

# Music of the Spheres - Dick Mills

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Continuing with the publication of extended interviews gathered for my recent **BBC World Service report on the revival of the Radiophonic Workshop**, we come to a figure who perhaps more than anyone else embodies the spirit and the ethos of this most enigmatic of organisations. But where on earth (or, more appropriately 'off' it) to even begin with **Dick Mills**? The only surviving member of the Workshop's original line-up and it's longest resident, he joined in its inaugural year of 1958 and remained for the next three and a half decades. Originally joining as a technical assistant, he may have few full-length compositions to his name, but his innumerable uncredited contributions and practical assistance to the works of others; plus the sheer number of sound effects he is responsible for are almost beyond estimation. Such technical and engineering expertise may well account for the matter-of-fact and rather self-effacing way he talks about his work, despite remaining a stalwart of the workshop for significantly longer than anyone else.

Chatting briefly with him before our interview, he revealed that the Workshop's cancelling of a number of tour dates prior to the Chichester University symposium last month had been on the orders of his doctor; something he clearly still felt bad about. And yet his band-mate's reticence to go on without him is entirely understandable. The Workshop simply wouldn't have been the same without him, then as well as now! Thankfully now in better health, our interview took place in the green room during a short interval before Mills was whisked off for another panel discussion; and while we were pressed for time this most genial and chatty individual still managed to lift the lid on his contribution to the most famous TV theme tune of all time and the genesis of a forty-year-old radiophonic classic entirely his own:



*DM: [Examining the copy of the 1975 LP *The Radiophonic Workshop* I've just asked him to sign] Which one is this? [...] Ah, yes. We come up against all sorts of people, you know. We went on [insert title of well-known 'Blue Peter-for-adults'- style TV programme] to talk about the workshop. And [The Producer] says 'Oh, it's lovely to meet you, I was ever so interested in that record!' [Indicates the photograph on the sleeve] 'Is that the Radiophonic Workshop? I said no, that's our boss's shed, because he's got an outboard motor there from his boat, [and] there's a model yacht up there and an anchor there, that's not the [workshop]! She really thought it was, she had no idea what we actually did there!*

**If I may say so, I think your track 'Adagio' from this album is one of my all-time favourite pieces of music.**

*My wife can't stand in the same room as it. I took it home 'cause I was so pleased with it. And she came out white as a sheet! She said 'I actually hate it!' She said 'I would take that cassette out and cheerfully jump on it!' I said 'Why?!' I think I've worked out that my wife, poor unfortunate; she hasn't got the ability to suspend her belief. She would probably tolerate science fiction but she knows it could never happen. I said 'well you're approaching it from the wrong [angle]. Why can't you... this could happen!' And she says 'But I know it couldn't!' It's though her imagination can't comprehend an open space or a space that she can't see the limitations to.*

**What was your brief when you were creating Adagio?**

*There wasn't any. This record, I don't think contains anything [produced by commission]. [They] said 'Oh, have a dabble and if we get enough we'll put it together and put it out on a disc.'*

**That must have been quite unusual for the workshop?**

*Yeah. Actually, I tell a lie. Because this 'Adagio' I actually did compose for [pauses to remember]... well, no, I used it for a show that I was involved on called... What was it, Captain Zep or was it Duke Diamond? [NB It was Zep, although Mills worked on them both] Kids television about an academy for space cadets, a detective series. The students were shown a crime being committed and they had to deduce who did it. But because it took place in this big academy and the students are in an auditorium, before it started they wanted some 'muzak' to go over this auditorium [scene], so I did that. And they just played it over and over again in the auditorium and I got extra PRS because the students and the characters in the play could hear it and it was wonderful! Then I did a... I'm not sure if I did a similar piece... no, it's not on here... called 'Come and Go'\* because what I did I did a bit of like Adagio and made a long length of it, turned it round the other way and joined it up [gestures handling tape] so it went like that and went away again! I just spent an afternoon meandering with a synthesiser and put some twinkles on it.*

**For me, personally, it's one of the Workshop's most haunting works.**

*Yes! It's funny, a lot of record reviewers when they [wrote about] the workshop, they came out and said 'the most surprising thing on this record is Dick Mills, we didn't know he did music! Well I wouldn't class that as music, that's the trouble! It's not written as music, it's just... extemporised, I suppose.*

