

# The Boings are Back in Town

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IN A GIGANTIC, HIGH- WINDOWED room that resembles the bridge of some fantasy starship, the most ordinary-looking fellows you could imagine are creating sounds from beyond our ken. Dressed in sensible jumpers, corduroys and dad jeans, these chaps in their sixties and seventies coax swooping electronic orchestras, robot murmurs and unnameable bass throbs from vintage keyboards and monolithic synthesisers. The effect is both eerie and strangely nostalgic - this is the future as imagined in the past.

We are in Peter Gabriel's Real World recording studios near Bath and these are the reunited members of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. Between 1958 and 1997 the workshop's unique combination of arts lab and light-entertainment resource gave British broadcasting a weird but instantly recognisable sonic identity. In junk-filled rooms in the BBC 's Maida Vale studios in London, classic British eccentricity met the avant-garde explosion of the Sixties as if *The Goons* were to join forces with Pink Floyd.

Asked to supply simple theme tunes and background music, the workshop replied with outré sonic experiments based on mathematical theory, tape manipulation and the mysteries of musique concrete. In their earliest days they created magnificently eerie soundscapes for radical radio dramas and Nigel Kneale's notorious TV sci-fi show *Quatermass and the Pit*, plus sonic translations of Spike Milligan and Peter Sellers' surreal humour for *The Goons* (hear the burping, clanging and frankly self-explanatory Major Bloodnok's Stomach).

Into the seventies the workshop became the BBC 's sonic signature, producing ingenious children's TV themes - remember *John Craven's Newsround*? - and radio dents for local stations. Radio Sheffield got a tune made from the sounds of cutlery; a religious broadcast was heralded by the sound of a halo of bees around a

saint's head; and for *Westminster at Work*, John Harrison of the workshop climbed inside Big Ben to record its maintenance engineers. Then there was the more conventional synthesised TV music: *Around The World In 80 Days* with Michael Paling, *The Living Planet*, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*...

This sound, known as 'radiophonics', influenced everyone from The Beatles to prog rock to modern electronic music. Yet these unsung visionaries were salaried BBC employees who worked to deadline and never owned any copyright to their work. There were to be poignant consequences in the loss of great talents such as Delia Derbyshire who created the legendary *Doctor Who* theme from an original score by TV and film composer Ron Grainer, and was to succumb to drink and depression later in life.

Now, 17 years after the original Radiophonic Workshop closed, five of its best-known alumni - Roger Limb, Dick Mills, Peter Howell, Paddy Kingsland, plus their youngest member, the workshop's de facto curator Mark Ayres - have reunited to play their music live to a new audience. (In a gesture of independence they've dropped the 'BBC' from their name.) At rock festivals across Europe the response has been warm: 'I don't think we've failed to get a standing ovation yet,' says somewhat astounded keyboard player Roger Limb. And they're making a new album too, with assistance from fans such as electronic composer Ghostpoet, DJ Tom Middleton, and Kieron Pepper, Martyn Ware and Paul Hartnoll from bands The Prodigy, Heaven 17 and Orbital.

The RW team seem to be having the time of their lives. I suggest to Mark that the band resembles a cross between German synth pioneers Kraftwerk and the cast of *Last of the Summer Wine*. 'It's a bit more like the electronic *Top Gear*,' he replies, laughing. 'A load of old blokes having fun, getting into scrapes and making it up as they go along'

LUXURY RECORDING STUDIOS ARE ALL WELL AND GOOD but sometimes you need to work somewhere more familiar. In a back room nearby, the jovial Dick Mills - who for 17 years created *Doctor*

*Who's* 'special sounds' of squelching monsters, ray guns and exploding spacecraft - has recreated the Maida Vale atmosphere with old-fashioned reel-to-reel tape recorders gingerly balanced on flight cases, all modified by bits of string. It is, in effect, a shed for sonic pottering. Back at Maida Vale, in the workshop's ominously named Studio 13, they used to create tape loops so long that they reached all the way down the corridor and back.

'Loops are a bit like Ernie Wise's hair' Dick explains. 'You don't ever want to see the join.' Mills became part of the workshop in 1958 when it was an adjunct to the drama department that recorded rehearsals and added rudimentary sound effects. Early workshopers discovered that by tampering with the equipment they could create echoes, strange voices and unnerving effects. A golden age of sonic oddness began, attuned to the radical spirit of the times. 'We used to make sounds nobody liked for plays that nobody listened to,' says Dick, only half joking.

