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Vox Populi?: The Recorded Voice and Twentieth-Century British History

ABSTRACT The vernacularisation of voice-recording technology over the course of the last century means that we have largely forgotten what a strange and quasi-magical thing it is to preserve someone's voice. This article, first delivered as the Ben Pimlott Memorial Lecture, traces the development of voice-recording technologies in the twentieth century from gramophone records to miniaturised mobile devices. It argues that the recording of the voice led to a renewed awareness of the voice as a trained instrument, as a marker of individual identity and as a way of immortalising speech and preserving an auditory remnant of people after their deaths. Recording technologies extended the range of voices that could be heard by taking the BBC and other voice capturers beyond the London-based live studios and what Lord Reith referred to as the anonymous 'collective personality' of the radio announcers; and it made people listen intently to voices as both expressions of the self and as vehicles for communicating with others. The voice recording technologies of the last century were essentially democratising, allowing the 'voice of the people' to be heard in authentic everyday settings, albeit in fragmentary and imperfect ways.

KEYWORDS voice, recording, tape, broadcasting, radio, oral history

In the spring of 1935, the Post Office held a much-publicised 'Girl with the Golden Voice' competition, to find a young woman to make the sound recording for its new talking clock. 5000 applicants, all from London's telephone exchanges, took part in months of competitive heats, which required them all to say 'The new rule will prove a boon' and 'Have you had Hatch End 866?' so they could be assessed on dentals, sibilants, phrasing and pleasing intonation.¹ In front of a judging panel comprising the actress Dame Sybil Thorndike, the

poet laureate John Masfield and the BBC's chief announcer Stuart Hibberd, the 24 finalists had to read passages from Milton and Shakespeare from behind a screen 'so that nicely waved hair and pretty faces and clothes should not confuse the issue'.²

The winning voice, belonging to 26-year-old Miss Ethel Cain of the Victoria Exchange was, in the judges' opinion, 'beautiful in quality, with fullness of tone, with nothing niggardly about it, and nothing rasping in the breathing or in the note'.³ Major G.C. Tryon, the Postmaster General, 'beamed at her with a benign, fatherly smile, and said he was proud that England could produce such a beautiful voice'.⁴ According to one contemporary historian, Cain's voice was so soothing that lonely people would dial TIM just to listen to it, and besotted men would attempt to get in touch with its owner.⁵ George Bernard Shaw wrote a play about her, 'The Girl with the Golden Voice', a two-hander in which he himself spoke to her on the telephone.⁶ A GPO engineer advised that 'in view of the possibility of certain members of the public becoming so enamoured of the Golden Voice that they are impelled to listen to it for an indefinite period, an automatic device disconnects the circuit at the end of three minutes'.⁷ Oddly, a 1939 GPO film promoting the talking clock, *At The Third Stroke* – in which a man argues with his wife and finds consolation in the Girl with the Golden Voice, climbing into bed and asking her out on the telephone before falling sleep with a smile on his face - seemed actively to encourage such compulsive behaviour.

Some recorded voices emphatically reinforce our sense of historical distance from them. The much parodied, soapbox tones of Bob Danvers-Walker, the commentator on Pathe cinema newsreels from the Second World War onwards, or the meticulously modulated RP of BBC announcers such as Stuart Hibberd, Freddy Grisewood or Alvar Lidell, appear to speak to us not just from another time, but from another mental landscape. For the democratisation of voice and accent has become a lazy shorthand for embodying social change – a means by which we, with an air of condescension towards our immediate

ancestors, bracket them off as stuffier and more class-conscious than us. At first glance it might seem easy to file the story of the Girl with the Golden Voice under the same heading. And yet it is clear her voice was being judged not just on its class-appropriate pronunciation but on its quality, clarity and even beauty. Masfield said that the Golden Voice should sound ‘like a nightingale singing at midnight without any trace of over-emphasis or personal advertisement’.⁸ Cain’s voice, heard by hundreds of millions of callers a year, seemed to carry not just the authority of officially sanctioned time but also the promise of some sort of intimate connection in an increasingly anonymised and automatised mass society. ‘It is a great office to be the very voice of Time speaking to an inquiring and uncertain world,’ a *Times* leader said.⁹

Most recorded voices at this time did, of course, communicate the tone and accent of a ruling class. Ideas about ideal voices change over time, and many of the ‘golden voices’ of the interwar years now sound highly affected - although the same might seem true to future listeners of the estuarine, glottal-stopped voices of our own time. But the development of recording technologies in the first half of the twentieth century led to a renewed awareness of the voice as a trained instrument, as a marker of individual identity and as a way of immortalising speech by allowing people to speak from beyond the grave. Recording technologies extended the range of voices that could be heard by taking the BBC and other voice capturers beyond the London-based live studios and what Lord Reith referred to as the anonymous ‘collective personality’ of the radio announcers;¹⁰ and, as with the talking clock, it made people listen intently to voices as both expressions of the self and as vehicles for communicating with others.

