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Radio and the Documentary Imagination: Thirty Years of Experiment, Innovation, and Revelation

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A renaissance occurred from the late 1960s in the art of documentary and “feature” production in radio, especially from within the major public broadcasters of Europe. Surprisingly, the pioneering work of this little commented-upon group of accomplished artisans finds its most immediate parallels not in radio but film culture, particularly in the auteur nouvelle vague and cinéma-vérité movements of the time. The new acoustic documentary-feature project suggests a radio “new wave”: a new art of “wild sound” recording freed from script and studio, and made possible by the advent of portable recorders, microphones and a strong infusion of 68 zeitgeist.

The portable tape recorder allowed us to give up our sedentary existence and become nomads and hunters once more … What liberation! We no longer wrote about a subject, we recorded the subject itself. We were acoustic cameras, shooting our sound material in the wild, then combining it into documentary works we called “acoustic films”.

Peter Leonard Braun 1999

In this essay I wish to address a form specific to the radio, to the radio as a broadcast sound medium, and as very much a product of the technology of, and revelation offered by recording.

Allan Weiss makes the point that there is not one radio or one radio imagination, but many. And as Weiss adds, “If the history of mainstream radio is a suppressed field, the history of experimental radio is utterly repressed”.1 Over the past four years I have been re-evaluating and mapping the emergence of one of those utterly repressed fields of radio, namely the radio documentary feature. My research, which includes extensive interviews with producers, archival collection and listening, seeks to locate this movement – the feature – within the larger “project” we might simply call public broadcasting.

From the late 1960s, a new form of non-fiction programming and specialist production in radio developed within this sector of broadcasting. In particular, the impetus for a new documentary idea, even project in radio, emerging well after the so called “golden years” but not unmarked by them, comes from a small group of disparate yet passionate practitioners working within some of the major European public and state broadcasting institutions.
By the mid 1970s, a movement, international in its aspirations, could be identified—a movement coalescing around what the West Germans have referred to as “the feature” in radio. The story of the radio feature is the story of the other “new wave”: of the filme sonore, radiomontage, radio filme and the documentaire de creation.² It is a story worth telling not only because of the intrinsic value (aesthetic, cultural, textual) of this rich and complex accumulation of works but because, as my research is revealing, this movement in radio has contributed in a significant way to the broader history of ideas.

A complex “socio-aesthetic agenda”³ is to be discovered in the documentary field, and particularly within radio feature-making, yet throughout the radio’s relatively short history developments of an aesthetic nature such as these have been marginalised. The field the French describe as “documentaire de creation”—an approach to documentary (in audiovisual media and radio) as much as a form of it—arises as a direct product of the culture of ideas that transformed cinema and the other arts in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite its emergence in this period, the documentaire de creation remains absent from practically all the critical and historical literature. Indeed the new radio documentary (acoustic films, features, montage, filmes sonore/radiophonique as an imaginative, expressive and revelatory field) is most significantly absent even from the new literature emerging around “auditory culture” and the sound arts, with some small exceptions. Why not a radio d’auteur, just as we say a film d’auteur²?

Since at least the late 1960s, the radio feature has had a significant international presence. And if television is generally assumed to be “an international medium, and radio … not. Radio is of its nature tied to a language”,⁴ the new feature “movement” has in many cases succeeded in breaking this apparent restriction as no other genre in radio, excepting of course music and some ars acustica. Features have perhaps offered the best example of the success of innovative distribution strategies developed by producers themselves and supported further by international co-productions.

What was innovative with the kinds of translation practices developed in German features in the 1970s for example was the idea of a mother band (mutterband), which could accommodate different narrations for a particular documentary in any language. Pioneering documentary maker Peter Leonard Braun, regarded by some in the field as the godfather of the international feature movement (post 1975), developed this narration technique as a way to solve radio’s linguistic disadvantage in a language-divided Europe (compared say to film and television where subtitling and dubbing have long facilitated multi-lingual distribution). Other producers began to work on this problem too. In the late 1970s, the highly regarded Australian Kaye Mortley (her reflexive and reflective documentary features and radio essays produced over a lifetime in this field and broadcast in many countries), has been a prolific and sophisticated interpreter and translator of the work of others, thus facilitating, in a less obvious way to Braun, a greater international reception for this kind of “writing in sound”.⁵ As a result, there are many instances of these auteur works being adapted for broadcast.
around the world in a variety of languages. Arguably, this is the only area of radio programming where this practice has occurred in any substantial way.

