

## RadioDoc Review

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### The Eternal Present: The Untold and Short Cuts series, BBC Radio 4.

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#### Abstract

The present tense is THE powerful first lesson in radio grammar. But so is telling the truth. What happens then, when these two butt up against one another and call each other's bluff?

'The Untold' is a half-hour BBC radio series dedicated to 'documenting the untold dramas of 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain'. The episode, *Songs of the Bothy Balladeer*, like all the stories in this series, is personal. This whole production can only be made with a high degree of cooperation from all its subjects. Indeed some of them nominate themselves. It means that we, the audience, are granted seemingly unimpeded access to a life-changing moment as it happens. We are with the subject behind the scenes. This is reality radio. In real time. Pre-recorded. Throughout the whole series 'time' is critical. The untold story must happen in a sort of 'suspended' real time. For the idea to work, the audience must feel it is living moment by moment alongside a particular dramatic event in the subject's life. The idea fits perfectly with our 'selfie stick' age.

The second series, *Short Cuts*, is another BBC Radio 4 production, assembled by an independent company, Falling Tree Productions. The slot is also 28 minutes, but this program is made up of short documentaries and 'adventures in sound'. Each episode is produced and curated around a particular theme by the inventive Eleanor McDowall. McDowall seeks out and plays documentaries from everywhere, mixing experienced, professional program makers up with student and community radio first-timers. What she is seeking are sound paintings that look at the world in a way you haven't seen before. She stresses a compositional approach, often with found sound.

'The End of the Story' episode is made up of three features about things drawing to a close. The first, by noted Danish producer Rikke Houd, is about ancient Inuit culture in Greenland. The story is told in three different epochs, each cut into fragments and layered over one another. The earliest is an evocative and mysterious archival recording. This sound of a man's voice from the past desperately shouting to us in the present, so that all it represents – people, culture, language, land, will not be forgotten and destroyed – has huge emotional power. The words are incomprehensible but the meaning is plain. The second, two and

a half minutes piece, is called 'Too Many Miles'. It is an imaginary audio film inspired by a Robert Frost poem. The producer of the third piece, 'Power of Bare', is former Third Coast Artistic Director, Sarah Geis. It is an interview with an American artist, Harold Stevenson, from the Warhol generation, who is best known for his paintings of the male nude.

In comparing these shows, it could be said that the program with the more artifice is actually the more honest. Not that it matters, because one program *The Untold*, simply proceeds by asking us to suspend our disbelief in the idea of real time being real, and the other, *Short Cuts*, doesn't.

**Keywords**

documentary, true stories, Greenland, Bothy Ballad, Robert Frost, Harold Stevenson

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# The Eternal Present: The Untold and Short Cuts series, BBC Radio 4.

The Untold: Songs of the Bothy Balladeer, 28 mins. 21 November 2016.

Producer: Dave Howard

[Audio link:](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b082x79q) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b082x79q>

Short Cuts: The End of the Story, 28 mins. 5 December 2016

Series Producer: Eleanor McDowall

[Audio link:](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08497cx) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08497cx>

## Review by Lyn Gallacher

It's embarrassing to admit, but I began in the business of making radio back in the days of quarter-inch tape. Reels and reels of it, that would unwind in the middle of an edit session and get stuck in wheels of my chair. I am a veteran of razor blades, white pencils, sticky tape and splicing boards. I also remember the big Otari machines (now a vintage item on e-bay) that were used to put the final cut to air, and how it could all go so horribly wrong.

It brings me to a story that illustrates how, from the very beginning, radio has been plagued by an internal dissonance in its attitude to time. In this story, names have been withheld to protect the guilty. As program makers we've always been told that the present tense makes for good journalism. I feel myself adopting it every time I write. Yes, even now. The present tense is THE powerful first lesson in radio grammar. But so is telling the truth. What happens then, when these two butt up against one another and call each other's bluff? This circumstance came about very early on in my career. This was a live-to-air show where the presenter threw to a pre-recorded interview as if he were welcoming a guest onto the program right then and there, rather than throwing to a piece of tape. And in this case it was actual tape. The spool was cued. The button pressed. The words, 'Joining me now ...' went to air clean and crystal clear – and then the audience heard: 'Ylumbblbmmshfmszsss'.

