

A ROOM WITHOUT A VIEW

Sometimes we might contemplate the possibility of every place we have known still existing somewhere within the curvature of space-time, and realise that perhaps only our own mortality, our own limitations, prevent us from returning to these realms again.

One such place in my memory is around twelve square metres in size, and like many locations of the twentieth century, wherein materials of one kind were forged into another, is totally devoid of decoration or any sign of those who work in it, utterly utilitarian in its purpose. Only the marks worn in machinery, the well-known patina of sweat and struggle, the scratch marks of razor blades or lines in chinagraph pencil on metal give any clue to its function.

On a hot day the windows are kept stubbornly closed and the fans silent to avoid the distraction of unwanted sounds. The valves, the vacuum tubes, in racks of amplifiers and other devices, generate even more heat for the occupant who is hard at their work. As for outside, there is little to see anyway, just a shady street of London brick mansions and plane trees, far from the busy places of the City

There is a yellowing card on the wall that shows the frequency of musical notes in cycles per second (c/s) and a row of brass hooks (they have to be of brass) on which there hang loops of recording tape, small concertos of sound written in magnetic particles of iron. There is a long rule, calibrated in the seconds of time that a tape will move and, scattered around, stands for passing longer tape loops.

Above the three tape machines is a sound meter and behind them a row of jack sockets by which they connect to the mixer on the north wall. Each machine has an editing block, a splicing block, a splicing tape dispenser and a rack with red, yellow and green leader tape.

The machines are semi-professional and difficult to use: to fast wind the tape requires a degree of effort, the mechanism only started by the force of the user's fingers, although they can also put into playback by 'opening' the large rotary control at the front.

The worker plays the tape across the playback head and, when they hear where to cut the sound, the tape is pulled out, sliced with a razor blade and joined to another length of tape, another sound.

The task is very physical, yet first an idea is needed to bring about its realisation. Then each element must be crafted and finally assembled and blended, mixed and overlaid in hours of work.

And where do the raw materials come from? Ultimately through a microphone and a tape recorder, here or elsewhere, or a gramophone, the sounds distorted at will by changing speed or reversing or twisting and manipulating the tape as it passes the heads, by feeding the output of one machine to another or by adding echo by feeding the sound through a reverberation room or spring device, or by modifying the sound spectrum with an equaliser.

What is created need have no connection to the source. It is to become disembodied, mere fabric to be shaped and woven into something new, but sometimes with a hint of its origin, thereby creating something strange yet familiar in the mind of the listener.

To the right of the mixer are various devices, the 'Crystal Palaces' that fade different incoming sounds in and out at varying rates, a set of oscillators tuned so as to be 'played' as a musical instrument by means of a 'keying unit', a wobulator sound source, equalisers, a frequency meter for setting musical pitches and an oscilloscope to analyse the shape of a sound wave, and many more things besides.

The mixer itself is a strange beast, dominating the room, but not always at the centre of activities. The faders work in a peculiar way, in that they have to be pulled downwards to increase the volume, coming from the odd idea that should an operator collapse they would automatically fall forwards and knock the controls off.

The sounds that finally emerge from that mixer are not perfect replicas of anything original but are entirely original, distorted by hissing valve amplifiers, by the granular particles of magnetic tape, by the overloaded circuits of limited analogue devices and by the sometimes erroneous slicing and repairing of physical tape.

As in any other workshop, here the creative mind must find a way to make that which is wanted and must then cut and hammer the given materials into the required shapes. That craftsmanship, equal to works of the past in paint, metal, stone and wood, has almost disappeared. But the spaces such artisans inhabited and what they achieved in such a place will surely live on as part of our heritage.

As the memory of their history fades, as their sounds disappear into silence, the walls of the room fold back and a new people arrive, those who see a different world through different eyes and minds.

The room is gone forever, but remains.

Room 11 at The BBC Radiophonic Workshop.

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For detailed information on the establishment and history of the Radiophonic Workshop you should refer to:

Special Sound: The Creation and Legacy of the Radiophonic Workshop by Louis Niebur, © 2010 by Oxford University Press
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