

RADIO

r e t h i n k

art, sound and transmission

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The Soundscape on Radio

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In the mid-1970s, two events coincided that have changed the way I think about sound: the World Soundscape Project and the founding of Vancouver Co-operative Radio. The first opened my ears to sounds beyond the classical music I had studied for many years and enhanced my understanding of the soundscape; the other provided the opportunity to organize and broadcast these sounds and thus to "speak back" to the community with the sounds of its own making. Both made me think about sound design, composition, acoustic ecology and how we hear and listen.

The World Soundscape Project (WSP), founded by R. Murray Schafer in the late 1960s, was one of the first attempts to study the acoustic environment and the impact of technology on it. Through systematic and critical study, the project coordinated and researched the scientific, aesthetic, philosophical, architectural and sociological aspects of soundscape ecology. When Schafer left Simon Fraser University in 1975, the project wound down and completed the publications of its work through the imprint of a Vancouver publisher. I was one of six members of the original research team that dissolved when Schafer left, but along with Barry Truax I have worked to maintain and expand the archives of over three hundred audiotapes we had collected, and have continued to disseminate and develop the project's legacy through publications, recordings and lectures. My involvement with this project changed the way I thought about listening and soundmaking, as I came to appreciate them in a delicately balanced relationship with each other. With these new ways of thinking about sound in mind, I became involved in the founding of Vancouver Co-operative Radio.

At first, members of the newly formed Co-operative Radio were challenged by the vast silence of the airwaves that accompanied the license to broadcast. We knew how fragile silence was and that it could be enhanced or destroyed by sound. In some ways, making radio is like composing music. The same care for form and content has to be taken in creating radio as in creating a piece of music. The same questions arise: when to have sound and when to have silence; what sense of time to create; what sounds to select; what to say and how to say it; how to retain the dimensions of silence under a stream of sound; how to attract and keep a listenership. The Co-op Radio airwaves may have been silent at first but the social environment and soundscape into which we were to broadcast our radio programming was already crowded with sounds. The challenge was to make ourselves heard.

Most of Vancouver Co-operative Radio's founding members desired closer interaction between radiomakers and listeners. We wanted to do something that no other station was doing at that time – to involve the community in the making of radio so that radio sound would embody the voice of the community. Any listener could also be a radiomaker, who might then become an increasingly active listener because of his or her immediate involvement with the station.

My own involvement with Co-op Radio gave me the opportunity to consider radio as an artistically expressive medium and to address issues of environment and acoustic ecology. I was attempting to make radio a place of environmental listening by broadcasting the soundscapes that listeners experienced in their daily lives. With that I had hoped to create a state of resonance within listeners so that when they encountered sounds in the actual environment, recollections of the radio broadcast would alert them to the soundscape in which they lived – creating participating listeners, that is, listeners of the broadcast who could then also be receptive to the soundscape as a whole.

Most of us have been conditioned, especially if we have lived in the city for awhile, to ignore the soundscape, including radio. The result is that we often do not even know what our ears put up with every day, how our whole being might be affected by an overload of sound input, and that we might unconsciously assist in the proliferation of increasingly noisy soundscapes. A question, then, is raised: how do we, as audio artists/composers, create the desire to listen in a world where the tendency is predominantly not to listen – to radio or the soundscape?

RADIO THAT LISTENS

Imagine radio that, instead of numbing us to sounds, strengthens our imagination and creativity; instead of manipulating us into faster work and more purchasing, it inspires us to invent; instead of overloading us with irrelevant information and fatiguing us, it refreshes our acoustic sensitivity; instead of moving us to ignore thoughts and surroundings, it stimulates listening; instead of broadcasting the same things over and over again, it does not repeat; instead of silencing us, it encourages us to sing or to speak, to make radio ourselves; instead of merely broadcasting at us, we listen through it.

Ideally, when we listen to radio we are listening to a listening medium. Radio listens through its microphones to the world, to human voices, to the environment. However, the microphone does not make choices. In itself it is without culture: the way it listens to the world is entirely determined by the recordist behind the microphone. Radio that listens then is about the recordist's position and perspective, the physical, psychological, political and cultural stance shaping the choices when recording. My choices are influenced by an understanding of the sonic environment as an intimate reflection of the social, technological and natural conditions of the area. I attempt to maintain an acoustic balance in the environment and to consider how its quality may be improved. To some extent, my recording choices are shaped by a desire to educate, to raise awareness of the present state of the soundscape. By encouraging listening and questioning, I hope also to make people aware of their roles as soundmakers and their responsibility toward the soundscape. My own first attempt to create radio that listens was called *Soundwalking*, a weekly one-hour radio program that took a very specific approach to the medium as a conveyor of environmental sounds.

