

Dick Mills, Peter Howell and the BBC Radiophonic Workshop

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Bob Fischer

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THE GREATEST SHOW IN THE GALAXY

2023 marks the 60th anniversary of the BBC's classic sci-fi serial, Doctor Who. Joining the celebrations are members of the legendary Radiophonic Workshop, with a special live performance at this year's Bluedot Festival. Workshop veterans Dick Mills and Peter Howell have already set the TARDIS co-ordinates.

“People treat us very generously,” says Dick Mills, with a modest smile. “We cover all grounds with the live show, so we get octogenarians bursting into tears if we mention Blue Peter or Crackerjack. But we also get the youngsters, who are up to date with everything”.

It's 65 years since the founding of the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop, and sixty years since the opening episode of surely its most celebrated client – Doctor Who. And it's an honour to be in the company of two men whose careers in sound production and composition are inextricably linked to this brace of charmingly eccentric institutions. Since 2013, Dick and fellow Workshop veteran Peter Howell have joined erstwhile BBC colleagues Paddy Kingsland and Roger Limb – alongside musical director Mark Ayres – to form a band whose live performances are an unashamed celebration of this affectingly nostalgic legacy.

Dick, now 86, joined the nascent Workshop in 1958, swiftly finding himself pressed into service on some of the BBC's most iconic productions of the decade. On TV, it was Quatermass And The Pit, Nigel Kneale's unsettling sci-fi serial. On radio, it was The Goon Show, arguably the template for every forward-thinking British comedy movement of the last seven decades.

"There was an engineering vacancy, and I applied," he shrugs. "And my lonely application was successful, because nobody else bothered. So I joined the Workshop, and the rest... just happened."

Peter, a relative youngster at 75, arrived in 1974 with a background in BBC studio management... but his formative years also included a string of home-recorded psychedelic folk albums. Unfamiliar with the work of late 1960s East Sussex outfit Agincourt? You have a world of gentle delights awaiting you. Although even these esoteric experiences left Peter unprepared for his first commission as a Radiophonic Workshop member: creating the sound of a flying steak and kidney pie for a BBC Schools programme.

"I remember the producer reporting back that it was 'adequate!'" he grins.

Nevertheless, it's their respective associations with Doctor Who that have proved the most enduring. Dick's long-standing credit for the show's "Special Sound" began in 1963, assisting Delia Derbyshire to create her startling electronic arrangement of Ron Grainer's legendary theme tune.

"With Delia and me, there was a very high resistance to making anything that might be recognisable," he recalls. "However you press regular instruments into action, they just haven't got the 'What on earth is that?' factor. So we got the Workshop engineer to stretch a steel wire the length of a 19-inch blank plate, and that became the thing we twanged. Which then had to be manipulated to form the notes. And the 'Ooo-we-ooo' machine was a Wobulator that Delia managed to play like this... hang on, let me put my hand up..."

He makes a dextrous double-digit movement in front of his laptop webcam.

“So there was nothing that forced regular tonal qualities or interludes onto us”.

Peter’s relationship with Doctor Who began in earnest in 1980. With incoming producer John Nathan-Turner keen for the show’s music to reflect a burgeoning synth-pop zeitgeist, Peter was tasked with creating a dramatic reworking of that iconic theme. No pressure, then?

“I did feel the pressure,” he nods. “But Paddy Kingsland was extremely helpful, he was my go-to pair of ears. I’d play bits to him and say ‘If this isn’t going anywhere, let’s stop now and not waste any more time’. But he kept on nodding, so that was alright. And, as with Delia’s version, I didn’t want to make anything where people could sit in the pub and say ‘Ah, I know how he did that, he used a Casio Thingummybob’. So I made it an amalgam of various techniques. I remember I was very in awe of Delia’s bassline. I loved that ‘Whump Whump Whump’...”

“She did that as a separate track, on the front of every main note!” adds Dick. “She slid up to them...”

“I did exactly the same thing, by playing the notes then turning the tape upside down,” smiles Peter. “I had to reproduce it somehow.”

The fifty-odd live performances they have racked up since 2013 have, they both agree, been an unexpected but delightful post-script to the Workshop’s illustrious story.

“It’s great fun,” smiles Dick. “I came to public performance late in life, and for the first few years I didn’t realise people were there to witness a Happening! And that Happening just happened to include... well, whatever happened. At Rough Trade, we were up one end of a long hallway with the sound mixer on the right under a balcony, and we couldn’t communicate with him unless he stood up and waved his hat. And it went wrong...”

“It went into a digital loop and kept on playing the same four bars!” laughs Peter.

“Afterwards, I went around apologising to people,” adds Dick. “And they said ‘Why? What happened?’”

Their mutual enthusiasm for their work – and for Doctor Who itself – is infectious. Fans worldwide, of course, are already excited about the show's 60th anniversary in November. There's the return of an old Doctor, David Tennant, to look forward to... followed by the new adventures of his successor, Ncuti Gatwa. In the build-up to all this, the Radiophonic Workshop are performing at this year's Bluedot Festival. Presumably with a celebratory set that draws heavily on the show's ever-evolving soundtrack?

“Yes, that's right,” confirms Peter. “I don't think I'm letting too much out of the bag if I say it's going to be less stop-start than our previous sets. We'll be running things into one another, with lots of video clips from the classic series. So the thematic atmosphere will always be Doctor Who.”

Jodrell Bank itself, of course, was the setting for Tom Baker's childhood-defining 1981 regeneration into Peter Davison's Fifth Doctor. So will Paddy Kingsland be performing his melancholy score for this pivotal scene in the very shadow of that towering radio telescope?

“My lips are sealed,” says Peter, defiantly. But – to paraphrase Tom's final, heart-breaking line – it's clear the moment has been prepared for.