

RadioDoc Review

Volume 1 • Issue 1 • 2014

2013-12-09

Editorial Introduction

Siobhan McHugh, University of Wollongong

Abstract

Welcome to the very first issue of *RadioDoc Review*, an online space where producers, critics and lovers of radio documentaries and audio storytelling meet.

Those of us who make and listen to quality radio documentaries have learned to seek out the best examples of audio storytelling via a mixture of trusted outlets, programs that win esteemed awards, and word-of-mouth. Social media are a boon in drawing attention to notable works, and key producers, programs, festivals and events have all helped to develop a dedicated audiophile community. But those of us with a passion for the long-form audio narrative are hungry for more. What makes an audio documentary or feature memorable, evocative, or gripping? Why do we get so emotionally involved with some stories? What is the secret to storytelling through sound? What, in fact, are the unique strengths and characteristics of our particular medium and form?

Keywords

Recommended Citation

McHugh, S., (2013) "Editorial Introduction", *RadioDoc Review* 1(1). doi: <https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.v1i1.1>

RadioDoc Review: Editorial Introduction

Siobhán McHugh, Founding Editor, *RadioDoc Review*
University of Wollongong, Australia

Welcome to the very first issue of *RadioDoc Review*, an online space where producers, critics and lovers of radio documentaries and audio storytelling meet. Those of us who make and listen to quality radio documentaries have learned to seek out the best examples of audio storytelling via a mixture of trusted outlets, programs that win esteemed awards, and word-of-mouth. Social media are a boon in drawing attention to notable works, and key producers, programs, festivals and events have all helped to develop a dedicated audiophile community. But those of us with a passion for the long-form audio narrative are hungry for more. What makes an audio documentary or feature memorable, evocative, or gripping? Why do we get so emotionally involved with some stories? What is the secret to storytelling through sound? What, in fact, are the unique strengths and characteristics of our particular medium and form?

Through in-depth reviews of excellent audio works, RadioDoc Review (RDR) hopes to answer these and other pressing questions. The five works reviewed in this first issue (March/April 2014) have been selected by a distinguished international editorial board, comprised of radio/sound scholars, award-winning practitioners and industry professionals. Several, like myself, play multiple roles: we teach and research radio studies, and moonlight as documentary-makers. Others work fulltime in documentary production, making their own works and mentoring others. Some straddle what is produced and what is broadcast, liaising with broadcasting organisations and advocating for radio through a variety of training, curatorial and consulting roles. Together, the RDR Editorial Board represents a rich store of collective expertise about, and commitment to, the extraordinary power of audio storytelling. I'd particularly like to thank Associate Editors Steve Ahern, Mia Lindgren and Gail Phillips for their assistance in establishing editorial principles.

This issue, the works critiqued range from a startling investigation of the surreal and hellish slum where African children snatch a living by recycling First World e-waste (THE CHILDREN OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH) to a languid, charming exploration of a little town in Texas with the unlikely name of Poetry (POETRY, TEXAS). They include the rare and shocking perspective of a paranoid schizophrenic, whose redemptive journey is tracked over ten years (THE HOSPITAL ALWAYS WINS), and a witty and delightful revisiting of the absurdist Russian writer, Gogol, through the lens of a shambolic London comic (GOGOL'S OVERCOAT). Each issue also features a HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT, and this is fittingly launched by one of the great names of US radio, Norman Corwin, through his landmark program, THE LONESOME TRAIN, about the train that bore the remains of the assassinated Abraham Lincoln home for burial. (See individual articles for full details of programs, podcast links and reviewers.)

Some of these works have already won acclaim; others are less well known. The purpose here is to have them interpreted and assessed by experts who can enlighten listeners about their artistry, journalistic excellence and assured use of the medium. To this end, RDR has evolved reviewer guidelines and criteria (devised by Michelle Boyd, Gail Phillips and myself - see Policies). To extend our understanding and develop a solid body of critical analysis, each work gets two reviews. Most of the reviews in this volume are by RDR Board members, but RDR also has an expert Reviewer Panel; anyone who meets the criteria can apply to join (see Policies). Some reviews are illustrated with embedded audio excerpts, a practice RDR encourages. The works critiqued will be preserved along with metadata at the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (rights permitting). This emerging canon will be a valuable resource for all those who share a passion for great audio documentary.

But this is only the start of where RDR can go. We hope it will also become a platform for ideas and initiatives around audio storytelling, as an aesthetic and journalistic practice, as academic scholarship and as community building. Articles and essays on these topics are very welcome. RDR followers can also join the debate on Twitter (RadioDoc Review@RDREditor) and on Facebook, or add comments on the RDR Journal page at <http://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/> We are also happy to receive notices of relevant news, events and publications.

A note on format and jargon: we generally use the term 'documentary' to represent a long-form audio narrative, which may also be called an audio 'feature'. Documentary and feature occupy a spectrum from straightforward reportage to poetic, highly crafted sound-rich *mélange*. See RDR Bibliography on this theme (coming soon!) or listen to RDR Board member Alan Hall's beguiling radio program, *The Ballad of the Radio Feature* (BBC 2008). We have set 25 minutes as the minimum for what can be considered long-form, allowing a program to develop complexities of character, unfold story and embed research to a satisfying degree. As RDR Board member and scholar David Hendy writes, "time... is the strongest tool in the documentary-maker's kitbag". But shorter audio stories can also be highly effective. They are becomingly increasingly popular, as is evidenced by the success of competitions such as ShortDocs at the Third Coast International Audio Festival in Chicago, and Pocketdocs, at ABC RN's 360 Documentaries in Australia. To salute this movement, RDR commissioned Chicago radio scholar Neil Verma to attend the 2013 ShortDocs Feast. His perceptive review captures the versatility and impact of the form.

In conclusion, I am proud and pleased to publish this first issue of *RadioDoc Review*, an initiative I launched at The Radio Conference: A TransNational Forum at the University of Bedfordshire, Luton, UK in July 2013. The idea was taken up with alacrity by the wonderfully diverse international community of audio scholars, storytellers and advocates, their enthusiasm and support proving that RDR fills a much-needed gap. Film has long had a critical studies tradition, while movie reviews abound in popular media. For too long, radio documentary has been under the radar. RDR and its team of excellent reviewers and stewards aim to change that, by developing critical language and analysis of this vital sonic storytelling form and evolving a canon of the genre.