Produced in 1978 and 1979, *Soundwalking* took Co-op Radio listeners into the soundscape of Vancouver and surroundings. With tape recorder and microphone I ventured into environments such as the quiet winter landscape of the nearby mountains where my footsteps, my voice and the snow falling from trees were the loudest sounds. I went to a shopping mall, park, zoo, factory, residential area located under a flight-path and the streets of Vancouver. It was my first attempt to create a program that listened to the communities of Greater Vancouver without attempting to report about them. It brought community soundscapes into

listeners' homes and simultaneously extended listeners' ears into the soundscape of the community.

It is still relatively unusual to hear environmental sounds or soundscapes on the radio. This type of radiomaking presents the familiar as though artificial, through a loudspeaker, second hand, framed in space and time, and therefore highlighted. Daily life is thus presented from a new acoustic angle. Such radio can assist us in listening to our everyday lives, to who we are as individuals and as a society.

In some soundwalks I speak "live" from the location of the recording directly to the listener. My voice forms the link to the listener who is not physically present. I speak about the sounds or soundscapes that are audible but also about aspects extraneous to the recording such as the weather, time of day or night, the feel of the place, the architecture, how the environment looks. The voice transmits information about a place that would otherwise not be apparent from raw environmental recordings and assists in transporting the listener into each specific soundscape that is broadcast. It is also a constant reminder of the recordist's presence in the environment and of the fact that this presence creates a specific acoustic perspective for the listener – that this particular microphone, this particular recording presents only one truth about the environment. By doing so, it is intended to create an awareness or curiosity in each individual listener of a unique acoustic perspective.

Another way to create radio that listens is with a stationary microphone, where its "perspective" remains constant during a given recording process. Through this approach the microphone listens by recording whatever occurs in the soundscape during a specified duration. There is no voice-link to the radio listener and the recordist remains still or may be absent while the microphone records. Because the recordist is removed from the situation, unusual sounds may be recorded – such rarities as a bird singing very close to the

microphone just when a street saxophonist finishes a piece (and in harmony!), or a neon sign flashing in the same rhythm as the nearby idling bus.

The "musical theme" that signalled the start of each *Soundwalking* program was created by such a stationary microphone. The microphone was hung out of the studio window and picked up the voices of the people who sat on the benches in Pigeon Park, the little square below. Their voices were often masked by the traffic sounds, whose rhythms were determined by the pace of the traffic lights. Seagulls, pigeons and boat horns from the nearby harbour punctuated this soundscape with their calls. Every week radio listeners were earwitnesses to the changing acoustic events in this neighbourhood park.

In addition, there is the searching microphone. I did not really discover this more active approach until I started recording in quieter, more natural environments. In the city many sounds present themselves to the microphone; the recordist can remain quite passive and end up with a lot of sound on tape. Not so in quiet environments. There the recordist often needs to take a more active role with the microphone in order to record any sound at all. It is a wonderful opportunity to search for the microscopic sounds in such sonic environments. By recording them at close range, an entirely new world of acoustic complexity can be discovered, all with a relatively silent backdrop. Working with such a recording engenders respect for the source of the sound. If we can hear the small, quiet sounds of nature amplified on radio or in any electroacoustic context we may understand that even these less perceptible sounds have an important place in the environment as a whole and warrant respect and protection. The small, quiet sounds in the natural environment are symbolic of nature's fragility, of those parts that are easily overlooked and trampled, whose significance in the ecological cycle is not fully understood.

The technique of close-miking existing sounds and creating new sounds by touching the material of the environment reveals sonic resonances, timbres and textures of a place. In Banff, for example, I became a soundmaker by touching the materials of the place, exploring and recording this process from very close range. Because it was winter, I found small winter sounds, cold sounds, sounds of ice. I spent time on a side channel of the Bow River where the water was frozen in horizontal sheets layered on top of each other. By rubbing or knocking small chips of

