised by the same John of God nuns in Beagle Bay. When she was 17, she was working in a hospital when she was told she had a visitor. Neither woman would recognise the other.

2. AUDIO – PHYLLIS

It just happened...

... first and last I saw her.

Dur 0.28

Phyllis never saw her mother again. I think the palpable melancholic undertow in her voice tells us how she feels about that. But the story was complicated, because the women liked the nuns, and the nuns were fighting their own battles. Under the sexist dispositions of church hierarchy, the females for instance didn’t get to use the one mission vehicle – the nuns and the girls had to walk in the hot sun. I asked one nun, Sister Pat, an important question, and I think you’ll hear how she genuinely seems to struggle to understand her role.

3. AUDIO: Sister PAT

Did it ever occur to you...

... we didn’t question.

DUR: 0.31

I think audio opens up a space for connection that video precludes. If we were watching Sister Pat in a Catholic context – near a church or a crucifix – we’d subliminally form a judgement, pro or anti, according to our religious or political views. But just hearing that sigh she gives, to me makes it more complicated – she’s conflicted. It turns out those nuns were proto-feminists in some ways. They defied the government intention not to have ‘smart blacks’ and even taught them Shakespeare. Jimmy Chi, who wrote the musical *Bran Nu Dae*, was educated by them, and another pupil, a girl, got a scholarship to high school.

Audio also trumps video in that it’s far less intrusive, and therefore more likely to capture revealing moments. Take this rare insight into a key moment in Australian history. I interviewed lots of migrants who came out from Europe after World War II to work on the huge Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme. It couldn’t have been built without them and was the start of the multicultural Australia we know today. But how was that decision made, to vary the longstanding Anglo–Celtic demographic? Well, in 1947, the UN had three million refugees to deal with, and the secretary of the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration was Robert Jackson, an Australian. He thought Prime Minister Ben Chifley might be interested in taking some of them.

4. AUDIO: ROBERT JACKSON

So I went with Major Cannon...

... it will be done!

DUR 0.45
Oral historian **Siobhán McHugh** talks us through the primal and intimate nature of audio.

What a fabulous footnote to history, eh, courtesy of ABC Archives. And by the way, audio trumps print too – you try spelling ‘fsccht’, as in ‘fsccht over his shoulder’.

But where audio truly triumphs is in creating connection with the listener. As you listen in real time, particularly to someone in an emotional state, you develop what I call a pact of intimacy. You have to fixedly watch film, but sound envelops you, comes with you in the car, surrounds you in the kitchen.

Take this clip from Susan Timmins, from my Marrying Out series for ABC RN.

![Image](image-url)

Susan’s mother Julia was the eldest of 11 children in an Irish-Catholic family in Maitland, near Newcastle in the 1920s. They ran the general store and had one of the first cars in town. Their mechanic, Errol White, was a Protestant. So what, I hear the younger people ask. But as older folk will remember, in pre-multicultural Australia, society was polarised between just two groups – Catholics and Protestants.

Somewhere in a Queensland museum there’s an item that’s testament to this: a brochure called The Protestant’s Guide to Shopping in Rockhampton. You could buy all your goods without having to encounter a reprobate Catholic! Back in Maitland, facing family fury, Julia and Errol eloped. Julia was immediately cut out of the family. When she returned because her father was dying, her mother barred the way on the verandah. She and Errol married and had Susan, but when Susan was two, Julia died in childbirth. Errol had nowhere to turn. His family derided the two children as ‘bog Irish’. Julia’s family maintained the fatwa – until, decades later, a brother contacted Errol.

5. AUDIO: SUSAN TIMMINS

And my father arranged that we’d…

... but he got nothing.

DUR: 1.16

I know someone who did a PhD on sectarianism and he told me that this audio did what his 100,000-word dissertation could not – it captured the pain. And it’s a shock for us to hear how such a confident, worldly woman as Susan is at the start, can disintegrate, even years later, recalling this event. But she wants it to be played, to show the awful impact of religious bigotry.

We shouldn’t forget here that audio is a two-way street. Being LISTENED TO can also be transformative. The inimitable American oral historian and broadcaster, Studs Terkel, loved to tell a story about this. One day he’s in a rundown part of Chicago when he notices a woman staring into an empty shop window, while her kids hover. Curious, he asks what she’s looking at. ‘Oh, just dreams’, she says. So he asks if she’ll tell him more and turns on his ever-present tape recorder. Afterwards, one of the kids says, ‘hey Mom, let’s hear it’. So Studs plays it back, and the woman listens intently.