THE BBC'S PECULIAR ATTACHMENT TO RULES governed the workshop's early days. Its first manager Daphne Oram - a genuine prodigy of music, maths and technology - resigned in high dudgeon after less than a year because the corporation decreed no one could stay in radiophonics for more than three months.

'They thought the electrical vibrations and the pressure would drive us bonkers,' explains Dick. 'But going bonkers was Daphne's life ambition.' After she left the BBC, Oram created an entirely new form of musical notation, Oramics. She died in 2003 and is now recognised as a pathfinder for electronic music.

Keyboard player Roger Limb - mahogany-voiced, former newsreader and announcer was 'overawed' when he joined the workshop in 1972. He stayed for 20 years, writing more than 150 title sequence songs. Why does he think radiophonics is experiencing a renaissance?

'For certain people in their forties and fifties the Radiophonic Workshop is part of their cultural background,' Roger replies.

'Sometimes they're not even quite sure what it was. It's an unanswered question, and they seem to enjoy discovering us.'

To Paddy Kingsland, the quiet and studious man who created the gloriously extravagant music for *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the success of the reunion has been an enormous surprise. When their first show at the London Roundhouse in 2009 drew 1,500 people, he privately suspected that they were the only 1,500 people in the world who cared. He's happy to have been proved wrong. 'So far it has been really, really good fun,' he says.

The fourth old-school member of the band is Peter Howell, who joined in 1974 when newfangled synthesisers and computers came in. Among their creations was an orchestration of the pizzicato from Delibes' ballet *Sylvia* (you know it), using only the sounds of chickens. (A major soup company reputedly expressed an interest in using this. The BBC turned them down.)

'There was no training at all,' Peter says. 'You just had to get on with it and learn as you went. Like a lot of people, I always thought I was on the verge of being found out.'

Instead, Peter Howell stayed to the very end of the original workshop's life in 1992 famously updating the *Doctor Who* theme into a slick eighties version ('I was terrified of messing with a classic'), when the workshop fell foul of then BBC Director General John Birt's maddening internal market reforms.

'I didn't quite turn the lights out,' he says sadly, 'but I was penultimate? It was natural that the workshop should close', he admits. Its pioneering premise had been superseded by new technology. 'But we were all annoyed that the BBC couldn't celebrate the workshop, and give it a good finale' One suspects that this sense of unfinished business is what got the revival going in the first place.

Towards the end of the day there is a visitor to Real World Studios. Special sound expert Brian Hodgson created the Tardis's famous

wheezing, groaning noise by scraping a key down the wires of a broken piano back in 1963. Though he declined a chance to join the reformed band permanently ('I felt I'd been there and done that'), he's come to contribute to the new album.

We talk about the the lost heroine of radiophonics, the woman who turned the *Doctor Who* theme into a milestone in electronic music, his friend and collaborator Delia Derbyshire. 'Delia was incredibly talented,' says Brian. 'But she could be very difficult to work with. You never knew where you were with her.' A musical obsessive, Delia could be governed by black moods. Commissioned in 1971 to write a piece for the Institute of Electrical Engineers, she worked night after night in an increasingly stressed state and then, the morning of the show, destroyed the tapes. 'I knew she would,' says Brian, who'd instructed an engineer to make a copy. 'I don't think she ever forgave me for that. Delia found everything hard because machines could never do what she wanted them to do. She was so far ahead of them.'

AFTER DELIA LEFT IN THE EARLY SEVENTIES her interest in music began to evaporate. Disillusion, over-reliance on alcohol and lost years followed. Just before she died in 2001, of renal failure at 64, her music and influence were coming back into focus. Thinking the time was right to get Delia working again, Mark Ayres wrote to her. His letter was discovered unopened on her doormat after her death.

'The cult of Delia is part of the resurgence of radiophonics,' says Brian. 'And she would have been chuffed about that, because she never felt she would be remembered. It was so sad. So much talent wasted because she was born before her time.'

And for all the creative freedom of the Radiophonic Workshop, there has always been a melancholic undertow to their music. It's there in the old recordings and it's there in the new ones. Perhaps this is why the strange, distant sound of radiophonics speaks so well to our times as well as to the Sixties and Seventies. It is the sound of nostalgia for an age that never came.