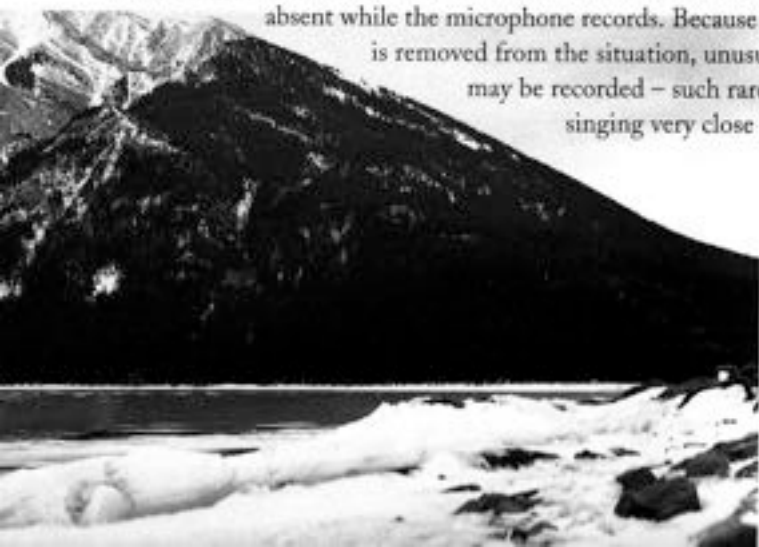


Photo: Carolyn Bellinger

ice on the contours of the large sheets of ice, a very glassy resonance was recorded, ever-changing in its timbre as it encountered different hollow spaces underneath. The sounds had an almost unbearable crispness to them if amplified too much. Because of its incredible clarity the surrounding silence seemed emphasized.

Silence does not actually exist on the airwaves. It cannot be broadcast, produced or reproduced. An atmosphere of silence can be created with certain types of sound but it is only a simulation. These ice sounds had all the characteristics around which the contours of silence could be brought out: clarity, crispness, acoustic phrasing, changing timbres like the close-up intimate whispers of a human voice. To broadcast these sounds effectively, utmost attention must be paid to the nature of the original recording. For example, focus on foreground sound gives the recording a very specific acoustic perspective. In any case, the selection process involved is a reminder of the subjectivity of the recordist who is making these choices.

ONE VISITOR'S PORTRAIT OF BANFF

One Visitor's Portrait of Banff is the radio program I produced for *Radio Rethink*. It listens into the community of Banff and its surrounding soundscape, consisting of differing formats: soundwalks, collages, earwitness accounts, sound object studies and short compositions. Unlike *Soundwalking*, it is not about the community in which I live; rather, it is about a place I have visited and to which I am a stranger. I, the recordist, am the visitor to Banff. The visitor's acoustic perspective is audible through the perspective of the microphone broadcast on radio. It is the perspective of an outsider. A visitor brings fresh ears to a place and may be alert to sounds that local inhabitants have become accustomed to. Knowing little about the place, the visitor needs to decode the meanings of sounds in an unfamiliar environment and tends to approach a new place with a searching and curious ear.

The visitor with the microphone may also be interested in understanding the relationship that exists and evolves between individuals and their environments. My relationship to Banff, for example, is shaped by connections through my family history. In 1911 my grandparents came to Banff by train, moving on a few days later to Glacier National Park to go mountain hiking and stay in a grand hotel. In 1959, after my grandfather's



Photo Cheryl Bellman

death, my grandmother invited my two older sisters and our cousin to retrace that memorable trip. Only thirteen years old, I was left behind. From Banff they sent me souvenirs, including a postcard of Mount Rundle. They went on to find the grand hotel but it had long gone and they ended up finding another place where my oldest sister met her future husband, which led to her subsequent emigration to Canada. In 1962, when I was sixteen, my parents took me on a trip to Canada to visit my sister. We travelled, again, by train. When we got to Banff I recognized Mount Rundle and made a drawing of it from my roomette on the train. On that trip I met my future husband; six years later I emigrated to Canada. Banff has been part of some life-changing journeys for my family.

I now have an audio portrait of Banff shaped in part by these memories. I used to think of a portrait as something definitive, framed, static, a face from a certain angle, something that captures a person in totality. This audio portrait tries to consider many aspects of Banff with open ears. At the same time, it allows listeners to construct their own portrait of the place.

RADIO, SOUNDSCAPE AND ECOLOGY – AN EPILOGUE

Ecology implies balance. Acoustic ecology implies balance between sound and silence, between listening and soundmaking. In Canada the potential for such balance lies in community radio stations offering airwaves that can be designed with an ecological consciousness; we also have vast stretches of land that are not yet dominated by noise. Compared to many other countries, we have room to move, physically and psychologically.

We are also a country of immigrants who have brought and continue to bring their experiences from other countries. What happens when we come into a new place, speaking before listening, as does most radio on



Photo Cheryl Bellows

this continent? What happens when immigrants and tourists enter a new place and speak before listening? What happens when on a daily basis we enter rooms and start to speak before we listen? Most radio engages in relentless broadcasting, a unidirectional flow of information and energy, which contradicts the notion of ecology. What would happen if we could turn that around and make radio listen before imposing its voice like an alien into a new environment? What if radio was non-intrusive, a source for listeners and for listening? Can radio be such a place of acceptance, a listening presence, a place of listening? Is it possible to create radio that listens, that in turn encourages us to listen to, and hear, ourselves?