EARLY VOICE RECORDING

Since the wax cylinders of early phonographs were delicate and could not be copied until the 1890s, and then only with poor-quality reproduction, few people would have heard a recorded voice before the twentieth century.¹¹ The sense of estrangement created by the dissevering of voice from physical body was famously captured in the painting of the dog, Nipper, listening to ‘His Master’s Voice’, painted in 1898 by Mark Barraud and acquired in 1899 by the fledgling Gramophone Company. Even in the early twentieth century, hearing the voices of absent speakers was often seen as the preserve of mystics and mad people.¹² It was only with the arrival of national radio and a mass market for 78rpm gramophone records after the First World War that recorded voices were widely disseminated. The newness of the experience invited much public contemplation on the nature of the voice and how it could best be captured and carried by these new technologies. ‘Never has the human voice in particular ... received a place in our civilization such as it is receiving today,’ wrote the *Manchester Guardian* in 1931, noting the impact of the gramophone and the wireless. ‘All up and down the world voices are being discussed – their resonance, timbre, variation, and quality; whether they “come through” well or “blast” or “twang,” or irritate by their monotony.’¹³

In her 1933 book *Broadcasting*, the BBC’s first director of talks, Hilda Matheson, noted that disconcerting sense of near-recognition that radio performers felt when they listened to their own recorded voice played back to them and they heard it as others did, through the air rather than conducted through the bones of their skull. ‘We scarcely remember when we could not speak; we are scarcely conscious of how we speak,’ she wrote. ‘Confront any man or woman with an audible record of his speech, and his feelings will vary from rage and incredulity to shame and embarrassment.’¹⁴ ‘I must apologise for my voice,’ one early broadcaster told his listeners. ‘Since my last talk I’ve had the somewhat alarming experience of hearing my own voice on the Blattnerphone. I was frankly horrified. It struck

me as being almost the most unpleasant voice I'd ever heard.'¹⁵ Another wrote that 'my voice was a very nasty shock to me. It was affected and drawly, and when I hopefully asked someone whether I really sounded like that he said I did.'¹⁶

Ludwig Blattner, the publicity-conscious manager of the Gaiety Cinema in Manchester, had been giving his customers the chance to pay to hear their own voice on his patented recording machine, the Blattnerphone, as early as 1929,¹⁷ and the BBC was using this cumbersome machine by 1931. But it was the lighter disc-cutting machines supplied by Cecil Watts's Marguerite Sound Studios from 1933, which could be carried in mobile recording vans, that were central to the development of the radio 'feature', which wove the recorded voice together with sound effects and music to create an aural picture. The development of mobile recording was pivotal in extending the repertoire of radio voices beyond the smooth-voiced, cultivated intonations of announcers like Grisewood and Hibberd who set the tone of Lord Reith's BBC. In the first BBC feature to use a mobile recording van (hired from a film company), Lawrence Gilliam's *'Opping 'Ooliday* (1934), its recorded voices were 'microphone snap-shots' of hop pickers leaving London Bridge station in the early morning on a special train, and being hired by Kent farmers.¹⁸

By 1936 the BBC had three recording vans of its own. A young BBC producer based in Manchester, Olive Shapley, set out specifically to record working-class voices using one of these units, making features in Durham mining villages, a northern seaside hotel, and the all-night cafes and loading depots frequented by long-distance lorry drivers. She found that, while ordinary people were intimidated in a studio, they spoke more naturally when recorded in their homes or the street.¹⁹ Shapley's first feature using the mobile unit, *£.s.d.: A Study in Shopping* (1936), was made in Sowerby Bridge near Halifax, and the arrival of the large, unwieldy van generated much excitement in the town.²⁰ This pattern was repeated wherever the mobile vans went, their arrival often being followed eagerly in the local press.²¹ But they

were limited in their range: although the BBC's first van, the M53, was referred to by *Wireless World* as the 'BBC's Flying Squad' and was nifty enough to visit the Hebrides and Sark, its two successors, the ones used in the regions, weighed seven tons each, had a 20mph maximum speed and could not negotiate the narrow, hilly roads in fringe areas like the West Country, Wales and the Scottish Highlands – the standard excuse when local papers complained, as they often did, that the BBC was not recording people in their area.²²

The introduction in 1935 of the TD/7, a twin-turntable gramophone with a tracking arm, had allowed producers to cue up the precise groove of a disc and put together feature programmes that were smooth amalgamations of different voices.²³ The producer D.G. Bridson, also based in Manchester, used the TD/7 and the mobile unit to make lyrical features combining poetic commentary, music and voices recorded on location. In *Coronation Scot* (1938), for instance, he traced the course of the London to Glasgow express, recording the voices of housewives, farmers and workers who lived near the railway line, so listeners heard the accents change slowly from Cockney to Gorbals.²⁴

Alongside this growing sense that 'ordinary' voices needed to be heard, however, was the belief that recording devices could be used as a way of preserving an auditory remnant of distinguished persons after their death. As early as 1925 the BBC was working with the British Museum and His Master's Voice to broadcast programmes of 'speeches, vocal and instrumental music and recitations by distinguished persons now dead', including recordings of Queen Victoria, Tennyson reciting 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' and Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree declaiming 'To be or not to be'.²⁵ The BBC carried on with these programmes, featuring eminent Victorians like William Gladstone, Henry Morton Stanley and Florence Nightingale, into the mid-1930s.²⁶ The fact that the men and women who recorded their voices on the earliest phonographs were all now dead gave these efforts an added piquancy, but the voices of people who had just died also had the power to move. "He

being dead yet speaketh” has acquired a new and more literal meaning,’ declared *The Times* in February 1936, after listening to a record issued by the Gramophone Company of the late King George V as he addressed the Empire from Sandringham just two months earlier.²⁷