It took several moments to figure out what was wrong. The tape was the correct one, the machine working. Everything looked fine. But somehow the Otari had been set on the wrong speed. By the time we found the right button, our supposedly live talent went from speaking at three and a half rotations a second to seven and a half rotations a second in the middle of a sentence. We wondered if the audience would think he was drunk. It was not my finest hour and resulted in a tense argument. I wanted to institute a ban on the 'fake live' throw. There were other ways, I argued, to preserve the idea of the eternal present that could be just as engaging but less risky, and less deceitful. But I lost the argument and wince, to this day, whenever I hear him do it. Don't get me wrong, I love the eternal present, but want to flag a note of caution. It is ugly when it becomes unstuck, and this is what concerns me about 'The Untold'.

## Untold Dramas

'The Untold' is a half-hour BBC radio series dedicated to 'documenting the untold dramas of 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain'. Throughout 2016 it went to air weekly on Radio 4 and episodes are available indefinitely as podcasts. The particular episode I've chosen to focus on for this review is typical of the series. It's called *Songs of the Bothy Balladeer*, and like all the stories in this series, it's personal. This whole production can only be made with a high degree of cooperation from all its subjects. Indeed some of them nominate themselves. There is a note on the website: *If you have a story unfolding in your life that you would like to share, please do contact us.* It means that we, the audience, are granted seemingly unimpeded access to a life-changing moment as it happens. We are with the subject behind the scenes. The microphone is up close and personal. This is reality radio. In real time. Pre-recorded.

What worries me is none of this. What worries me is more like 'whiteboard anxiety'. By this I mean the weekly *Untold* schedule being mapped out by the series producers as they sit at their BBC open plan desktop computers. There is a mess of papers, empty coffee cups and despite the ease of sharing documents digitally, I imagine a large old-fashioned whiteboard, where the upcoming broadcast dates have episodes titles slated against them. In this environment, creative decisions are made on the run, because no amount of careful planning can stop the program scheduled for next Wednesday potentially falling over. And when that happens for a show like this, all you can do is bow to the inevitable and move the program for the following week up into Wednesday's slot. The subsequent hole for the following week can be dealt with later. This concern for the producers sounds eccentric, and it is, but it does highlight the old problem of the eternal present. There is no way, if you are working on a particular show about a specific individual, that you can patch up that show if that person drops out. Usually, if someone becomes boring, sick, irrelevant or unavailable, there are multiple ways around the problem. This is what being a good radio producer involves. It is about being light on your feet, being able to change direction and delivering the show on time.

The concept behind *The Untold* denies this possibility. Each story has to feature the person living it. It is their life and no amount of creative thinking from a radio producer can justify the substitution of one talent for another. If that person changes their mind about being involved that episode cannot, will not happen. Months of work will be lost and there will be a hole on the whiteboard. In order to find out how many stories really do go belly-up I sent an email to the series producers. The only answer I've received is an automatic one thanking me for contacting the Untold team, and saying that while they read all their emails they don't respond to every message.

One of the more obvious but painful reasons a subject might change their mind about participating in the program is that their life may not have gone as well as they hoped and the story they wanted to tell just simply didn't happen. This program is still determined to give listeners the eternal present tense that exists in the future. But enough speculating. Let's spend some time instead with Rachel Carstairs, the Bothy Balladeer.

## Bothy Balladeer

A Bothy Ballad is a particular type of traditional Scottish music and Rachel is a budding singer. She's seventeen and auditioning for a place at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. She hopes it will help her secure a future as a successful musician and make her mother cry. The episode starts in Plockton, on the west coast of Scotland near Skye, in the National

Centre for Excellence in Traditional Music. Here, Rachel is being put through her paces by Dougie, a music teacher and voice coach. He explains why Rachel is important and why the future of Scottish music seems to hang on the shoulders of this young girl. It makes us care about Rachel and care about her story. And as the episode ramps up to the audition, we are definitely rooting for her.

Throughout the program her singing is beautiful and beautifully recorded. It also comes with gentle explanations along the way. This is my favourite part of the show. These close readings of the music allowed me to hear and appreciate this form of traditional song in a more detailed way than I would have done otherwise. But all this musicality is subservient to a driving narrative thrusting us towards Rachel's big day. We hear Rachel's anxiety. We hear the anxiety of her teachers. We hear the anxiety of her mother. Mostly these are location recordings made by the series producer, Dave Howard, who is also present in them, asking questions, drawing out the emotion.

