

# Sounding off

The BBC's Radiophonic Workshop created many sound effects for programmes such as *Doctor Who*. **Nick Smurthwaite** examines the department's lasting legacy after it was brought into the spotlight again recently as the subject of a documentary

In their understated, British way they were pioneers who put all their talent and energy into building a bridge between technology and art. They laboured away, sometimes into the wee small hours, in Room 13 at the BBC's base in Maida Vale, hitting an assortment of inanimate objects, shouting into boxes, twanging cutlery, twiddling knobs, adjusting their wobblers and sticking endless bits of magnetic tape together.

The work of the now defunct Radiophonic Workshop, celebrated in the BBC documentary *Alchemists of Sound*, took radio and television sound effects and incidental music into the electronic era.

"Initially the people experimenting with this kind of radio were doing it after hours when everybody else went home," explains Mark Ayres, composer and archivist. "They wanted to create something that was more exploratory and psychological, to get inside people's heads."

"You couldn't just go to the BBC sound effects library and find something that suggested someone having a nervous breakdown. The only way of doing that was through imagination

and manipulation of sound in new and interesting ways."

Because programme-makers started to find uses for this innovative work, BBC management eventually found them a room at Maida Vale in 1958 and sent a couple of knob-twiddlers on attachment to set up a department.

The idea was to provide electronic sounds for radio drama but it was not long before they were discovered by television, whose appetite for signature tunes, interval ditties and sounds to accompany schools programmes and adult drama proved voracious.

The hungriest beast of all was *Doctor Who*, the longest running sci-fi serial in television history, for which the Radiophonic Workshop provided one of TV's best known signature tunes, as well as some 400 tapes – out of a total archive of 3,500 – of incidental sounds and music.

Dick Mills, creator of *Doctor Who* sound effects, says the lack of equipment, time and know-how in the early days meant he often had to make it up as he went along.

"In one episode I used the cleaning agent Swartega, rubbing my hands together in front of the microphone to suggest something large and slimy

encroaching on some hapless victim. The sound it made was satisfyingly obscene."

"From our humble beginnings in the fifties there was very little equipment designed especially for the sound composer. It was not until multi-track tapes, synthesisers and computers came along in the seventies that our jobs got easier, at least theoretically. The challenge still remained the same – thinking up original ideas in the first place."

Another veteran of the Radiophonic Workshop, Maddalena Fagandini, is revealed in the documentary as being behind the unit's hit single, *Time Beat*, in 1963 although she denies that she was the real Ray Cathode – the made-up name the record company used as a marketing ploy. The truth is that record producer George Martin was brought in to beef up a jingle created by Fagandini.

By the late eighties, the Radiophonic Workshop was starting to be regarded by the BBC hierarchy as a drain on resources.

"Everything had to justify its costs," explains Ayres, "so you couldn't put a composer on something for six weeks and say 'well it doesn't matter if it doesn't work', because by then it did matter."

John Birt introduced 'producer choice' which meant BBC producers could choose between buying their services within the BBC or using independent suppliers. To make that work, every department within the BBC had to become an independent business unit, justifying its existence by making a profit. Obviously an experimental unit such as the Radiophonic Workshop would founder under such a profit driven system.

Producers turned to the proliferating numbers of freelance composers and sound engineers, sensing that the Radiophonic Workshop's days were numbered.

"When it was first set up the workshop produced experimental work that wasn't being done anywhere else," explains Ayres. "By the time it closed in the mid-nineties it had lost its experimental edge because everything within the BBC had to be for a reason. There was no room or money for experimentation."

Today Ayres describes himself as "the public face of the Radiophonic Workshop", its archivist and keeper of the flame. He was shocked to find, during the 18 months he spent making a catalogue of its output, that all the



Making a noise – innovators at work

Sci-fi classic – *Doctor Who* was one of the programmes for which the Radiophonic Workshop provided sound effects



tapes after 1983 had been dumped in a storeroom. Luckily nobody had got round to chucking them out.

"A lot of the material is in very poor condition, so I have to make sure that the people who have access to it are respectful and know what they are doing. At present I am working on transferring the material digitally into a form that will make it available to a wider audience. The documentary has aroused a lot of interest and I'm hoping to put together a series of CD releases featuring all the best sounds."

■ *The Alchemists of Sound* is expected to be repeated on BBC2 later this year and there is more information about the programme on [www.bbc.co.uk/bb4/music/features/alchemists.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bb4/music/features/alchemists.shtml) or on [www.markayres.co.uk](http://www.markayres.co.uk)