

‘A Very Long Shadow’ – Roger Limb

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Continuing with my interviews from the alumni of the **BBC Radiophonic Workshop**, we move on to genius composer **Roger Limb**. Part of what I suppose we could call the department’s ‘second wave’, he joined the workshop at the dawn of its synthesiser era in 1973 and worked as one of its principal producers and composers for over two decades, creating a huge body of signature tunes for television and radio drama that will almost certainly be familiar to anyone growing up in the UK over the past thirty years. Perhaps best known for his substantial contributions to *Doctor Who* during the eighties, he also recorded and produced many of the songs for the cult BBC Schools programme *Look And Read*, including the famous ‘Magic E’ song that became the subject of much rather tiresome postmodern chuckling in subsequent years:

A respected pop and jazz musician outside of the workshop, Limb has now rejoined his friends and former colleagues as part of a revamped Radiophonic Workshop band and will be touring the festival circuit with them over the summer. This interview took place during a rather brief interval in a long day of discussions and performances at Chichester University. Despite being pushed for time, however, Roger’s additional years as a voiceover artist and continuity announcer for the BBC meant that he had no trouble putting his points across quickly and succinctly!

RL: I think the Radiophonic Workshop has a sort of legacy, [because] even though it closed down 15 years ago, there’s a whole generation of people for whom the phrase ‘Radiophonic Workshop’ has some sort of mystical quality. When they were kids, perhaps they saw the name on the screen. Or they heard the back announcement on radio [and thought] “... Radiophonic Workshop – what does it mean, who are these radiophonic workmen, what do they do, where do these strange uncanny sounds and strange music come from, what is going on there?” So I think a lot of people remember that rather mysterious atmosphere, and [had] questions about it that were never properly answered, questions that are still hanging in the air today.

Can you tell us something about the equipment and techniques used by the workshop?

When the Radiophonic Workshop first began producing music there was a lot of very strange and rudimentary techniques [involved]. The whole idea of tape manipulation – you get a piece of sound on a tape and you can do strange things to it: play it slower, play it backwards, damage the tape slightly, put unearthly echo on it... And [so] a lot of the early radiophonic music that came from the workshop

was tape that had been manipulated. Later on there was quite a big change in the early 1970s when synthesisers became more and more used and the old tape cutting techniques went out of fashion. So for the last thirty years the signature sound of the workshop has been the synthesiser. But that doesn't mean to say it's [become] limited because the whole world of synthesisers, the whole world of sequencing and sampling has meant an enormous change and development in the techniques available for people who were doing electronic, radiophonic music.

With that in mind, I'm wondering what your thoughts are on modern electronic music, about how your influence has permeated down to the current generation?

I think there's no doubt at all that the radiophonic workshop cast a very long shadow. Techniques have changed drastically in the last ten, twenty years and now it's possible for people at home with home studios, even on their cell-phones, to create and play radiophonic music through wonderful speaker arrays and things such as that. There's a huge market and a huge output of Radiophonic electronic music now. I don't know how on earth [to keep track of it], it's like the old question of loads and loads of people talking but nobody listening! I listen to as much of it as I can and from time to time I hear something that's quite arresting, something that obviously a person has put a lot of thought and ingenuity into. And that's really quite interesting, but the problem is there is so much to listen to that it's quite often just a happy chance if you happen to hear something [significant]. But I keep listening!

As a member of twenty years standing, you must have seen quite a lot of change at the workshop?

When I arrived there were about five or six studios in which each individual member of the workshop would set up their own little studio according to the way they wanted things, whether it was tape machines, synthesisers, or mixing desks. As time went on the techniques became more and more advanced and we had a little more money to spend on for example multi-track tape machines. And then another big change happened in the 1980s and that was the arrival of sequencing programmes on computers. Quite rudimentary to start with but developing in such a way that it was a joy to use, particularly for incidental music for drama when you could measure the action that was given to you on the tape or the film and express it exactly onto a sequence on a computer and [then] write the music around it. It was a wonderful tool to use.

Talking to you and to Paddy Kingsland earlier, the impression that I get is that there is a lot of excitement in the current line-up about modern developments in music technology, rather than simply using the tried and tested methods you would have used in the workshop at the time.

I think there is, but [out of all of us] I'm probably the most of an old curmudgeon, because quite apart from doing these gigs with the RW -we're performing live quite regularly- I go out and do a lot of live jazz gigs, playing piano or double bass, playing conventional music and trying to do it in an unconventional or original sort of way. So when I hear about these [modern] techniques they talk about, recording and finding good samples from the recordings they do with the people who want to come and work with us, I was a little bit wary at first, I thought 'hmm, this doesn't sound like much fun to me'. But I've had a couple of goes at it and I must say that it's growing on me and I'm getting more and more involved in using the techniques that have been prescribed. And I think a lot of positive stuff is coming out of it.

And finally, can you tell us anything about the new album?

There is an album due out and it's going to be out in a matter of months, perhaps. We're putting some final touches to it next month, in May. It will be called 'Electricity', rather appropriately. And there will be a lot of new stuff on it, but perhaps we will revisit one or two old tracks as well.