The presenter, Grace Dent, whose narration stitches together the different scenes, is not on location. She is studio-bound and omniscient, and yet her very non-posh, non-BBC accent and approach take us somewhere else again. She is inside the BBC, without being a BBC insider. Grace Dent is perhaps best known for her celebrity gossip/opinion column, which appears in *The Independent* every Wednesday. She also writes 'Grace and Flavour', a restaurant review for the *London Evening Standard*, and has eleven novels for teenagers to her name. But it's the title of her first non-fiction book that gives a clear indication of her comedic tone: *How To Leave Twitter (My Time as Queen of the Universe and Why This Must Stop)*. So yes, when this utterly charming and listenable voice drops like God into the middle of another's story line, it pulls focus. It means the audience meets Rachel through Grace and both appear in the present moment while quite obviously being in a different time and space. I can accept all this without a problem. It's a standard documentary-making technique in both radio and in television. What is harder to accept is the double-headed nature of it in this instance. This simply could be my Australian rather than English ears, but when I hear the producer asking questions on location, and feel that he is directing the action *in situ*, it makes me wonder why the presenter is not out there doing that herself. At one point Dave asks Rachel, 'Do you have butterflies in your tummy?' For me, the producer's presence in the field adds another layer between myself and the subject, and it points to the mechanics of making the show in a distracting way.

This, however, is how they do it in Britain, and it works. I am moved when Rachel makes it into the Conservatoire. Yet, there's another unusual radio technique at play here. Rachel finds out via email at 11pm that she has been accepted. Our location producer, Dave, is not there to capture the moment, and yet without sound from this moment there can be no show. It is THE pivotal dramatic scene. Clearly our clever producer is wise to this problem and has asked Rachel to have her room-mate record her opening this crucial email. And this is where my suspension of disbelief that enables me to go along with the fiction of the eternal present tense nearly becomes unstuck.

Throughout the whole series 'time' is critical. The untold story must happen in a sort of 'suspended' real time. For the idea to work, the audience must feel it is living moment by moment alongside a particular dramatic event in the subject's life. The idea fits perfectly with our 'selfie stick' age. The ability to record, publish and archive our lives in the same instant as events happen has never been so ubiquitous. So of course the subject should record herself. And if she has also nominated herself to be part of the series then she will probably be not only willing but media-savvy. Yet, this is a radical shift. What we, the

audience, think we hear is a ‘fly-on-the-wall recording’. It is as if a small sound from that person’s life has leaked through time and space, into our ears. What we are actually hearing is more like advertising, but because this form of advertising is so insidious we take it for granted. We will never know what actually happened in that moment. Were there several takes? How much acting was involved? In a sense all field recording is like this, but not all field recording is packaged as purporting to give listeners a slice of life, directly from the subject’s own unexpurgated, experience, in the way this program does.

In this series the producers do a good job of papering over this particular anomaly. In the interests of professional integrity they are careful to tell us who has recorded what. But the more profound implications of this cannot and do not get in the way of the narrative, which steals the limelight, as narrative always does. This is why it is interesting to think about how everything could so easily have become unstuck. What if Rachel had not got into the Conservatoire – would she still have pressed ‘record’?

This gets back to the shuffling of stories on the whiteboard. Even though these are not news stories and can in a sense go to air at any time, they do have a shelf life. Even the eternal present can only be stretched so far. What if the Conservatoire had been bombed, or was in the news because its director had sexually molested students. Then Rachel’s burning ambition would suddenly acquire more complicated implications and would not be able to be broadcast within the same naïve frame that *The Untold* provides. You may think I’m being overly dramatic but some stories are keepers, and others are not. For example, a bereaved spouse is only supposed to be red-raw with the grief of losing a life-long partner for a certain length of time. Mourning shouldn’t go on too long. So when listening to these tales of loss, the audience needs to think that they are fairly recent or that they are recorded fairly close to the event, or it will cease to care in the same way. All of this involves varying levels of artifice, depending on each production. This is why editors use post-production to carefully pick out ‘authentic’ moments and why the uncensored, unguarded voice is such gold. It helps cover up the general conceit inherent in both the program and the industry.