The belief that human voices needed to be captured before they vanished forever underpinned the founding of the BBC Sound Archive in 1937. Marie Slocombe, who had joined the BBC as a holiday temp secretary in the Recorded Programmes Department that summer, was asked to tidy up a pile of Cecil Watts’s lacquer-coated aluminium discs, which were not archived because they could only be used about 20 times before they became too scratched to play. Sorting through recordings of H.G. Wells, Lloyd George, G.K. Chesterton and others, Slocombe obtained permission to send them to a record company for processing. Every week she would write a memorandum to her superiors explaining why she had selected four or five items for permanent pressing - on one occasion having to make a special case for preserving two copies of George Bernard Shaw’s voice. Although her initial motivation was simply that ‘these voices must be preserved’, she made the case for spending licence fee money by pointing to the worth of such voices to listeners of the future.²⁸ By the time the head of the BBC Recorded Programmes Department, Lynton Fletcher, played some of these recordings at a Foyles Literary Luncheon in 1941, there were 10,000 records in the library which, he said, ‘when laid on top of each other would stretch as high as the Tower of Babel’. The writer and barrister Philip Guedalla, introducing Fletcher, said that this ‘gallery of voices’ allowed us to ‘walk back by a very broad and a very easy highway into the past’.²⁹ The BBC Sound Archive, as it was renamed, later grew into a more general library of news events and programmes but its original guiding impulse was as a repository for voices that might otherwise be lost.

This sense that new recording technologies needed to archive the voices of important people before they died carried into the postwar era. Bertie Rodgers’s longrunning radio

project for the Third Programme, *Irish Literary Portraits*, beginning in 1949 and interviewing people who had known authors such as Yeats, Joyce and J.M. Synge, pioneered oral history as sound montage, what came to be known as the ‘Rodgers technique’: editing these voices, with minimal narration, into a virtual conversation that surprised even the participants when they listened to it.³⁰ A renaissance of spoken word radio on the new Third Programme coincided fortuitously with the arrival of the long-playing record and the launch in 1951 of Argo Records which, inspired by Caedmon in the US, soon began recording authors or actors reciting poetry and other literary works on LPs. One of Argo’s first big successes was the 1954 BBC radio recording of *Under Milk Wood*, subtitled a ‘play for voices’ - its First Voice provided by the beautifully sonorous Richard Burton. With the help of Peter Orr of the British Council’s Department of Recorded Sound, who travelled the country interviewing them, Argo also recorded over a hundred poets (ranging in age from T.S. Eliot to Sylvia Plath) for the series *The Poet Speaks*.

The number of poets recorded in high fidelity around this time is striking when one considers that the voices of Rudyard Kipling and W.B. Yeats, who died in 1936 and 1939 respectively, are available only in fragmentary, scratchy recordings which do not sound much better than those of Tennyson on the earliest phonograph.³¹ John Masefield, a longstanding champion of the spoken word, welcomed the return to poetry recital via LP. In 1959 he issued his long poem ‘The Story of Ossian’ on Argo Records before bringing it out in print. The writer and critic John Wain, as the *Observer*’s ‘spoken word’ reviewer, looked forward to the ‘imminent rescue of the poet by hi-fi and LP from the bear-hug of the printing press’.³² Observing that his former students at the University of Reading had no idea of literary form because they saw the printed word merely as an ideogram that bypassed the ear on its way to the brain, his prescribed treatment for this ‘print-coddled mind’ was hearing poetry spoken aloud on LP.³³

THE RISE OF THE TAPE RECORDER

The arrival of the tape recorder helped to expand and democratise this field collection of voices by gradually deprofessionalising it and bringing it definitively out of the recording studio. ‘There is no end to the thrills which this magic entertainer can bring,’ claimed the advertisement for the evocatively named Soundmirror, which in 1949 became the first commercially available magnetic tape recorder to arrive in Britain. ‘It will record the humorous patter of your favourite comedian, the art of the orator, the fun of a party or important family occasions like weddings.’³⁴ For the first few years, however, its market was restricted to professionals or serious hobbyists, and a tape recorder was rare enough to be a tourist exhibit. The star attraction at Launceston borough fete in Cornwall in September 1950, for example, was ‘a recording machine (the first in Launceston) owned and operated by Messrs. L. and K. Dean, of the Westgate Radio. Adults and children queued up to speak into the microphone and a minute later, to hear their own voices played back over the machine’.³⁵

For professionals, the portable tape recorder meant crucially that they did not require a mobile recording van or sound engineer. Its introduction created a new type of anthropology, for it coincided with a widespread anxiety that local dialects and regional culture were being destroyed by rural depopulation and the growing dominance of national mass media, and that the authentic human voices of the regions needed to be recorded before they vanished.

Another fear at the time was that National Service training might cause young men to ‘scrape their tongues’ and lose their accents and dialects.³⁶ In Scotland a small number of amateur scholars, worried in particular about the decline of Gaelic, had already begun sporadic efforts to record voices. John Lorne Campbell had bought his first recorder, the Ediphone, before the Second World War, which he used to record people on Barra, but he failed to get public

funding and no universities or libraries wanted to archive his recordings. In 1947, inspired by the Irish Folklore Commission, which by then had over 50 fieldworkers collecting voices throughout Ireland, Campbell founded the Folklore Institute of Scotland with a few friends and used the Webster wire recorder, which he ordered by post from the US, to capture bards and storytellers in South Uist – although, since it needed mains electricity, he had to invite his informants to the Lochboisdale Hotel for recording sessions.³⁷

The arrival of the portable tape recorder gave fresh impetus to these disparate recording programmes. A charismatic guiding force was the Scottish poet and folklorist Hamish Henderson who, while staying as a guest of the Olivetti family at their villa near Ivrea in Italy after the war, was introduced to the company's new portable model. 'That tape-recorder struck me with the force of a revelation!' he said later. 'Here was a tool with which I could record, document and revitalise the song and musical tradition of Scotland. It was a windfall – like Newton's apple – out of the pure Alpine air!'³⁸ So when, in October 1950, the American musicologist Alan Lomax arrived in Scotland with a portable tape recorder to record folk songs, Henderson immediately understood its worth. He agreed to help Lomax by travelling round the northeast of Scotland recording songs - which he later described as 'like holding a tin can under the Niagara Falls'³⁹ – while the Celtic scholar Calum MacLean covered the Gaelic-speaking west with his brother, the poet Sorley MacLean. The resulting 25 tapes inaugurated the archive of the new School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh, which also served as a repository for extant scattered recordings, such as the Gaelic stories recorded by Campbell in the Outer Hebrides. The School's field workers, working on short-term contracts, began hitchhiking around Scotland with their recording equipment and living, according to Henderson, at 'sub-subsistence level'.⁴⁰

