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The Sound of Fog: remembering the audio artistry of Chris Brookes

Angela Antle, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador

Abstract

This article remembers the work of Peabody Award winner, Battery Radio founder, and documentarian Chris Brookes who died in April 2023.

Keywords

Chris Brookes, documentary, Listening Cinema, Battery Radio

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I drive onto Signal Hill and squeeze into one of the last available slots overlooking the ocean. I'm here to listen, with others, to a Chris Brookes' feature on the same hill where he lived and produced some of the world's best audio. A hill made famous by the Italian inventor of the radio.

It's not going to be the quiet hour that I imagined. I have never seen so many people or vehicles jammed into this small lot. TV crew in black administer to groups of athletes in matching-coloured windbreakers. Generators rumble, walkie-talkies crackle, tripods are tipped over and righted, a camera drones overhead startling seagulls diving for scraps, and zip-line guy wires hum in the wind.

Sound up: *Jazz music fills the car.*

I turn my back to the chaos and turn up the volume.

Host: *Good evening and welcome to Sunsets at Signal Hill, I'm Pat Foran, an Artistic Fraud producer. In Collaboration with Parks Canada, we are remembering the brilliant radio work of our friend Chris Brookes every Tuesday night this month here on Signal Hill, the place where Marconi received the first wireless signal and Chris's home.*

The grey wall of North Atlantic fog is a dull silver screen.

Chris lived just below us tucked into the cliffs of the Battery, the namesake of his production company. Tonight, we're bringing you Running the Goat: A Dance in Eight Figures. First broadcast by Radio Netherlands in 2005, it won awards at the Third Coast Festival and the Grand Prix Marulic in 2006.

A container ship seesaws as it hits the waves of Freshwater Bay.

Sound up: *A quick accordion reel. Laughter. A clatter of steps keeps the beat.*

The waves transform into a heaving dance floor.

Christina Smith: *“Running the Goat: A dance in eight figures.”*

Chris Brookes: *“Can you, like for someone who has never seen it, can you describe it?”*

Dancer Mercedes Barry: *“Well it’s one of those things. I would imagine it’s a bit like climbing Mount Everest would feel like. Eight people, four couples and (laughs) there’s been times when I get maybe a quarter or halfway through it when I think this is it. The heart attack time when you can’t swallow, and your heart is going mad and the sweat is pouring out of you. It’s just. There’s a certain thing that people get inside of it that I just don’t get in the other dances I don’t want to get carried away here, but it is a kind of spiritual experience not just a physical one.”*

Chris Brookes was a generous and brilliant, conceptual-theatre artist who brought those skills and more to radio. I was lucky to stumble into his orbit, in the late 80s, at CBC Radio in St. John’s. He was the resident audio magician, making the ephemeral visible with his writing, tech savviness, and sense of play. I decided then I would aspire to make his kind of radio: documentaries and long-form pieces that transported listeners with layered concepts and sound work.

Sound down: The accordion reel and dancer’s steps fade.

In *Running the Goat*, Chris uses the sounds of the traditional dance to surface the emotion of 30,000 Newfoundlanders losing their livelihood when the cod moratorium was announced. He laid the ‘set’ dance over fisherman recalling their cod-fishing *marks* – the underwater places where they knew the cod to congregate. Places that only make sense if you’re in a dory on the ocean’s surface and more importantly, if there are fish.

Sound up: A make-and-break small boat engine sputters.

Chris Brookes: *The surface of Motion Bay looks as bare as an empty dance floor. But not to the generations of fishermen who’ve danced on it.*

This radio experience brings to mind Kate Lacey's idea of a Listening Cinema. "Listening together," she notes, "in a concentrated fashion in a public space without visual stimulation remains so unusual an experience, despite more than a century of media sound, that it still appeals to experimental artists as a way to produce alternative experiences, unpredictable encounters and new ways of engaging in public culture" (Lacey, 2013, p.155).

Singer Anita Best scats a tune from the foghorn's note.

Chris Brookes: Culture is a practical thing.