All of which brings me to the next program I’ve been asked to review. Here a careful listener will notice the eternal present being stretched in exactly the opposite direction. This series, *Short Cuts*, is another BBC Radio 4 production, but it is assembled by an independent company, Falling Tree Productions. The slot, like *The Untold*, is 28 minutes, but this program is made up of short documentaries and ‘adventures in sound’, each somewhere between 2-15 minutes long. Each episode is produced and curated around a particular theme by the inventive Eleanor McDowall from Falling Tree. And the presenter is another young British comedian, Josie Long. It’s her job to draw the loose threads of each theme together into a convincing, connecting script without sounding as if the idea is being forced. At times it works better than others. In the episode I’ve focused on for this review called ‘The End of the Story’, it was a little odd.

## The End of the Story

‘The End of the Story’ is the last episode of the tenth series of *Short Cuts*, which tells me two things. One, that this is a highly successful show, and two, that the idea of a program about endings for the end of a series is too neat a linguistic trope to ignore. It does not make sense in that way to someone listening to a one-off episode online. But endings are always interesting and this is a delightful radio half-hour. My gripe about Josie Long’s script

being odd is possibly unfair. You have to get into a program of this sort somehow, and Josie is both friendly and personable. It is just that there seems to be a trope about, that invites us into these sort of collated formats by way of a personal anecdote from the presenter. It is common to hear a host at the top of a show saying something about themselves in order to get somewhere else and it strikes me as odd and lazy. For example, 'Let me tell you about my experience of breastfeeding in public, before we listen to this reflection on the nature of childhood by today's sound artist,' is not a great set up. This is not what Josie does, but she comes close. I'm exaggerating to make the larger point. Josie is a charming and informed host, but as the DJ of a short doco magazine slot she has to make diverse projects cohere into one seamless half-hour and, even with the most artful studio production, this does not work effortlessly every time.

My other small complaint is that on the *Short Cuts* website there are no details of the individual pieces played in each episode. So Josie Long's introductory script is the only resource available to tell us, the audience, that this particular episode of *Short Cuts* is made up of three features about things drawing to a close. The first, by the noted Danish producer Rikke Houd, is about ancient Inuit culture in Greenland, although we are not told this until afterwards. And we are not told at all that it was especially commissioned for the program. The second piece is much shorter: two and a half minutes. It is called 'Too Many Miles' and is an imaginary audio film inspired by a Robert Frost poem. Made by poet Jennifer Metsker and sound artist Stephanie Rowden, it won a Short Docs award at the Third Coast Festival of 2016 and was used under licence from this audio competition. The third piece, 'Power of Bare', also has a Third Coast connection. Its producer is former Third Coast Artistic Director, Sarah Geis, yet like the first piece, it was commissioned especially for *Short Cuts*. It is an illustrated interview with an American artist called Harold Stevenson. He is from the Warhol generation and is best known for his paintings of the male nude. In this program he is an old man who, Thoreau-like, moves away from the city to live out his days in a forest. What Josie Long tells us at the top of the show is that everywhere she goes in London she has her own mental, emotional map of the landscape, and that her mind is blown by how big that map would be if everyone who inhabits this city put all their maps together. She then says that the stories in this first piece are from a place where there are fewer people, but that as they are bottled and caught, they last much longer. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but it serves to alert us to the fact that we are now entering a poetic space. And that poetic space, as it unfolds, is beautiful.

I also understand why we were not told upfront that this is Greenland. The piece seeks to take us back in time, wanting us to remember that Greenland was not always called Greenland, and that the stories we are to listen to pre-date this particular Western tag. What we hear instead is the phrase: *beginnings and endings curl around each other like the bodies of lovers*. It works for me. With the scratchy sound from the surface noise of a wax cylinder mixed together with cracking icebergs, I am transported a long way back in time, and yet, fully in the present.

The main story in this short piece is a legend of the kayak man who destroys a monster, a man-eating siren who feeds on brave hunters that venture into her territory. The story is told in three different epochs, each cut into fragments and layered over one another. The earliest is an evocative and mysterious archival recording. This sound of a man's voice from the past desperately shouting to us in the present, so that all it represents – people, culture, language, land, will not be forgotten and destroyed – has huge emotional power. The words are incomprehensible but the meaning is plain.