Henderson and Calum MacLean eventually won a fierce argument with Stewart Sanderson, the School's archivist, who thought that only carefully vetted material should be

kept and made available solely to academic researchers, and who wanted the tapes to be transcribed and then wiped and reused, as happened at the Irish Folklore Commission. Henderson and MacLean wanted everything kept and made as widely available as possible, believing the tapes contained ‘unique voices that must be preserved and made available to generations unborn’.⁴¹ By the early 1970s the School had a staff of 20 and 2500 hours of Scottish voices on 3600 reels of tape. Henderson would spend long afternoons in his office playing reel-to-reel recordings to friends and colleagues.⁴² ‘Behind the innocent, time-weathered walls of 27 George Square,’ the *Glasgow Herald* wrote in 1971, ‘lie meaty tales, songs and legends of witchcraft, love charms, curses, the Clearances, tragedies, illicit whisky-making, and gems from down the centuries.’⁴³

Stanley Ellis, the principal fieldworker for Harold Orton’s Survey of English Dialects at Leeds University, was similarly energised by the tape recorder. His institution had a long history of recording voices: F.W. Moorman, soon after his appointment as Professor of English in 1912, persuaded the university to buy a primitive wax-cylinder dictaphone and he would ride on a bicycle, his dictaphone strapped to it, to take field recordings of local dialect in Yorkshire villages. In 1928 Orton himself had initiated a survey of Northumbrian dialects and he aimed to continue this during and after the war at Leeds but petrol rationing, in place until 1950, severely hindered field collection.⁴⁴

In 1952, no longer hindered by petrol shortages, Ellis began riding round Britain in a BSA motorcycle and sidecar loaded with his new Simon Mark I portable recorder and packets of Ringtons tea used to persuade village postmistresses to put him in touch with the elderly agricultural workers whose dialect would be best preserved.⁴⁵ After Ellis’s marriage in spring 1953 the University supplied him with a caravan and a better tape recorder designed by a former BBC engineer, which also had a battery and converter. Ellis lived with his wife and, later, their first child on the road for the next five years, giving rise to a compellingly

titled scholarly article, 'Dialect-Hunting by Caravan'. At first this caravan was pulled by a 1936 Vauxhall 14hp car but this aged vehicle could not carry its load up steep hills, so fieldwork was initially confined to flat Lincolnshire - until in 1954, the university supplied a Land Rover and Ellis began covering the whole country from the home counties to the Scottish borders.⁴⁶ Maurice Varney, who studied dialectology at Leeds from 1955 to 1959, wrote later that 'when Stanley's land rover and caravan pulled up at the English Department after another expedition, we all trembled as if awaiting the arrival of a great explorer like Shackleton or Burton'.⁴⁷ This being the period of *My Fair Lady*'s long run in the West End (1958-63), Ellis's ability to place a regional accent to within a couple of miles led to newspapers describing him as 'a real-life Professor Higgins'.⁴⁸

These portable tape-recording projects bred imitators. In the early 1950s, the Department of Welsh at University College of Wales, Cardiff was inspired by the Leeds Survey and the School of Scottish Studies to buy a Grundig 500L tape recorder and send a research student, Vincent H. Phillips, to record some of the last Welsh speakers in the Vale of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire.⁴⁹ In 1957 Phillips was appointed to the staff of the new Welsh Folk Museum, but the museum had to borrow the Grundig from his old department for its fieldwork. In January 1958, Gruffydd John Williams, Professor of Welsh at Cardiff, made a radio appeal on behalf of the museum, asking for £2000 to buy recorders and a recording van. 'If we as Welshmen do not give the Welsh Folk Museum this opportunity we will be severely criticised by future generations,' he told listeners.⁵⁰ The funds raised enabled the museum to buy a Land Rover and an EMI portable tape recorder.⁵¹

The pioneering oral historian, George Ewart Evans, was an early adopter of this EMI machine, also known as the Midget. In 1948 Evans had moved with his family to Blaxhall, a Suffolk village whose location three miles from the nearest railway station, and with only one bus a week to Ipswich, had allowed its dialect to be preserved. His first book, *Ask the Fellows*

who Cut the Hay (1956), had emerged out of unrecorded conversations with neighbouring farmers, but that year David Bryson, head of the new BBC area station at Norwich, lent him a Midget, because Evans was about to move from Blaxhall and wanted to record his friends before he left. He was technically adept, having served as a radio operator during the war, and immediately saw the virtues of the Midget - particularly in a village like Blaxhall with no electricity, for it could be battery-operated.⁵² This enthusiasm for tape recording was unusual among sociologists and oral historians at this time. Michael Young of Bethnal Green's Institute of Community Studies, explaining why he and Peter Willmott had not used one for *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957), said that 'we didn't think tape recorders added very much'. Young's ICS colleague Dennis Marsden told another interviewer that 'we almost prided ourselves in that method' [of note taking without taping].⁵³ Evans used the Midget to capture not just what was said but ways of speaking, 'the verve and the sinewy texture of the language of the men and women who were born in the eighties of the last century ... as if their work, the work of their hands, had fashioned their tongue, and moulded their speech to economical and often memorable utterance'.⁵⁴

