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Editorial: Podcasting as the New Space for Crafted Audio

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Abstract

Editorial Overview

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EDITORIAL

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Podcasting as the new space for crafted audio.

Issue 5 of *RadioDoc Review* moves further into critiquing complex crafted audio works delivered as podcasts, and also, in some cases via radio. The intricacies of the podcast-radio relationship are addressed in depth in the latest issue of *The Radio Journal: International Studies in Audio and Broadcast Media*, among other places. There has also been some excellent media analysis of new audio storytelling forms and formats, notably of *S-Town*, a seven-hour podcast released in March 2017 by the team at *Serial* and *This American Life*, which achieved an astonishing 40 million downloads in its first six weeks after publication, surpassing even *Serial*. Described variously by writers in *Slate*, *The Atlantic* and *Vulture*, as aural literary journalism that brilliantly evokes a small 'Shit-Town' in rural Alabama and its colourful resident, John B McLemore, *S-Town* also attracted criticism on ethical and privacy grounds, charges refuted by this editor in a short article [here](#).

These debates add further weight to the growing importance of podcasting as a new audio medium. The appetite for robust and informed criticism of the plethora of audio works emerging in the podcast space is also growing. Before *RadioDoc Review* launched in January 2014, this function was largely filled by *in situ* peer review at events organised by groups such as the International Feature Conference and the Chicago-based Third Coast International Audio Competition. Increasing scrutiny of the audio storytelling form post-*Serial* led to online discussion sites such as The Timbre (now defunct), fan sites such as Bello Collective and live listening events such as those organised by In the Dark (UK) and Audiocraft (Australia). In 2017, *The New York Times* launched a closed Facebook group, The New York Times Podcast Club, modelled on the idea of a book club. Its curators nominate one podcast for listening each week and its members (currently 19,783) offer very diverse opinions. The rapid growth of this club and the vast array of podcasts it references are an indication of the continuing surge of podcast popularity in the US, where 40% of Americans over 12 listen to podcasts weekly (Edison Research 2017). Podcasting has also evolved its own competitions, with meticulously judged awards now instigated in Australia ([The Castaways](#)), the UK ([the British Podcast Awards](#)) and as special categories of the New York Radio Festival, the [Webbys](#) award honouring media excellence on the internet and the Prix Italia. Industry-based podcasting conferences and showcases are also emerging, notably the [Podcast Movement](#) in the US, [OzPod](#) in Australia and the [London Podcast Festival](#).

While all these initiatives are to be applauded, *RadioDoc Review* remains unique, because of the integrity of its process and the exceptional quality of its criticism: its in-depth articles are written by award-winning audio producers, specialist journalists, eminent (and occasionally emerging) scholars. Works deemed worthy of criticism are nominated by a highly credentialed international board, a process which in itself establishes a canon – unlike the ‘Best 20 Podcasts’ touted by media outlets or fan groups. Just to be reviewed in *RadioDoc Review* means the work has been endorsed by some of the world’s most influential audio figures. Critics are then individually commissioned by the editor so as to provide expert insight into a particular audio work. Thus, in this issue, Masako Fukui, a first-generation Japanese-Australian producer who has twice won gold at New York Radio Festival, was invited to review Taiwanese-American producer Dmae Roberts’ ‘Mei Mei, A Daughter’s Song’, a piece which reflects on East-West tensions in another first generation Asian-Western family and has, she notes, ‘enduring power as a cultural critique’.

To ensure a high editorial standard and lack of bias, articles are rigorously edited and approved by an Associate Editor before proceeding to publication. Some articles follow a formal scholarly process: they are ‘double blind peer-reviewed’, or evaluated by two other academics in the field, who appraise the articles without knowing the identity of the author and suggest modifications. Scholarly articles of this kind include Mia Lindgren’s review, ‘Balancing personal trauma, storytelling and journalistic ethics: a critical analysis of Kirsti Melville’s *The Storm*.’ By providing rich context and exploring the journalistic, ethical and aesthetic choices the producer made, the finalised article deepens the impact of this landmark documentary, in which the maker chronicles the effects of sexual abuse on her own former partner.

And so to Issue 5, which delivers critiques by scholars and practitioners from Canada, Australia and the US of audio works by UK, US and Danish producers. *Love + Radio* is one of the earliest American podcasts, established by producer Nick Van der Kolk in 2005. Along with trademark high production values, it delves into edgy, sometimes murky, aspects of life. In ‘Empathy, Ethics and Aesthetics in Love and Radio’, Canadian Michelle Macklem, who produces CBC’s innovative podcast *Sleepover*, [examines](#) two quite different episodes: ‘The Living Room’, in which a woman whose room overlooks a young couple’s becomes an increasingly complicit voyeur; and ‘Jack and Ellen’, a multifaceted tale of manipulation and morality. The ethics of the documentarian come into sharp focus in both and Macklem wonders whether the empathy audio can so easily engender can be a questionable force: ‘Can we ever truly understand someone else’s embodied experience in the world?’

Love + Radio also demonstrates masterful mixing and layering of sound, rarer in the talkier world of podcasting than in traditional radio features. In 'Jack and Ellen', sound 'becomes a third character in the piece, one that sets an unsettling tone through music and effects. 'Jack and Ellen' is caught somewhere between a radio documentary and a swirling sample-based composition as the skilled musicality of the piece communicates a specific editorial perspective, that is perhaps a glimpse of how the producers were affected during its creation.' 'The Living Room', in contrast, uses music sparingly, but achieves impact through its attention to timing – a crucial aspect of audio production that inexperienced podcasters can misjudge. As Macklem observes, here 'silence is used as strategically as sound.'