## **You wouldn't call it music, though?**

*Well, I would, you know, tonal-wise. Yes, rather than a sound effect. Or you could call it "the music of the spheres" or whatever. You know, it's just... [trails off, shrugs]*

## **Your background was more in the creation of the sound effects, particularly for Doctor Who. And you also helped produce the iconic theme tune?**

*Oh, yeah! I did [the Doctor Who theme] with Delia and we stuck it all together. Actually, at last year's fiftieth anniversary party at the Excel Centre, I did a presentation on how we put the signature tune together. I managed to get the components – three separate components – and I played them on the computer and I actually photographed the screen so that you could see the traces going along and then I put all the traces up and showed how they all went relative to each other. And then I described what happened when we [encountered] a bum note and couldn't find it. We had to unwind all the tapes down the corridor and count the joins. That was the only way of [finding] it.*

*The Doctor Who theme is an enigma, if you like, to most people, because they can't actually latch on to any known instrument that they think might have been used to make it because there wasn't any musical instruments. It consists of three basic music lines, a bass track that goes all the way through then you've got the melody that goes most of the way through, then the twiddle-y bits on the top and the whoosh noises that makes the graphics behind it. So Delia and I would have constructed those on three separate tapes that had to be played together. No synthesisers, no multitrack, nothing. So the bass note was a twanged wire, which then had to be speeded up or slowed down to give you the right pitch, then then had to be cut together to the right length. Then everyone of those bass note phrases had a little grace note stuck ion the front which was an extra 'whurrp' from an oscillator. Then Delia did the melody 'OOO-EE-OO' with an oscillator she just waggled the knob until she got the phrasing correct; then she had to copy those how many times she wanted it and cut them all together. Then the white noise was whoosh-y noise, [we] played it backwards and looped it, speed-changed it, mixed it all together. Then we played the three tapes together... and there was a mistake! Now, nobody can watch three different reels of tape being played and spot where the mistake is, particularly as each of these tapes were full of splices. So what we had to do was to unroll these three rolls of tape, right down the corridor at Maida Vale, and walk along looking at the visual pattern of the splices. And when one of the splices was out of [the] visual pattern that's got to be where the wrong note is.*

**As someone who makes music with tape, I do know how unpredictable it can be.**

*Yes! And you've only got to store it too long [for] the joints to dry out! But usually we didn't have too much problem. Sometimes the backing on the tape was of a funny composition and sometimes the editing sticky[tape] was of a different make and it just wouldn't stick on, but we didn't have too much malfunctions, as they say. There was a trick that you're supposed to wind a tape on inside out because if there [were] any loud passages in the tape it tended to print through magnetically to the next layer of tape on the spool. And if you wound it backwards or perhaps inside out, it would print after itself, so you wouldn't get a pre-echo or a loud noise and so know what was coming! It was silly and nobody ever went through and tried to prove it!*

And with that, he was ushered away to join the imminent panel discussion occurring in the main hall. What an absolute treat it was to spend some time with him. And as an added treat of my own, I've found some footage of the aforementioned children's science fiction quiz show 'Captain Zep' on youtube and have included it below for your edification. Sadly, this slightly poor edit was the only clip of the programme I could find, but gratifyingly it does include the auditorium scene with an extract from 'Adagio' playing in the background, just as Dick described it. It's interesting to note that, despite being quite a bit older, his music has aged far better in the ensuing decades than the 'Captain Zep' programme itself – It's hard to believe that puffy yellow 'space-clown' uniforms, copious amounts of hair-gel and extended scenes pertaining to the distribution of badges to schoolchildren could ever be considered essential televisual ingredients, though respect is due to lead actor Paul Greenword for keeping straight-faced throughout:

For those of you hungry for more, Dick Mills' credited and uncredited work is so vast in it's scale that a complete overview is beyond my capabilities here, though any fans of classic Doctor Who will recognise much of his work – he was the principle 'special sound' creator for the series in it's original run from 1972 onwards, the best part of two decades. My **BBC Records Special I** produced in 2012 for Jonny Trunk's OST show is also worth checking out, though I say so myself, featuring as it does a number of his original compositions, including several from the '**Hi Tech FX**' LP, which should be considered an essential purchase for fans of the Doctor, sound effects and electronic music alike! And anyone who can offer me some information regarding the track \*'Come and Go' that Dick mentions is encouraged to get in touch. I can't find the slightest reference to it anywhere!