On top of this, telling the same story one hundred years later, there is the contemporary recording of a female voice made *in situ* in Greenland. The back announcement tells us that Rikke Houd visited Greenland last August. We are also told that she recorded this version of the kayak man story without being aware that the archival recording, made a hundred years earlier, was almost word for word the same. There is a lovely quote from the Head of Radio in the Department of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, Professor Tim Crook, on Rikke Houd's website. It reads: 'Rikke makes programmes capturing the poetry of humanity [...] she gently creates a sound world that engages your imagination with the heart of her subjects.' And it is true. There is a linguistic connection in this piece of radio that shows how orality works, and how powerful it is. It is the perfect feeding ground for a creative piece of sound design, which is what we get. This is the third layer of this piece. The producer-narrator uses her real-time presence to take us back in time. She tells us how the story-catcher from a hundred years ago carried his lugubrious machine into this remote location. She tells us what the machine looks like, and says he is cranking the handle *now*. She gives us the scene as if it were unfolding in the eternal present.

The anthropologist knows these stories will soon disappear. The world is changing. The men have begun cutting their hair. Yet, if he makes this recording their stories will last forever. The men listen back to their own voices and are astonished. It is magic. With this machine they are transported into the future and we into the past. But, of course we are not. The past shifts. It is not really the past.

In another hundred years, future ears will hear the past differently. It will come with new plug-ins and a different set of special effects. The past is as malleable as the present. It goes where program makers put it. So, when I listen to this piece set in Greenland, I'm drawn in by the all the scratches, the roominess and the linguistic devices used to keep one layer of time separate from another. These profoundly useful tools of the trade are fun to work with, and somewhat secret. They're shared by audio geeks rather than spoken about by station managers and listeners, because to do so exposes the fundamental contradiction unerringly inherent in the very idea of a broadcastable 'now' and it would take away the magic. Yet this contradiction within the eternal present is becoming ever more amplified in our age of digital reproduction, where the glitches, the hiss and the snap, crackle and pop of ancient recording gear has to be added later, using up to the minute modern studio equipment so that the past truly sounds like the past. We can, of course, clean up the sound, but it is much more interesting to dirty it. The further back in time, the louder the surface noise and the greater the impediment to listening—an impediment which, paradoxically draws us in.

In 'The End of the Story', Josie Long says that in old photos, people are frozen, somehow stuck in time, but that in audio recordings they come to life. This is not quite true. Old recordings come to life again only in so far as producers want to let them. Good sound design, as we hear in Rikke Houd's stunningly evocative piece, means that the past can be put wherever the producer wants it, and that those voices come to life from whichever period of history and to whatever degree the program requires. It's all part of the cleaning, de-noising, re-noising, mixing process. Meaning it is actually music. After listening to this piece I went online to check the cost of an airfare to Greenland. There is no greater compliment I can give to a radio composition of this type.



## Too Many Miles

Fans of short-form documentaries and fans of *Short Cuts* as a series will be pleased to know that 'The End of the Story' is not the end of the story. *Short Cuts* is back with an expanded output in 2017, and has been promised another season in 2018. The main radio brain behind this series is Eleanor McDowall, who came up with the concept and is series producer. Alan Hall, founding guru of Falling Tree, is *Short Cuts*' executive producer. McDowall's name is also attached to a pioneering audio project called *Radio Atlas*, the purpose of which is to allow listeners to tune into radio documentaries in foreign languages and follow their meaning via subtitles on the web.<sup>1</sup> It's a very inclusive and generous service. And it's this worldview of McDowall's that makes *Short Cuts* so strong. She seeks out and plays documentaries from everywhere, mixing experienced, professional program makers up with student and community radio first-timers. She herself is delighted by what she finds. Anything that sounds like a distinctive way of telling a story attracts her attention. What she is seeking are sound paintings that look at the world in a way you haven't seen before. She stresses a compositional approach, often with found sound. In a BBC podcast interview,<sup>2</sup> McDowall says one of her favourite short documentaries is a piece called 'Some Little Sandwiches.' It was made out of a recording on an old answering machine. The voice on the tape is of some anonymous mother describing her sandwiches to her children. She is very happy and excited about her sandwiches, but the piece becomes heartbreaking as it goes on, because it is not actually about sandwiches. It is about the mother being lonely and knowing her children are unlikely to call her back. McDowall also made a work herself where she put contact microphones on the boots of women playing roller derby. This is the sort of inventiveness that gives *Short Cuts* its flavour and the second piece in the 'End of the Story' fits right in.