Short Cuts from the BBC in England is a showcase for inventive and assured storytelling from all over. It is hosted by comedian Josie Long and produced by Eleanor McDowall, who is also the founder of *Radio Atlas*, a groundbreaking podcast of multilingual audio storytelling with elegant subtitles. So it is unsurprising that the episode reviewed, 'End of the Story', should feature an eclectic mix of styles, sourced from Denmark, US and UK. Rikke Houd's 'kayak man' is about ancient Inuit culture in Greenland, layered over a century of personal experience. Lyn Gallacher, a veteran producer for ABC Australia's Radio National, is [captivated](#) by its aura and artistry: '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'. The episode also features 'Too Many Miles', a cinematic audio reversioning of Robert Frost's timeless poem, Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening, which was a Short Doc winner at Third Coast; and 'Power of Bare', an intimate interview with a reflective American artist, Harold Stevenson, by Sarah Geis, a former artistic director of Third Coast who is now a freelance producer and teacher of audio storytelling. *Short Cuts* won 'Best Radio Podcast' at the inaugural British podcasting awards in 2017.

'The Untold' is another radio/podcast series from BBC Radio 4, which focuses on personal narrative. It is also hosted by a comedian, Grace Dent, whose warm presence is intended to help very diverse stories cohere. But this kind of radio lives in what reviewer Lyn Gallacher calls 'the eternal present', which is not without its drawbacks: '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?' Gallacher goes on to break down the production aspects of one episode, 'Songs of the Bothy Balladeer', which traces a young Scottish folk singer's aspiration to study at the Conservatorium.

The true crime genre is one of the most popular podcast types, but it can take many formats, from a 'chumcast', where two or more friends riff on a cold case (e.g. *My Favourite Murder*) to episodic audio storytelling grounded in solid investigative journalism, exemplified by *Serial. Criminal*, from the US independent podcast network Radiotopia established in 2014, is one of the longest running examples of the crafted audio storytelling genre. Most of its 60+ episodes are self-contained, although occasionally the show runs a mini-series. US media scholar Jason Loviglio [analyses](#) *Criminal* within the context of the American public radio investigative journalism tradition from which it originates. He suggests that the show 's consistently strong stories have 'moved beyond mere crime journalism to something that aspires to a bit more philosophical heft'. Though the content of *Criminal* varies hugely, from historical studies to searing contemporary accounts of prison life, the show is anchored by the understated hosting of Phoebe Judge, as Loviglio notes: 'Unlike narrative non-fiction audio hosts like [Ira] Glass and *Serial*'s Sarah Koenig, and *Radiolab*'s garrulous duo of Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, Judge's on-air persona is subordinate to, rather than intimately mixed with, the subject matter itself. What Judge lacks in affect, she makes up for in steady plotting and unflappable competence, which may be more valuable companions for a show that traffics in tragedies.'

Dmae Roberts's portrait of her vexed relationship with her Taiwanese mother uses sound itself as a poetic narrative element. As reviewer Masako Fukui [writes](#): 'The aural experience of *Mei Mei* is like breathing in a story. The soundscape is richly layered with the cacophony of streetscapes and traffic, temple ambience, Chinese opera recordings, a children's choir, as well as a fairytale narrated in Taiwanese and English.'⁴ But the crux of the piece is 'the thorny issue of identity'. This is addressed at multiple levels, and complexified by harnessing the affective power of sound. 'This is why the foreign language narration and the mother's often indecipherable English have such potent meanings. In one scene, her utterings are repeated as a chorus with a humorous sing-song quality. Is this playful riffing just another layer to the rich texture of the soundscape, or does its 'foreignness' feed into the shame the daughter feels about being different?' Ultimately, Fukui suggests, *Mei Mei* is more like intercultural theatre than a radio documentary.

The last two articles take up a related theme, as US scholar Neil Verma surveys the current field of audio fiction podcasts. Audio fiction and non-fiction formats share much in terms of choreography of sound and exploitation of the medium's capacity to engender intimacy and trigger the imagination. For 'The Arts of Amnesia: The Case for Audio Drama', Verma studied, over the course of about six months, 43 audio dramas that take podcast form (a little over 400

episodes), plus 50 hours of works released as audiobooks. Verma views current podcast audio drama through a long lens that extends back to radio drama and criticism of the 1940s and finds that today's makers have much to learn from their predecessors: 'If the problem is how to depict happenings in audio that most listeners are used to experiencing with images, then the happy discovery is that audio provides more leeway, not less: this produces what Rudolf Arnheim, radio drama's first theorist, called radio's "economy of enjoyment". And this is just one awareness that old radio and new podcasting have in common.'

Ironically, Verma's expansive and insightful critique was published the very month that an [article](#) by US audio producer and academic Sarah Montague lamented the 'meager critical framework' for radio drama and features. Montague reminds us of the importance of having such a body of criticism: 'Through regard and analysis, it helps us to understand the creative properties of works and to deepen our experience of these works. The taxonomies that result serve the further purpose of extending the possibilities for the form'.

As this issue demonstrates, this is precisely the purpose that *RadioDoc Review* continues to serve.