

# Radiophonic Workshop at 50

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They began by running out into thunderstorms with microphones, squelching Swarfiga in their fingers and sticking bits of tape together manually to create music from recorded sound. They ended up with a studio boasting some of the most advanced synthesisers and MIDI software in the world.

And it was all in the name of creating sound effects and electronic music for BBC programmes. 2008 marks the 50th anniversary of the birth of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, an event they no doubt would have marked with digital fanfare, had the department not been closed down in 1997.

Instead, we have an impossibly track-packed double CD, BBC Radiophonic Workshop: A Retrospective, to celebrate this milestone. A chronological musical journey through the Workshop's output over 107 tracks, it features an eclectic bunch of offerings, from SF classics such as Doctor Who, Quatermass and The Changes to Radio station idents and soundscapes to science documentaries. Musically it's just as diverse, from revamped nursery rhymes, comical ditties and lush faux orchestral opuses to avant-garde oddities and atonal incidental scores that make Lou Reed's Metal Machine Music sound like The Four Seasons.

The CD has been collated by Mark Ayres, a man best known to Doctor Who fans for composing three incidental scores for the classic show, and overseeing the sound restoration on the Who DVD release. He also doubles as the custodian for the Radiophonic Archives.

"I was the producer, compiled it, researched it, mastered it and delivered it," says Ayres of the CD. He's a man who's been fascinated by the BBC Radiophonic since he was a child, and though he never officially worked for the Workshop himself (he was a freelancer when he worked on Doctor Who) he forged many close links with those that did work there.

"I have been listening to this stuff for pleasure since I was a teenager," he admits. "I have always been fascinated by it, and by the Radiophonic Workshop as an organisation and as a group of people, for their contribution to the television that I've enjoyed throughout my life. If you weren't watching Doctor Who on a Saturday night and therefore listening to the Radiophonic Workshop, you were watching Blue Peter during the week and there was Radiophonic music on Bleep and Booster. So it was very much a sound that permeated my childhood and I think the childhoods of a lot of other people of my generation whether they realise it or not. We were all listening to that stuff. So I was fascinated by the work. I was also fascinated by the organisation – that there was this department full of people whose job it was to make wonderful noises.

“During the ’80s I did actually apply for a job there. I didn’t get it, but I got a letter from Desmond Briscoe – the head of the department – saying, look, I’m not offering you the job but I want you to come and see me. And I went in for a sort of ‘you haven’t got the job’ interview, but basically what he was saying was, we don’t think you’re suitable but you’re someone we’re going to keep in touch with, because we think you’ve got promise for the future.

“But then, of course, he left. But I did keep in contact with the people there. And when it closed I got three phone calls in very quick succession. But looking back on it, I’m actually quite pleased I never went on staff there, because I think it makes me rather more objective.”

And so, almost by default, Ayres became Custodian of the Archive.

“When the Radiophonic Workshop shut down, I rescued all the tapes and made sure they were looked after. Because they weren’t catalogued, they weren’t properly housed or anything, and there was a real risk that they were going to be thrown out. So I went in and put labels on them and put them all in order and it took about 18 months. And now they are stored on BBC premises but I still look after them, and continue, as a hobby really, to curate the collection. Because there are 3,500 reels of tape and nearly 10,000 projects, and all the reels are in slightly different condition and need a bit of TLC.

“Obviously over the years that I have been doing that there have been some CDs, which we released a few years ago. Obviously Doctor Who at the BBC Radiophonic Workshop volumes one to four, and I’m hoping there will be more one day. And we rereleased the two Radiophonic Workshop LPs – BBC Radiophonic Music and The Radiophonic Workshop – with additional tracks on. But then the BBC Music label that was run by BBC Worldwide, closed down for various reasons. So all that back catalogue was deleted and was unavailable for a few years.

“Over the intervening years I’ve been trying to get more products out there. The first two volumes of Doctor Who at the Radiophonic Workshop were licensed to Mute Records a couple of years ago. So they seemed to be the obvious label to continue the work with, and there are now a couple of people working at BBC Music who are very keen to see more releases out there, as I have been for years. And it all coincided with the 50th Anniversary, which I said was an obvious time to put a compilation out there.”

The new album is a loose compilation of two previous albums – Soundhouse and a 21st anniversary album (neither of which had covers Ayres was particularly fond of) – which Ayres was keen to see re-released in some form, but updated, amended and added to: “I wanted to rerelease them, but probably not in their original form, because we would have been honour bound to use the original covers and I didn’t really want to do that. They were

such a good overview of workshop history between them that I thought that I could combine the two, swap a few tracks over and replace a couple with slightly better tracks – a couple have got longer versions. And because we were putting it on two CDs rather than two vinyl albums, we could actually add the same amount of material again, so it's almost four LPs' worth. So that's how it came about. It is ridiculously good value for money."

Two other old compilations – BBC Radiophonic Music and The Radiophonic Workshop – have also been re-released by Mute, and Ayres is much fonder of their original covers (which have been retained) fondly referring to them as, "The Pink Album and Desmond's Shed – the picture was literally taken in Desmond's Garden shed!"

Although he became a professional musician himself in the '80s and so a child of the synthesiser revolution, Ayres has a genuine admiration for the pre-computer days of the Workshop, when the department had to build its own equipment:

"The reason they built equipment in the early days was that they had no budget. They could not go out and buy machines. The workshop was set up with a very, very small sum of money, a couple of rooms at Maida Vale and the keys to a redundant stores department. So they basically got everything that everybody else had thrown out – all the outdated tape recorders that nobody else could use. What they did have was a couple of extraordinarily talented engineers who seized this opportunity to adapt, to repair, to build, to invent gadgets as required. They invented purely electronic faders that were crackle free. Dave Young created this thing called the Crystal Palace which was a wonderful thing with a gramophone motor and a big old condenser built into a Perspex box, and it was a kind of analogue source sequencer, so it had lots of jack sockets on it – you could feed lots of sounds into it and it would sequence between them so you could create these long, evolving soundscapes.

"Obviously in the early days there were no samplers. So if you wanted to create electronic music that was pitched – to make tunes out of sounds – you had to do it by cutting tape and repitching tape. It was analogue sampling, and they were inventing that as they went along. In the late '70s, for instance, Peter Howell did a thing for Hen Pizzicato, which was a hen singing a tune, and it's only about 30 seconds long, and it took him a week to do. If he had left it two years it would have taken him 30 seconds because the Fairlight synthesiser came out."

He also believe that this "hands on approach" had advantages over the synth-produced sounds of the '80s. Basically, synths and the sounds they made became too common, the output of the Radiophonic Workshop lost its uniqueness.

“It’s very true,” says Ayres. “And one of the reasons I think is that with a lot of the early stuff, the actual method obscures the technique. You cannot tell how it was done by listening to it because it is so alien to anything we now do. If you listen to some of the ’80s stuff, I can recognise the exact synthesiser and the exact synthesiser patch that they’re using. So immediately you can date it, and immediately it sounds of the era. In the ’60s there was nothing like it and therefore there is nothing to compare it to. And therefore it doesn’t date. It’s still mind-boggling what they achieved.”