In addition to the development of strategies for international distribution, an international infrastructure of competitions, conferences and professional exchange is in evidence. This begins with the creation of The Prix Italia in 1948 – the world’s first broadcast media prize – which since 1953 has had a radio documentary category. As an attempt to raise the stakes for radio internationally, particularly in terms of these unique and specialist recorded forms, Braun established the “International Features Conference” (IFC) in 1974. It has been held annually since, and the 2005 conference attracted more than eighty-five participants. In 1976 Braun also launched The Prix Futura under the aegis of Sender Freies Berlin (SFB) as another international showcase for features.

Despite this intense international activity and professional dialogue, the feature remains all but unknown critically and academically. Which brings me back to my task here: to introduce a field for enquiry.

In order that we may better understand the development of this field in the European context, let us fast-forward to the 2001 IFC held in Sydney. It was here the conference organisers inaugurated “The Classics”. For the first time an historical presentation of “classic features” was to be put before an audience of radio professionals, in the main, specialist documentary and feature makers coming from around the world. (And classic here will move beyond those programs made by the BBC’s celebrated features department – ironically shut down in 1965, just as Peter Leonard Braun was getting going with his new ideas for “acoustic filmmaking”.)

In a context of critical and historical neglect I believe the IFC decided to initiate this meeting with its past so as to at last engage with its own history, and perhaps to offer up its own version of a canon. By 2001, even within the resource-rich Western European countries including Germany, France and the United Kingdom, the pressure on the feature and other extended time-intensive forms of specialist radio to “perform”, “modernize”, “be relevant”, “deliver ratings” was becoming ever more a life and death issue. With the rise of new media forms too, especially online broadcasting and web media, and with the proliferation of media outlets and the rise of ideologies which might be said to favour convergence, the pressure on supposedly more “traditional” and extended forms of the radio supported only by public broadcasting was keenly felt, and most directly in terms of the loss of staff (expertise, craft skills), time (the empire of the sound-bite), reduced resources and of course a loss of morale. (To speak of this particular form of radio’s past at all was also recognition that even within the ranks of the international feature-making fraternity, amnesia prevailed).

For the Sydney conference, the Australians (ABC) invited conference founder and figurehead Peter Leonhard Braun to present the first of these extended reflections. Over four afternoons, Braun began the process of charting a course through the largely unmapped
terrain of radio’s international feature-making past. He began by reminding his audience of what had existed when he first entered the fray, as a young writer in Berlin at SFB in the 1950s.

This was a time when radio was the predominant mass medium, riding high on the respect and popularity it had gained during the war years. For young radio recruits working in the GDR stations in the 1950s, the BBC remained a model of integrity and excellence, and they worked in departments and programming often based directly on the BBC model. This was certainly the case for the Features Department at SFB for which the young Leo Braun worked, first as a freelancer and later as a staff producer. For the BBC, these were the “golden years” of the Feature Department under the leadership of Lawrence Gilliam, when Dylan Thomas and Louis MacNeice (both poets) could produce and write “classic” features, somewhere between drama, documentary, poetry, and what the BBC also called “panoramas” – grand, large scale productions based on fact, but rendered dramatically and musically with what seemed like a cast of thousands: orchestras, musicians on call, teams of dedicated sound recordists, actors, engineers – the best the BBC had to offer.

For the gathering of dedicated radio professionals who were Braun’s audience at the 2001 IFC, he began by playing two extracts from radio’s golden age. The programs he offered up were Fréderick General from ORTF (France 1947), a tour-de-force performance of one hour, 45 minutes’ duration, complete with a dazzling orchestral soundtrack, and an excerpt from a classic in terms of BBC broadcasting history, The March of the ’45 (produced by D.G. Bridson and first broadcast in 1936, but repeated many times thereafter). (Braun first heard these pieces whilst living in London and Paris as an aspiring freelancer, writing features for SFB.)