Many early users of the portable tape recorder were motivated by this sense that they were recording a pre-First World War generation which was a last link to pre-modern culture. The urgency of Evans's task was brought home to him when his first informant, a farmer called Robert Savage, died just before he began making recordings.⁵⁵ Calum Maclean, starting work in the west Highlands in 1947 for the Irish Folklore Commission, had told the *Glasgow Herald*: 'Time is vital. The really good storytellers are mostly over 70 years of age. Their stories must be recorded before it is too late.'⁵⁶ Often hearing news of the death of men he had recently interviewed, Stanley Ellis was similarly spurred on by a sense that further collection of voices needed to be done quickly.⁵⁷

BROADCASTING AND ORAL HISTORY

The portable tape recorder provided a bridge between this emergent field of oral history and radio broadcasting. In the early 1960s George Ewart Evans went on to work on BBC radio broadcasts about the oral folklore of hares and horses with another producer, David Thomson, who had pioneered oral history on the radio, travelling the Scottish highlands and islands in the late 1940s, recording storytellers on acetate disc for the BBC's *Country Magazine*. The Leeds Dialect Survey also developed a close relationship with the BBC, which agreed to make permanent pressings from Ellis's tapes for its Sound Archive, and Ellis was a frequent speaker on the Home Service and Third Programme, talking through his recordings of old farmers' reminiscences of country life before the First World War.⁵⁸

A first batch of six EMI Midget recorders had arrived at the BBC in early 1952.⁵⁹ In the same year the BBC launched a folk music and dialect recording scheme at the behest of its new Head of Recorded Programmes, Donegal-born (and folk-singing) Brian George, having already initiated a similar scheme in Ireland in 1947 with the Irish Folklore Commission. In 1953 Peter Kennedy of the English Folk Dance and Song Society began presenting a radio folk music series, *As I Roved Out*, which ran for 53 episodes until 1958, based on tape recordings of old songs and dialect made throughout Britain by himself and the Irish broadcaster and uilleann piper Seamus Ennis, with local experts like Hamish Henderson and the Sussex folk singer Bob Copper helping out in particular regions.⁶⁰ Indeed, the portable tape recorder gave a significant impetus to the postwar folk music revival: the ethnomusicologist A.L. 'Bert' Lloyd also used one to make field recordings for the radical label Topic Records.⁶¹

The EMI Midget had its greatest impact in BBC regional radio which, with the corporation's attentions diverted by television and the arrival of ITV, enjoyed substantial

independence in the decade after the war. By 1955 the BBC had over a hundred Midget recorders, many of them being employed in the regions.⁶² Richard Kelly, a BBC radio producer based in Newcastle, used them for his vox pop programme *Voice of the People*, which began in 1954, recording ordinary people around the streets and slums of the city. 'It's impossible to convey the shock of hearing Geordie accents coming out of the Rediffusion wooden wireless set which had hitherto spoken only in the voice of Whitehall and the occasional cockney comic,' recalled the TV producer Jim Walker, then working in Gateshead Public Library. 'It was like seeing your granny suddenly reading the News on the telly.'⁶³ *Voice of the People* (later renamed *Voice of the North*) was hugely popular in the region and was still attaining record listening figures well into the 1960s.⁶⁴ Some items from the programme fed into the national network, being heard on Jack De Manio's *Today* programme,⁶⁵ and they helped establish the vox pop as a broadcast genre.

Denis Mitchell also used the EMI Midget in his 1954 series for the North of England Home Service, *People Talking*, based on his night walks through the streets of Manchester, talking to the homeless, criminals and others on the margins of society. Mitchell mostly dispensed with narration, letting these voices come through the radio on their own. When he adapted several of his radio features for television in the late 1950s, sound cameras were still rare and he used the stream of unscripted talk from his tape recordings with impressionistic silent shooting, in preference to the conventional dubbed narration. This 'think-tape' technique was aimed at evoking the interior lives of those on camera or creating telling juxtapositions: *Morning in the Streets* (1959), for example, begins with a woman talking longingly about the countryside ('every shade of green – I didn't know there were so many shades of green – and the little lambs') while the camera pans along a row of grim terraced houses. The playwright Dennis Potter, assigned to work under Mitchell in the winter of 1959-60, called it 'the stretch of tension between sound and picture'.⁶⁶

‘I’d fallen in love with the human voice,’ Mitchell said. ‘It wasn’t what they said so much as how they said it ... Actors can’t do it – we’ve tried. You can’t reproduce it, the passion and the sadness imprisoned.’⁶⁷ Of one of his radio and television documentaries, *In Prison*, made inside Strangeways, he said that ‘the most telling and moving thing about prison is the sort of droop in people’s voices, and the inescapable echo of what sounds like a vast public lavatory’.⁶⁸ Mitchell became convinced of the unique properties of each human voice after interviewing a 107-year-old gypsy woman who ‘spoke in a kind of blank verse’. Since she had no teeth the recording was unusable – a common problem with older informants, bad or missing teeth ruling people out of inclusion in the Leeds Dialect Survey⁶⁹ - and he asked numerous actresses to read the transcript for him but could not bring it to life. ‘Written English is almost dead, don’t you think?’, he said in 1960. ‘Severed from experience? ... But up and down the country people are still speaking a natural poetry.’⁷⁰