A woman walking a toy poodle stops to talk to a man in a broken-down car, his headlights flash to the beat of the dancers' accordion. Two runners in florescent shorts disappear over the hill's edge onto the Northhead Trail.

Singer Anita Best: Everyone has to die. It's still really hard and sad for the people who miss that person but change and alteration are the natural way of things.

Sound up: Dancers finish and applaud.

Singer Anita Best: It sounds like a horrible thing to say, in a way, but the tradition... it doesn't have a regular life. It just has a remembered life. And that would have happened whether tourists came or not.

Sound down: (song stops)

The TV shoot's chaos warps my cinematic listening experience, but it is still profound to listen to Chris talk about this hill, on this hill. In 'Are We on the Air?', his chapter contribution to *Reality Radio* (Biewen & Dilworth, 2010), Chris dispels the myth that Marconi heard the first wireless message here. He also reveals the creative lengths he could go to as a feature maker. Because there was no such thing as static in 1901, he created "ether flutters" to represent the sound that Marconi could have been straining to hear through during those three long days. "Pigeons would gather on the adjoining rooftop, and I would lie awake listening to the feathery swishing of their wings cutting the air as they got airborne. A fluttering at the window was the way I imagined that the idea of radio could have fluttered at Marconi's mind,

a faint signal trying to come in. An urgency. So I sneaked a stereo mic onto the window ledge and recorded the flutters. In the mix I processed the sound and pushed it into deep reverb to make “ether flutters,” then slowly pulled it out of reverb to make it recognizable as wings when the program later mentions carrier pigeons” (Brookes, 2012, p. 18).

Chris understood that sound does more than locate listeners and mark the passage of time, he used it as connective tissue between illusion and reality. In *Running the Goat*, he skillfully draws on sound to comment on the tensions between Newfoundland’s communal fishing culture and the performative, post-fish nostalgia created for visitors by tourism marketers.

Sound up: FOGHORN SFX

Chris Brookes: *A thick grey wall of fog promenades through the Narrows, into St. John’s harbour. Kinda hard to hear on the radio.*

Fog, like fish, is pretty silent. Except they invented a voice for the fog.

Sound up: FOGHORN SFX

Chris Brookes: *The foghorn. And for the fish,*

Sound up: FOGHORN SFX with dance steps in the background.

Chris Brookes: *They invented a culture.*

Men in black lug coffee carafes to a catering tent that the wind has all but ripped away from its metal structure. Bored that they haven’t spotted any TV stars, tourists hold their iPhones up to the fog. If they could hear what I hear, they’d know the grey surface they overlook obscures the soon-to-be-forgotten *marks* that fed generations of Newfoundlanders and their vibrant, communal culture. Loss looms as I listen to the gentle voice of a friend, remembering him as a bulwark against the commercialization of culture.

Sound up: FOGHORN SFX, accordion music, dancing feet.

Singer Anita Best: *If you're attached to a certain thing, you regard it as a loss. But it is a natural kind of loss, in a way. I mean, it's like when someone dies.*

Sound up: *Dancers' whoops and feet.*

One of the TV competitors clammers up a ladder and clips herself to the zipline in the race to the bottom. Above me, in Cabot Tower, a window glows where Pat Foran is broadcasting Chris' words on a temporary FM transmitter. Tourists trickle out of a bus. Their leader gestures to the tower and they listen, just as Marconi might have done in this very place and I think of Chris' description of the scenario that gave this hill its name:

There was this little Italian man on top of my cliff a hundred years ago, freezing his arse off in a drafty, little shack, listening for three solid days with earphones clapped to his skull. A man giving radio his full attention. Does it give him the information? No. It engages his imagination so powerfully that he imagines the information. To me, this illustrates that radio excels not by delivering information (in this case the letter "s") but by evoking the imagination (the suggestion of the letter "s") (Brookes in Biewen & Dilworth, 2012, p. 17).

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Author Details

Angela Antle is the associate editor of RDR. She's a PhD Candidate at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador researching podcasting, disinformation and petrocultures.