From both pieces Braun played the credit sequence with an announcer reading a long list of technical and creative personnel, something we might now expect to see only with a major film or large-scale theatre production.

Of the French piece, Braun commented, “It was an absolutely different picture of production. I’d never heard anything like that before; it was so compulsive, so very close to reality, but it was not the reality itself, so to speak”. Of Bridson’s piece (“three hours, thirty minutes” says Braun in awe) and broadcast in three parts, all in rhyming verse, set to music, the Scottish clans marching on Culloden, we have an example of the “panorama” feature – and hailed as such in the opening credits. There is a sense of the “grand mix” you only begin to hear again with multi-track recording, but here it is “live” – although “mixed” from multiple studios in real time, performed in long “takes”. There is a very filmic sense in both productions of a mise-en-scene: a vision of a world, larger than life, yet intimate at the same time, a universe conjured into being in the closed world of the studio, using music, voice and “effects”.

Madsen: Radio and the Documentary Imagination: Thirty Years of Experiment, Innovation, and Revelation
These early epics were closer to opera than documentary, Braun explained, speaking as a director: “You were like a General or an admiral. You needed an army!” (Bridson: “My idea in writing The March of the ’45 … had been to do for radio something comparable in its way to what had been done for the cinema by D.W. Griffith or Cecil B. de Mille. I wanted to tell a dramatic story, panoramic in scope, and to make it more immediately exciting than anything that had been heard before”).

But by the time of the early 60s, and Braun intimates as much, these kinds of programs were no longer sustainable in terms of radio’s dwindling resources (much of which had been commandeered by television) and radically changed formats, but they were also somehow felt to be too distanced from the world and from the histories and events they had tried to convey and depict. If I read Braun correctly, it appeared to the new younger radio writers joining the ranks of radio professionals in the 1960s, that it was now the world itself demanding audition, a listening to its thus-far obscured and unheeded sonic activity. The radio features and documentaries being made at this time, says Braun, were ready for change. Radio was not taking sufficient advantage of new technologies, or listening to the mood of the times. As Rene Farabet of the Atelier de creation radiophonique (ACR) would say of this same period at Radio France:

I see the ACR as another event of 1968. It put into question all of our ideas about radio. Radio was then up to that time “in the fridge”, frozen, in slippers. ‘68 happened in the street. It was a phenomenon of the exterior, the outside. The challenge was to meet this world, not simply make it come to the radio.

Now responding to subjects born of the roving microphone (set free by new lightweight portable recorders entering the market) and a more intensive audition enabled by the emergence of high fidelity technologies, a new kind of feature was able to be explored, one as “well-made” as those earlier French and British extravaganzas, but with some important differences. New possibilities of montage, layering and “depth of field” which could be offered to the new radio “writer” by the adoption of plastic magnetic recording tape technology had also begun to have a real impact on radio production by the late 60s and were providing the right environment for major innovation and discovery to occur in a number of genres and forms. For Braun and other European pioneers in this area at the time, stereo also became important in defining a new acoustic depth of field for radio.

But returning to Braun’s account, the radio of the early golden age feature as heard in these French and BBC examples remained limited because it “seemed to demand you were in a sort of eggshell”. For Braun and others, “the reality” was left still “very much outside”: “these productions were about something but not the thing itself”, he reflected. Braun’s sentiments – to break out of the closed world of the studio – were being echoed in other centres too and one can trace a number of feature and documentary producers who were
expanding the use of what the Germans called, *O-Ton*, or *Originalton*: meaning original sound (wild sound, actuality, ambiance in English).²¹

In 1947 in Australia for example, Colin Simpson (a well known writer) for a series called *Walkabout* takes a wire recorder to remote Arnhem Land and records a buffalo hunt. In his book, *Adam in Ochre*, he describes the thrill of capturing and listening to these wild sounds as he sits perched on a tree recording hooves and gunshot: this, he wrote “would have the listeners in the suburbs gripping the Genoa velvet of their lounge chairs”. Even with these short inferior recordings (still illustrative rather than being the subject itself) one is transported to another world as a sonic window opens onto a now lost time and place.