Charles Parker, a features producer for the BBC Midland Region in Birmingham, later said of the Midget that ‘this little machine has taught me socialism’.⁷¹ The Midget was the essential equipment for the *Radio Ballads* which Parker made with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger between 1958 and 1964. For the first of these, *The Ballad of John Axon*, Parker and MacColl went to Stockport (where the eponymous train driver who lost his life trying to save others from a runaway train had worked) to gather field recordings which they intended to be used, according to then established practice, as the basis for a script read by actors – but they found the voices they gathered had an emotional heft no actor could convey. MacColl had gained experience of recording voices while working at the BBC in Manchester in the 1930s – having, for instance, interviewed people in doss houses and seamen’s missions for Olive Shapley’s *Homeless People* (1938)⁷² – which convinced him that recorded speech had ‘the excitement of an experience relived and communicated directly without dilution of additives, living speech un glossed by author’s pen or actor’s voice’.⁷³ When *The Ballad of John Axon*

went out on the evening of 2 July 1958, just before *Today in Parliament*, Paul Ferris of the *Observer* found the voices of the railwaymen and their families so affecting that he felt the mahogany tones of John Snagge, who introduced the programme before segueing into *Today in Parliament* after it, to be a discordant intrusion.⁷⁴

The Radio Ballads were a creative amalgam of voice and music, combining fragments of taped speech (the verse) and sung recitative (the refrain), the whole being knitted together by folk songs and jazz improvisations. By the third ballad, *Singing the Fishing*, they had perfected this elision of speech and song. Its star, Sam Larner, an 84-year-old Suffolk sailor, was a traditional singer and he interspersed his interview with country songs and ballads as well as speaking in a richly musical mode full of similes, rhymes and aphorisms. Parker had by then developed a new studio technique: instead of editing the whole programme with scissors and razor blade as before, he cued up the recorded voices on tape in the studio so the musicians could treat them almost like orchestra members, matching their own riffs to their beat and pitch.⁷⁵

Parker believed, like John Wain did of the LP, that the tape recorder was honouring the musicality of the vernacular voice after five centuries of dominance by print, his position being neatly summarised in the title of one of his unpublished articles: ‘Why Can’t the Educated Speak English?’ Middle-class talk, he felt, was ‘a barrier to hide behind, not ... a means of communication’, while the vernacular was ‘rich ... accurate, economical’.⁷⁶ In *Song of the Road*, about the building of the M1 motorway, MacColl similarly noted that, while the labourers sprinkled their speech with metaphor, dramatic tense changes and extended analogies, the surveyors spoke in ‘a reasoned, impassive, uninvolved stream of sound’, using clipped accents, impersonal pronouns and passive voices.⁷⁷ But Parker and MacColl saw the ballads as artworks rather than studies in sociological verisimilitude. They were happy to rework the recorded speech, removing extraneous words and stumbles and editing to make it

fit a musical line. ‘I traffic in illusion, not in “realism”’, Parker wrote in a letter to the *Listener* after its reviewer had criticised *Song of a Road*. ‘If instead of a paintbrush or a pen, I use a midget tape recorder, this does not make me a “realist” any more than Breughel or Dickens.’⁷⁸

The Radio Ballads, as with the work of other radio producers using the new portable tape recorders, thus spoke to a particular cultural moment. Seeking to combine authenticity with affective power, they used ordinary voices as a counter to both the increasingly anachronistic BBC accent and a plasticised mass culture which they felt was diluting regional diversity. The focus on the vernacular voice was part of a general rediscovery of working-class, non-metropolitan experience at this time – evident also in the northern new wave in cinema, the provincial accents heard on programmes made by the ITV regional companies and the working-class sociology undertaken by the Institute of Community Studies, Richard Hoggart and others. This rediscovery was both progressive and nostalgic, embracing the social-democratic, egalitarian impulses of postwar, welfare-state social democracy while also seeking to revive traditional forms of culture as a bulwark against what they saw as a blandly homogeneous, Americanised, commercial mass media.

But the change of regime in radio from the early 1960s onwards meant that it became harder for the domestic anthropology and oral history that flourished in the age of the Midget recorder to find outlets. In 1964, BBC managers cancelled the production of any more Radio Ballads and the following year, as television commanded ever more resources, the BBC’s radio features department was disbanded. Radio 3, inaugurated in 1967, was less interested in the spoken word than the old Third, and in 1970, following the controversial *Broadcasting in the Seventies* report, the BBC regions were effectively killed off. Many of the pioneering tape-recording radio producers of the 1950s and 1960s lamented what they saw as the disappearance of the ordinary voice from broadcasting. Philip Donnellan, who used

Mitchell's think-tape technique to adapt several of Parker's radio ballads for BBC television in the early 1970s, complained that it was being usurped by documentaries fronted by 'the quintessential Whickerwork [Alan Whicker] figure ... The convention and the ideology were made flesh and dwelt among us in the form of Clark, Bronowski, Kee, Attenborough and a hundred other lesser godlets.'⁷⁹ 'There are important lessons to be learnt about the spoken word, and our failure, by and large, to honour it in broadcasting,' wrote Charles Parker in 1977. 'It is my experience that all around us still, in factory or mine or city street, in fishing-boat or lorry cab or gipsy caravan, there is a wealth of spoken English to draw upon.'⁸⁰