'Too Many Miles' plays as a series of speculative film directions that start like this:

*I want to start with the man by the side of the road.  
Light wind, or maybe heavy wind. Snow.  
Thick woods. Black. Tree shadows.  
If he has a horse, he'll hold its harness lightly.  
Close up on the man's face. He thinks, every inch of this land is owned.  
The snow cannot be owned.  
Then an aerial view of the man – a white shape on a black road,  
the snow erasing him.  
He could be a ghost. Consider making this a ghost story.  
Then, zoom in on the road...*

At the words 'zoom in on the road', so does the sound, and the traffic noise places us firmly away from the forest and in the modern world. The man then goes inside a tall building, into a luxury apartment and there he is by the window, with a drink in his hands. He ruminates on death, which also, we're told, cannot be owned. The narrated film directions

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: Radio Atlas is a collaborator of RadioDoc Review: see <http://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/vol2/iss2/10/> and read reviews at <http://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/vol2/iss2/>

<sup>2</sup> BBC Academy, Making the most of short form storytelling in radio <http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/production/article/art20130726152755039>

unfold further, to suggest an unbridgeable chasm between this urban sophisticate and the homely, ghostly figure, abandoned in the woods, from which he has morphed.

Because *Short Cuts* does not always let us know the context for which each production was created, it is difficult sometimes to figure that out for yourself. Particularly, in this case, when the piece is so short. It took me several prompts to realise that I was familiar with the poem that *Too Many Miles* is referencing: *Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening*. It comes from the same group of Frost's work that includes that most famous of all American poems, *The Road Not Taken*:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood  
 And sorry I could not travel both.  
 And be one traveller, long I stood  
 And looked down one as far as I could  
 To where it bent in the undergrowth

*The Short Docs Challenge*, for which this piece was created, had the specific theme of Radio Cinema and *Too Many Miles* fits this perfectly. I can understand why it was given the award at the Third Coast Festival. For all those who know and love this poem, this radio work would have had exactly the right emotional resonance, but without this background it struggles. It is too disorientating. But it is cinematic and this is achieved by lots of layering in the sound and the clever creation of an imaginary film in our heads. The film directions pick up and play with the lines of the poem itself, but finally go in a very different direction.

Robert Frost is a beloved American poet because he is so earthy, unpretentious and his use of language is so simple, yet profound. These two artists have turned that on its head by morphing the man who stopped by the woods on a snowy evening into a marooned urban sophisticate, who is lost in his high-rise apartment, mixed drink with ice cubes in hand. There is nothing quite so far away from the simple life in the woods. But I did not get this on the first listen, and perhaps I was still in Greenland. I felt that the piece was certainly telling me something new; I just didn't quite know what it was. The *Short Cuts* producers may have been aware of this because the whole episode tails out with a reading, a beautiful looped reading, of the Frost lines; *promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep*.

'Too Many Miles' is an intimate two and a half minutes of radio. The concept, rhythm, and sound design are intelligent, musical – and perhaps forced. This could be an example of too much post-production squeezed into too little airtime. The eternal present could not support the conceit. And for me the poem sits more powerfully, without all this artifice, by itself at the end of the show. This is also probably why the third item in this episode is a much simpler piece. It would have been too dense a radio half-hour to follow with another production immediately after this one, with so many layers of sound. Our ears were ready for simple by this stage of the show and this is what we got.

## Power of Bare

If you're lucky you'll find a great story and if you're even luckier a great storyteller. You can't guarantee either of those but if you have the right skills you can guarantee the way the story is told. If you have all three you've struck gold.<sup>3</sup> - Alan Hall

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<sup>3</sup> ibid

I love this quote from Alan Hall, because it speaks so simply and directly to my own radio experience. It's the great trifecta, and doesn't happen as often as I'd like. This is why it's interesting, in this same interview, to hear Hall go on to speculate about ways one might increase one's odds. He suggests that the microphone be used as a way of achieving an 'accelerated intimacy', rather than a threatening device that produces performance anxiety. He says recording an interview is all about how you handle a particular person in a particular situation. By puncturing the space, the microphone allows you to get closer and delivers a heightened concentration. Hall suggests at times breaking with a conventional seated interview posture and asking the interviewee to lie on a couch, shut their eyes, and dim the lights. By imagining that the microphone is not there, it becomes present in a different way. Then after that you are free to create. Take the words. Make them music. Accentuate the quality of the voice. Enjoy. It's fun.