In Copenhagen in the late 1940s a German refugee from the war, Willy Reunert fitted out his car to make a heavy disc recorder portable, enabling him to document the lives and scenes of contemporary life in Denmark. He ventured beyond his adopted country to Europe in the immediate aftermath of war, recording scenes of loss, desolation and emptiness in the country he had been forced to leave. German mothers post pictures of their boy soldier children in a public hall hoping someone will recognise these missing sons. The whole scene is conveyed with spare narration, silences and whispers are captured, the voices of the women. This is a kind of radio film in the sense that it gives us an acoustic scene to enter. No camera can take us so close or be so unobtrusive whilst so implicated. An intimate space opens which is not dominated by either reporter or the usual narration standing in for the real: it is a space which allows for a new kind of *revelation through listening* – a revelation that will become a characteristic of this new field of documentary expression which already has so much in common with that other *auteur* tradition of documentary cinema and literature, so much more well known to the media critic and historian. There is the chance here then to encounter something of an interior world, to enter the vibrational and emotional landscape as if one were almost present “in” the scene. As the film director Robert Bresson has observed, “The ear works inwards; the eye, outwards”.

I am reminded too of the depression photography of Walker Evans and the documentary observations of James Agee: a genre is already here in development, only it is a disconnected and fragmented story – and in radio, unfortunately mostly unknown. (There is no international history of radio programmes, let alone in one field or genre; yet we do know this story of the cinema and in literature, if one interweaves the different strands: think of Dos Passos, Plimpton, Agee, Capote, Flaherty, Ivens, Resnais, Varda, Marker, Lorentz, Pennebaker, Morris.)

But I return to Braun and the origin story he gives for the “new acoustical feature” – because the Reunert case is unusual and in fact, actuality or “wild sound” did not take centre stage in features until the 1970s, or at least not until the advent of the new precision portable tape recorders like the Uher and the Nagra.
In London in 1964 Braun tells us how he persuaded the BBC to provide a recording van to cover a pub for one evening. He persuades them, he says, “to set up microphones in each corner of the pub, near the band, the loo and so on … It was all then recorded simultaneously on many, many tapes”. Writing to his boss in Berlin at SFB about such experiments, he announces: “Now a production has to be made, that consists of 15 minutes of sound in continuity”.

Braun imagines a whole new world for the feature documentary here, not confined and ordered by the pre-prepared script, nor dependent on studio sound effects. And when he later goes to the Prix Italia in 1966, he recalls thinking, “I had drilled a hole through the eggshell. I had reached the reality. Things could now speak by themselves”. It was at the Prix Italia however that Braun heard what he later described as, “the first real breakthrough in acoustic film”: a feature by a Polish radio and television producer, Witold Zadrowski, *Death of an Elephant*. Zadrowski had “beat him to it”, Braun admits. It was Zadrowski who became the new “Columbus”: “the archetype, the ante-type: a hunter” (an archetype also familiar in the history of documentary cinema and non-fiction literature, new journalism et cetera): “a single figure and not a production team”.

In this origin story (one probably of several if we begin to dig deep enough), Witold the hunter sails to somewhere in Africa, with one of the first portable recorders. And, says Braun, he is carrying an omnidirectional microphone, his “magic ball” (Zadrowski). In Africa, Witold meets Bob Cottovich, a specialist in hunting lions and elephants. He accompanies him on his next hunt. This is a production of forty-two minutes (played in its entirety at the conference, complete with written translation for us to follow), and it is almost nothing but the sonic mise-en-scene created by judicious editing of this wild sound or actuality – “just keeping the mike always open” as Braun explains (not unlike film director Antonioni’s “method”: of course only possible with effective portable recorders and large supplies of tape). “Cotter is hunting the elephant”, says Braun. “Witold is hunting Cotter! It’s a hunt on two levels … and the cast? Just four people: two hunters, a trecker, and a Masai warrior with a spear … And of course an elephant and one magic microphone”. Braun has destroyed now his own Columbus claims, hailing this little known reporter from behind the Iron Curtain as the true pioneer for the new acoustic filmmaking in radio. It was “him with his magic ball, in Africa, in ‘65, with the first [radio] documentary ever made to my knowledge, completely from the beginning to end just as a rough montage of life recordings – him and his equipment and an African situation”.

