

Guardian, 2 November, 2009

## **Release of Life On Earth soundtrack delivers music as pioneering as the show**

The first commercial release of the avant-garde soundtrack to the 1979 David Attenborough nature blockbuster Life On Earth shows how pivotal it was to that programme's era-defining impact



The red-eyed Panamanian tree frog on the cover of the Life On Earth soundtrack

by Mike Power

British composer Edward Williams's orchestral piece The Sex Life of the Fern is perhaps not going to trouble this year's Christmas No1 spot. And other tunes on his new LP, such as Eusthenopteron and the Primeval Swamp, are even less likely to prove a hit.

But for 13 weeks in 1979, millions of television sets in Britain reverberated to these pioneering works, as they provided the musical backing for the BBC's landmark natural history blockbuster, Life On Earth, presented by Sir David Attenborough.

Today, the music by the now 88-year-old composer is to receive its first commercial release. "I think it added to the programme very well," Attenborough told the Guardian. "It's very different from a huge orchestra, it

has an almost chamber music sound. I was delighted to hear it was being issued."

Life On Earth heralded a new genre of nature programming. Its ambitious analysis of evolution from primitive algae to land mammals reached its pinnacle in an era-defining encounter between Attenborough and a family of mountain gorillas in Rwanda, where he ad-libbed in a half-whisper to camera as a giant primate gently groomed him.

The music was pivotal to the programme's impact. Using flute, harp, clarinet, strings, percussion and early synthesisers, Williams's score provided an evocative counterpoint to the visuals and Attenborough's commentary.

Williams and his orchestra intricately crafted the music scene-by-scene to reflect the imagery on-screen. In one sequence examining the flight of birds, the instrumentation mirrors each new creature's appearance. "I thought that if the music was written specifically for a film that it wouldn't work on its own. But it does," Williams said.

To create the soundscape, Williams fed recordings of his orchestra through an early British synthesiser, the VCS3. That avant-garde approach matched the groundbreaking production techniques of the series, which featured such innovations as video jump-cuts across continents with total continuity in Attenborough's commentary.

"I started using the filters and voltage control of the VCS3 on conventionally created classical sounds by the orchestra," Williams said. "It made possible all sorts of marvellous explorations of new sounds which could then be made into music."

The record's route from obscurity to its new release is one of almost evolutionary serendipity. Jonny Trunk of Trunk records, an indie label dedicated to the issuing of esoteric lost vinyl, first came across the music when a friend showed him an LP he had bought. Just 100 vinyl copies were privately pressed by Williams as gifts to the orchestra that played it.

A few months later, a record collector, Steve Stasis, decided to sell his entire library music collection of specialist recordings used in TV and film scores never intended for commercial release. Among the collection lay the Life On Earth recording.

"I bought the lot, kept the Williams LP, and sold the rest the next day for the same money," Trunk said.

Trunk then licensed the music from the BBC, an arduous six-month process. The original sleeve featured illustrations, but the new record features a red-eyed Panamanian tree frog. That image comes from a book that

accompanied the series that Trunk found in a second-hand shop. The photo was taken by Attenborough, who granted its use free of charge.

"He didn't even mention money," Trunk said. "I think he's a higher being than that. It would almost have been rude to ask how much he wanted for it."

Williams says recording the music and watching the series changed his world view. "It made a huge impression on me and changed my life. I've been fascinated by evolution ever since. My admiration for David is unfathomable. He is the most marvellous man, quiet and clear and very, very sensible."

Williams toured in the 1970s with his band, Uncle Jambo's Pendular Vibrations, a group playing three VCS3 synthesisers.