Then she says, ‘Well, until I heard that, I never knew I felt that way.’ Some call it validation. Just being listened to – REALLY listened to – can help you make sense of your life.
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6. AUDIO: excerpt from In King Coal’s Kingdom by Tom Morton, ABC RN 360 Documentaries 2013.*

IN: door slam, sound of horse

OUT: ... probably under a minute.

DUR: 1.15

I won’t go into the whole Radio-as-Theatre-of-the-Mind thing – the oft-noted and very true observation that radio makes better pictures than TV, because in a well-crafted radio feature, with fly-on-the-wall audio scenes and an evocative, textured soundscape, YOU are the co-creator; you supply the pictures from your own imagination. Here’s a stallion, recorded in the Hunter Valley, courtesy of Tom Morton, who made a program for ABC RN’s 360 Documentaries called In King Coal’s Kingdom. This involved an investigation into the competing industries of coal and horse-breeding in the Hunter Valley, and in this excerpt, Tom takes us to the heart of the latter with this recording of a prize stallion servicing a mare – a great example of theatre-of-the-mind, as you can hear.

And every collaborator in this process creates their own unique story, from the same audio. But to get there, it’s best to listen to an entire narrative, with its chapters, peaks and troughs, which we can’t do here. I recommend the new indie American site, Radiotopia.fm. Or of course our own 360 Documentaries and Hindsight at ABC RN. Or the usual US suspects, This American Life and Radiolab.

I’m going to end in fact with a story from Radiolab. It’s about Emilie, a young art student in New York, who’s in a coma in hospital with hideous injuries after being hit by a truck. Her boyfriend, Alan, and her mother, Susan, have kept vigil by her bedside for weeks. They want Emilie sent to a rehab centre for treatment, but the doctors say that won’t work unless Emilie can be reached. One night, in despair, Alan remembers Helen Keller, the deaf, blind and mute girl, who was taught to communicate through ‘finger-typing’ words on her hand. He tries it with Emilie. When he types, “I L-o-v-e Y-o-u” onto Emilie’s hand, lo and behold, she responds! But in a neutral, non-Emilie kind of way. She doesn’t connect his name or the words with it being HER Alan. He asks her name, and records the conversation on his mobile, as evidence for the doctors. She sounds a bit jumbled, as you’d expect.

**AUDIO Finding Emilie #1**

What is your name?...

....Emilie... music.

DURATION: 0.43

This was huge of course. They’ve made a connection. She’s clearly not a vegetable. But she’s still not HER. Alan now asks her, through finger typing, if he can put in her hearing aids, which she’s resisted before. She’s been deaf since she was little. Emilie says okay. Listen to what happens next.

**AUDIO Finding Emilie #2**

He says Emilie can you hear me

...the whole time

DUR: 0.34
Oral historian **Siobhán McHugh** talks us through the primal and intimate nature of someone's voice, brings Emilie back to full consciousness. You can HEAR how her personality is fully present there, where it wasn’t before. Before, she showed cognition, but she didn’t know who she really WAS.

So that’s definitely what I’d call a Driveway Moment – it makes you stop dead and wait, listen to see what happens. I’ve recorded one such moment, with an Australian journalist, Jan Graham, describing the hideous intimacy of sharing the dying moments of a GI in the Vietnam War. It’s online in my article in The Conversation, called How Audio Storytelling Got Sexy, which triggered this talk.

There are plenty of other Driveway Moments out there, but it’s almost pornographic to take them out of context. You need to absorb the run-up and epilogue in order to feel their full force. But if you want a new source for compelling audio and a fuller analysis of what constitutes good audio storytelling and why, I shamelessly recommend RadioDoc Review.

It’s a new, free, online journal, the first in the WORLD dedicated to in-depth critiques of the best audio documentaries and features we can find, written by top producers and thinkers from all over. The first issue goes live next month with ten reviews – a sort of Metacritic for Radio. I’m the founding editor, but I think I can safely spruik RadioDoc Review because it really is a collective project, made by the many folk out there who want to celebrate and share great audio storytelling. I hope you’ll join the gang.

**AUDIO LINKS**

- Marrying Out (McHugh, 2 x 53mins)
- Good indie audio storytelling: Radiotopia
- In King Coal’s Kingdom (Tom Morton)
- Finding Emilie (Radiolab)
- Driveway Moment with Jan Graham and more
- RadioDoc Review