This new approach to radio was out there then, independently developing and often in isolation, its communication being hampered by cultural, political and linguistic barriers. But as I have stressed, there were few chances for this kind of radio to travel prior to Braun’s efforts (and if we are to believe his accounts, few attended the documentary sessions at the Prix Italia at this early stage). So, although Braun was beaten to the new “continent” of radio feature-making where actuality could at last become the subject itself, Braun was able to
pioneer something equally significant, which likewise has had little commentary from critics or media historians. Through Braun’s seeking out of the “best the world of radio had to offer” in this field, he established a movement (a culture within radio) which must be considered in a more broad context not only of sound broadcasting but as part of an expressive and revelatory documentary culture (which in turn is an international cross-cultural development of ideas as much as of a practice). What Braun most admired in Laurence Gilliam of the BBC’s renowned Features Department for example – Braun describes Gilliam as “the first one in the history of radio and features to create a culture of the feature” – Braun seeks out and goes on to develop beyond the BBC, and indeed beyond its legacy to Germany. He does this in spite of the obvious national, political, cultural and linguistic barriers which continue to separate and remove state/public radios from each other’s influence and which also militate against such international cultures of innovation and formal sophistication.25

Braun heard what he had been hoping to hear – the sounds of a new radio – in some surprising places: in Yugoslavia, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and Denmark, and as an astonishing experiment within French radio’s new and exploratory “workshop”, the Atelier de creation radiophonique. Dissatisfied with what he saw as the dominant trends in radio feature-making, drama (hörspiel) and reportage (“the 60s was an ice age for the feature”) combined with a need to find like minds, Braun actively sought out work of a challenging or accomplished nature wherever it turned up. His new IFC likewise thwarted the usual bureaucracies and meritocracies rife in State radios by independently inviting only key practitioners to his conferences.

The introduction and development of new technologies could at last deliver to radio the possibility for something distinctly “radiogenic”26 – new forms which would be based not so much on “transmission” or adaptation but on a new idea of construction and “narration” through sound, an intensive listening and compositional practice, a “writing on tape” with “scenes” captured outside of a studio, en plein air: a new art of “wild sound recording”. A form that contained within it the possibility, (always there from radio’s most early days) of being “the radio of radio.”27

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2 Terms used in France. “Montage” and “feature” also used in Denmark.
Mortley, as is Braun, is a key documentary auteur in this history. She began her exploratory and often experimental work in features in the Australian Broadcasting Commission/Corporation (ABC) in the 1970s, and from the mid ’80s to the present has been working independently in Europe.

The first actual competition (exclusively radio until 1957, and then after that for both radio and television) was held in 1949 in Venice. First and second prizes were awarded to “feature” programs: Frédérick General, (France) and The Old and Truthful Story of Rumpelstiltskin (BBC Features Department).

It was established also as a response to a growing and more sophisticated international radio feature and documentary output, especially that coming from the main public broadcasters of Western Europe – but also from parts of Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia.

“Feature” was a term borrowed from newspaper journalism (initially by the BBC) to describe a range of programs concerned primarily with factual storytelling. Paul Rotha, a pioneer in British film documentary remarked in “Television and the Future of Documentary”, Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television 9 (1954-55), 369, “In retrospect, the BBC began to develop the documentary idea in radio as far back as the mid thirties … Features [or] radio documentary was developed very largely through the guidance and stimulus of Laurence Gilliam”. But the term goes back even earlier to Lance Sieveng’s “Research Section” established by John Reith in 1928 “to browse over the whole field of programmes, to initiate ideas, to experiment generally”. Val Gielgud cited in Asa Briggs, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Vol. 2  (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 89.

As part of this historical awakening, the first international collection of features was compiled by the European Broadcasting Union: “The I.F.C. (International Feature Conference) Collection”, (Geneva: EBU-UER, 2004) commemorating thirty years of the IFC.