FROM CASSETTE TAPE TO SOUNDSCAPE

Weighing 16 pounds and measuring 16x8x8 inches, the Midget tape recorder was inaptly named, especially when its operator also had to carry round a battery pack, though it became slightly more portable in 1958 when transistors replaced valves. As one of the villagers Evans recorded asked him: 'If that's a Midget how big are the grown-up ones?'⁸¹ Seeing one of these huge reel-to-reels for the first time, Terence Morris suggests, 'could be as unsettling as the great plate cameras with which the Victorians captured their images of compliant – and often naked – savagery.'⁸² The School of Scottish Studies had the additional problem that some of the very religious Hebridean islanders disliked the idea of their voices being preserved after their deaths.⁸³ Many of the tape-recording ethnographers of the 1950s developed techniques to put interviewees, unused to the technology, at their ease. Charles Parker would sit at the feet of his interviewees to make himself subservient to them. His namesake, the oral historian and broadcaster Tony Parker, also tried to sit on a smaller chair than his informants so he was at a lower eye level.⁸⁴ Stanley Ellis often had to reassure his interviewees that he was not from 'the wireless' or 'the papers', and he soon found that he

could use his caravan, which excited much interest when he parked it in their fields, as an icebreaker with the farmworkers he wanted to interview.⁸⁵ Denis Mitchell, according to Philip Donnellan, said little, ‘holding the mic with one hand and a ciggie with the other, encouraging people only with his look of battered and opaque world-weariness’.⁸⁶

Non-professionals did not normally use the Midget and other large, expensive models. By 1955, British sales of tape recorders were still only about 40,000 a year - sold, according to *The Economist*, to ‘a tribe of avant-garde churchmen, delving psychiatrists and progressive teachers’.⁸⁷ But the tape recorder was becoming a vogueish item: in Richard Hamilton’s pop art collage, ‘Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Home So Different, So Appealing?’, created for the Independent Group’s 1956 exhibition *This Is Tomorrow*, its cornucopia of consumer durables includes a Boosey and Hawkes ‘Reporter’ tape recorder. ‘TV has thumped sound radio, but over on the other side of the suburban living-room you’ll find the tape-recorder as naturally as the magazine-rack,’ wrote John Wain in 1958.⁸⁸ In the late 1950s, Tape Recording Clubs sprang up throughout the country, with a mostly young male membership, who exchanged tapes, swapped expertise and arranged field recording trips – although they were generally more interested in recording actuality in public places than in capturing voices *per se*. By 1960, there were nearly 200 different models of recorder on the UK market, with a quarter of a million machines sold every year, the cheapest at about £20.⁸⁹

As the tape recorder became more commonplace, it created some anxiety in public places among people who worried that their voices were being appropriated without their consent. In May 1956, three Conservative candidates walked out of a Ratepayers’ Association meeting at Cleveleys in Lancashire because a tape recorder was being used, one maintaining that what he said was copyright.⁹⁰ In July 1958, a man was ejected from the stands at the Royal Show at Bristol for trying to record the Queen Mother’s voice for his sick mother.⁹¹ In March 1960 a Conservative councillor was ordered to remove a tape recorder he

took in to a Salford City Council meeting. He had planned to drive round the city in a loudspeaker van playing the recording so that ratepayers might hear ‘a picture of Socialist dictatorship more vivid than they have ever had before’.⁹² There remained a feeling that voices, as a unique signature of the self, were owned by their originators and that they should have control over their recording and dissemination.

The still relatively unfamiliar technology of the tape recorder was the central inspiration for Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*, first performed in October 1958 with the Irish actor Patrick Magee. When Beckett was unable to hear Magee reading extracts from his *Molloy* on the BBC Third Programme, Martin Esslin of the BBC’s European productions department brought a tape recorder to Paris so Beckett could listen to it. Beckett wrote *Krapp’s Last Tape* after becoming fascinated with the sound of Magee’s recorded voice.⁹³ Set on Krapp’s 69th birthday on a ‘late evening in the future’,⁹⁴ it consists of him playing earlier versions of his voice recorded on each of his birthdays over the last 40 years. At various points Krapp hugs the recorder and even mimics fellatio with the microphone, as the machine seems to promise access to earlier versions of himself. But it is an illusion: the recording, coming through the unnatural, hissy sound of the magnetic tape, is nothing like the embodied self that once was.

It was not until the arrival in Britain of the first compact cassette recorders, manufactured by the Dutch firm Philips, in time for Christmas 1965, with ‘snap-in cassettes for easy, one-hand loading’,⁹⁵ that the tape recorder began to lose these uncanny associations and emerged as a banal, everyday item. Over the next seven years, the cassette recorder had a faster growth rate than any other domestic electronic product and by 1973 sales were over 4 million.⁹⁶ Initially designed for dictation, the cassette soon caught on for domestic use because it was small and light (only 3oz), of a universal standard and could be slotted into the machine without having to thread tape awkwardly around guides and tape heads. By the late

1960s, Dolby B noise reduction had made the sound acceptable enough to be used by the academic oral historians who were beginning to emerge, although up until the late 1970s many preferred the better definition of the reel-to-reel Uher Report Monitor.⁹⁷ The ease of collecting voices on cassette helped to generate new kinds of oral history and non-fiction writing – such as the melding of a literary and spoken voice in *Akenfield* (1969), in which Ronald Blythe combined taped conversations with villagers collected by travelling round several neighbouring East Suffolk villages on an old Raleigh bicycle, with his own interview notes, memories and observations.⁹⁸ This montage technique, of recorded interviews transcribed and tidied up into long dramatic monologues, was widely emulated in works such as Mary Chamberlain's *Fenwomen* (1975), and Tony Parker's *Lighthouse* (1975) and *The People of Providence* (1983).

To the dismay of some fellow oral historians, Parker wiped all his tapes and shredded the longhand transcripts once the radio programme or book he was working on was done. This was partly because his interviewees were often criminals and he wanted to assure them that no one else would hear the tape, but also because he saw the written script or book as his ultimate end. He called the process 'composing', feeling that the rhythm and pace of classical symphonies provided him with the template for linking these voices together, editing and changing word order and omitting whole interviews if they did not fit the emerging pattern.⁹⁹ Another art form owing much of its success, as Derek Paget argues, to 'the flexibility and unobtrusiveness of the portable cassette recorder'¹⁰⁰ was verbatim theatre, pioneered by Charles Parker in the Birmingham-based Banner Company which he founded in 1973, and which recorded and transcribed interviews as the basis for a script spoken by actors. As in the dramatic monologues of Blythe et al., verbatim theatre was a hybrid form which used recorded voices as raw material but transformed them into something more shaped and structured.