This is exactly the approach Sarah Geis adopts in the 'Power of Bare', which is an illustrated interview with Harold Stevenson. The piece is about one person, one situation, one story and features one voice. The year is 2013, and Josie Long tells us we are in a hut in a pine forest in South-East Oklahoma. She says there is the smell of the earth, pine needles and that the crickets are humming and the dogs are scratching their fleas. We are in this small corner of the planet to meet an ageing artist. And we do. There are no questions from the producer and no interventions from the presenter. Harold speaks directly to us. In the set up, we are told that his most famous painting hangs in the Guggenheim. It is a forty-foot image of his lover and it's called *The New Adam*. Harold is known for his male nudes. This set up is necessary because it prepares us for the subtext of the piece, which is not so much Harold facing death, as it is Harold facing his family, with whom he's never been able to mention his homosexuality. It simply never came up. How could it? Harold says if you live in the same house all your life with the same family you have no opportunity to do, or be anything different. It therefore touches Harold deeply when his family, without saying anything, allows his lover, Lloyd, to be buried in the family plot. It is the most accepting gesture they could make. This story leads to the final moment of the piece when the phone rings. Harold is embarrassed. He's forgotten a dinner engagement. In this moment the affection between Harold and his community is clear. He respects them and they him. Nothing more needs to be said. We hear him lying on the phone, as he does not want to cause offence. He asks us to keep his secret.

In the back announce, we learn that it's been three years since this interview was recorded, and that in this time Harold suffered a mini-stroke. As a consequence he was moved by his family to an aged care facility. He didn't like it at first but has since adjusted to his new situation. All this information is useful because we want to know that Harold's life is not over yet; otherwise the tone of our listening would be different.

Also not over yet, is the life of *Short Cuts*. Indeed it may be one of the few series of this sort that is happily carving out a path to the future. There is a growing audience for short documentaries that goes well beyond the radio audience. These shows are ideal for podcasters and streamers. And what McDowall does with her magpie approach to sourcing material helps her find that other online audience. *Short Cuts* cruises sites like Soundcloud, Audioboom and [Mixcloud](#) where anyone can post their sonic creations. Playing material from these sources not only widens the pool of talent for *Short Cuts*, but also serves as good community-building. This goes along with a generosity of information-sharing. As if we are all working together globally, to help each other make better sound pieces. In her interview about *Short Cuts* on the BBC Academy podcast, McDowell and her team

recommend some listening to feature makers and audio enthusiasts: 99% Invisible, *Unfictional*, *ABC's 360documentaries* and *Third Coast's ReSound*.

Sadly the ABC's *360documentaries* is no longer in production and its successor, *Earshot*, took another cut last year. If this trajectory is followed features, performance, sound art and documentaries of this sort will be phased out completely at the ABC before too long. It's a pattern that sits oddly against a growing international appreciation of this work. Which is why it is so important to celebrate and recognise programs around the world which are adapting to the new era. I admire them all. Neither of these shows, *The Untold* nor *Short Cuts*, could have been made in the way that they are, a decade ago. This is a tribute to the producers who are so ready and able to reinvent themselves and who apply their craft and old skills, to new ways of doing things

Finally, in comparing these shows, it could be said that the program with the more artifice is actually the more honest. Not that it matters, because one program *The Untold*, simply proceeds by asking us to suspend our disbelief in the idea of real time being real, and the other, *Short Cuts*, doesn't. I hope both shows continue and wish them all the best as they face the next evolution of the form, and the next evolution of the eternal present.

## LYN GALLACHER

Dr Lyn Gallacher is a Features Producer for ABC Radio National, where she currently produces programs for Earshot. Over the years her stories have won a variety of awards, including a European Union Award for Journalism 2010. She's also been a Creative Fellow at the State Library of Victoria, an Artist-in-residence at Bundanon, New South Wales, a judge for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, and a presenter at Writers Festivals around the country. In 2012 she was a Harold White Fellow at the National Library of Australia, where she undertook research into the important Australian literary figure, Nancy Keesing. Lyn's current project is the biography of Melbourne's iconic Discurio record store. She lives in South Gippsland, near the southernmost tip of the Australian mainland, with three colour-coordinated alpacas. This photo was taken after her first flying lesson.