Braun heard Bridson’s “The End of Mussolini” and Cecil McGivern’s features about radar whilst at the BBC in 1964. These programs, says Rotha, 369, “became as well known to the listening public” as similar documentaries “were to the cinema going audience. Their counterpart in the U.S. was, perhaps, the brilliant documentary programmes by Norman Corwin”.

In this feature, originally produced live, Bridson “linked the action by having two sets of narrators … participants in the events. The transmission switched back and forth between Glasgow and Manchester studios, as the setting altered from the Scottish to the British camps, and the narrators tying the action together with verse … The Prince, his generals, and his opponents spoke in heroic prose, and the whole atmosphere was brilliant and glorious”. Description in Elkan Allan and Dorotheen Allan, Good Listening: A Survey of Broadcasting (London: Hutchinson, 1951).


The atelier was launched in October 1969, and represented a new and daring step in radio history internationally. It was established as a direct consequence of the events sweeping France in early 1968. Here was a nearly autonomous “free” space of some three hours in duration, dedicated to exploring what was possible in radio. The program offered a rare mix between genres and forms, jettisoning the format-driven approaches that dominated nearly everywhere else in radio at the time.


Magnetic recording, invented by Vladimir Poulsen in 1898, established itself only from 1944 onwards, following technological improvements mainly introduced in Germany: “The previously-used very fragile paper
support and the impractical steel wire being replaced by the polyester support by the late 1940s and early 1950s … magnetic tape was quickly to become a malleable support medium that could be recorded on, cut, pasted, erased and re-recorded on, giving birth to the new sound techniques of *dubbing*, *re-recording*, *editing* and *overdubbing*. In Christian Hugonnet and Pierre Walder, *Stereophonic Sound Recording: Theory and Practice*, trans. Patrick R.W. Roe (Chichester New York Weinheim Brisbane Singapore Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, 1998).

16 A significant amateur recording movement in France, *Chasseurs de son* (Sound hunters) also contributed to the environment of experimentation of the 1960s. They were making sound portraits captured “in the field” on new portable tape machines, little audio films of life *sur le vif*. Of course this equipment was also being discovered by the emergent *nouvelle vague* of French filmmakers such as Jean Rouch, Jean-Luc Godard, et cetera.


18 Charles Parker and Ewan MacColl’s “radio ballads” for example, which used the portable Midget recorder to capture the voices of ordinary people from all over the United Kingdom. Parker’s voices, however, are heavily edited and mixed with MacColl’s songs so as to form the “ballad”/story.


20 Cited in Kaye Mortley, “Five Sound Objects” (paper presented at the International Features Conference (IFC), Zagreb, April 2002).

21 Braun admits developments were in parallel: he says “You already had in France the expression “filme sonore” when I invented the expression “acoustic film” (acustica film) and the Zagreb “school” was exploring something similar at the same time”. Interview with author, Berlin, 2004. I note also that “acoustical film” was employed by Alfred Braun at Radio Berlin in 1930 to describe experimental radio work being made there: for example, Walter Ruttmann’s protodocumentary *Weekend*, using optical sound film, is well known in art history circles, although it is hardly known in radio. See Klaus Schöning, “The Contours of Acoustic Art”, *Theatre Journal* 43, no. 3 (1991).

22 The Nagra, built by Stefan Kudelski, a “chasseur de son” was the first compact and autonomous tape-recorder (*magnétophone*): portable and light compared to other machines of the time (early 1950s), by the late 1960s it became the machine of choice for both filmmakers in the field and radio feature makers. Yann Paranthoën would later write for his radio documentary *On Nagra* for the ACR: “Radio before the Nagra, was it really radio?” See Yann Paranthoën, *On Nagra*... (Paris: Co-edit edition Radio France, INA, SCAM, 1993), Radio *documentaire de creation*.

23 These recordings became part of *Londoner Abend* (“London Evening”), produced in 1964. Braun used extended “takes” or sound scenes recorded in the field with the help of the BBC.


25 *Braun Interview (2).*
A term first used by the French radio writer, Paul Deharme in the early 1920s although Lance Sieveking uses the word in his *The Stuff of Radio* (London: Cassell and Company Limited, 1934).

See Sieveking, 26.