

The Radiophonic Workshop, Shoreditch Electric Light Station

The BBC's former musical boffins bring 'Doctor Who' and more to life

by Kieron Tyler, Sunday, 10 November 2013



The Radiophonic Workshop at the Shoreditch Electric Light Station with (in white) Captain Dick Mills at the helm

No preparation is sufficient for hearing the theme to *Doctor Who* live. It's obviously going to be on the menu, yet as the familiar "dung-a, dung-a, dung-a" refrain kicks off something deep and unexpected stirs within. The emotional bond with this sound and this melody is so strong it's akin to being transported to one of the Doctor's exotic destinations. Recreated on stage, the familiar suddenly becomes thrillingly fresh.

What the BBC Radiophonic Workshop created became part of the fabric of British society. They invented the voice of the Daleks. Yet in 1998, under John Birt, the BBC closed it down. But the extermination wasn't a success. Now, 15

years on, its former staff brings its laboratory-born music and sounds to life. Playing a repurposed power station was apt.

The concert by the Radiophonic Workshop (the BBC is dropped for live outings) was part of LEAF, the London Electronic Arts Festival, a multi-faceted event which also brought Diplo and Omar Souleyman to the stage. Dinos Chapman created an installation around his *Luftbobler* album. Mute Records boss Daniel Miller gave a talk on his A-Z of electronic music. Giorgio Moroder was interviewed, while Arthur Baker did the same to New Order. William Orbit was grilled on his approach to sound.

But the BBC Radiophonic Workshop predates them all. Founded in 1958, its purpose was to create incidental music, sound effects and themes for the Corporation's productions. Their tools were originally tape, oscillators and anything else they could get their hands on which made a sound. For LEAF, Mark Ayres, Peter Howell, Paddy Kingsland, Roger Limb and Dick Mills and were joined by a live drummer for an hour-long journey from the abstract and ambient to the melodic.

Mills took centre stage as MC. In his yachting cap and white coat, he looked like a holidaying boffin as he shepherded two massive tape reel-to-reel tape recorders. The Radiophonic Workshop's homespun approach was underlined when a spool fell off one of them. Either side of him, the stage was littered with equipment from all eras of electronica and out-there music making: digital keyboards, a theremin, electric wind instruments, analogue synths bristling with wires, and mysterious be-knobbed boxes. Limb also played – surprisingly forcefully – electric bass, while Mills and Howell also doubled up on guitar. Howell took the vocals.

After beginning with a crackling, jarring “Till the Lights Go Out”, the eerie clank of the departed Delia Derbyshire's “Ziwih Ziwih oo-oo-oo” was enough reminder that this band is unlike any other. The two major set pieces were around *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (which actually included Kingsland individually in its credits)

and *Doctor Who*. Howell and Kingsland performed a strange, percussive duet on theremin and vocal effects. “ROBOTS” was creepy and otherworldly.



William Hartnell as the original Doctor Who

Kingsland's "Vespucci" was noir-ish and funky. Divorced from their original context, these compositions retained a power.

Nonetheless, it was joy which radiated most. These technician-musicians obviously love being together. The nods and glances exchanged showed how they care for each other and what they have created. Which was just as well, as Captain Mills was always ready with a crack. He reckoned Ayres's sciatica was brought on to escape clearing the stage after the show.

This could have been a lesson in living history: a ritual performance by musical eggheads of cult items appealing to fans of the margins. Instead, it was a consummate lesson in how to turn the methodical into the exuberant. With Doctor Who's 50th anniversary fast approaching, this was all the celebration needed.