Writing on ‘the perils of the transcript’ in an early issue of *Oral History*, Raphael Samuel argued that in Blythe’s *Akenfield* the spoken word was being ‘boxed into the categories of written prose’, transformed into grammatical, punctuated sentences that had little connection with the rhythms and cadences of speech. He contrasted it with George Ewart Evans’s then most recent book, *Where Beards Wag All*, also about a group of Suffolk villagers, in which the reported speech was ‘ragged at the edges; it twists and turns, gnaws away at meanings and coils itself up’.¹⁰¹ In fact, although Evans transcribed his speakers meticulously using phonetic spellings and accents, he did often neaten syntax and omit verbal redundancies.¹⁰² These longstanding arguments in oral history about whether hesitations and repetitions should be smoothed out in transcripts of interviews never really addressed the fact that the transcript itself, however accurately it was transcribed, was becoming the key material for the oral historian to work with – whereas the early users of portable tape recorders had been interested in the voice itself, in all its inescapably non-textual corporeality.

Inevitably, as tape recorders became more portable and recording voices easier, and a small double-sided cassette could capture 90 minutes instead of the 15-minute bursts managed by the Midget, some of the radical sense of excitement about capturing voices that might be lost forever was itself lost, and the focus became more on what was being said rather than how it was being said. Perhaps the same disenchantment of the recorded voice can be glimpsed in the books-on-tape industry that flourished from the early 1980s onwards, prompted chiefly by the increase in car use. Whereas the early days of the long-playing record had generated an interest in trained voices like Richard Burton and Robert Speight discoursing at length in poetry, oratory and Shakespearean verse, the most popular books on tape were BBC comedy programmes and abridged novels.

Towards the end of the century, however, the miniaturisation of sound recorders led to a rediscovery of the expressive and evocative potential of the recorded voice. In the new arts

of ‘sound mapping’ and ‘sound walking’, urban artists used recorded voices as a way of marking landscapes and experiences lost to new development. One of the first such projects was Graeme Miller’s *Linked*, an invisible artwork launched in 2003 along a three-mile route of the M11 link road where there had been protests against its construction in the 1990s. Miller hired a team of five researchers to talk to local residents and road protestors, and ended up with hundreds of hours of recorded interviews. Using an electronic headset tuned to a particular wavelength, the walker-listener picks up these voices which are broadcast on 20 transmitters fixed to lampposts. The transmitters have stable computer chips and no moving parts that might wear out so as long as they have a supply of electricity, they could last for a century or more, perhaps outliving the new road itself. *Linked* is thus about the survival of the human voice in the face of physical destruction: he being dead yet speaketh.

After *Linked*, similar projects flourished, often focusing on urban areas about to be redeveloped. Like the practice of rescue archaeology, where archaeological traces threatened by new building were recorded before they were bulldozed, these artworks tried to rescue local voices in areas earmarked for redevelopment. The Lottery-funded King’s Cross Voices (2004-8), for instance, was dedicated to preserving the voices of local people, such as shopkeepers, railway workers and prostitutes, in sound trails combining music, sound effects and human voices. These projects aimed to be not simply auditory but sensual experiences. The ‘memoryscape’ projects, created by Toby Butler for the Museum of London along the River Thames, employed binaural sound, which creates a wraparound effect as though the voices of people who used to work along the river are walking alongside the listener instead of just coming through headphones.¹⁰³ Something of the strange ethereality of the radio signal to early twentieth-century listeners is recaptured in these soundscapes, in their capacity to spirit voices invisibly through space.

CONCLUSION

The days of intrepid voice capture, with domestic anthropologists travelling to the farthest fringes of the country to record people on cumbrous technology, are long gone. The vernacularisation of voice-recording technology over the course of the last century means that we have largely forgotten what a strange and quasi-magical thing it is to preserve someone's voice. Perhaps it is time to re-enchant the recorded voice and listen to it more carefully.

Fortunately, the arrival of high-fidelity sound streaming on the Internet, allowing digitised sound archives to be uploaded using file-compressing software, has meant that many of these twentieth-century recordings are now widely available. Digitisation has come, in many cases, just in time, for magnetic tape only has a limited life before it becomes brittle with age, and fungal blight, tape mould and so-called 'sticky shed syndrome' have already threatened to make tapes in the National Museum of Wales, the School of Scottish Studies and the British Library Sound Archive unplayable. Now anyone with a computer can stream George Ewart Evans's interviews with farmworkers born over 130 years ago, in which they tell him through thickets of Suffolk dialect about threshing with a flail or getting beef from the lord of the manor at Christmas. It is a reminder that the voice recording technologies of the last century were essentially democratising, allowing the 'voice of the people' to be heard in authentic everyday settings, albeit in fragmentary and imperfect ways.

The human voice is such an important part of our individual identities that, as Shelley Trower argues, 'we might do well to think more not only about what it says, but what it is, and how it says it'.¹⁰⁴ A voice has a signature as distinctive as a fingerprint and a recording of it is a uniquely intimate encounter with that person. Since a voice is essentially just an exhaled breath, a series of vibrations of air produced by different parts of the body from the abdomen to the lips, a recording of it can convey the sense of being alive at a moment in time

and space perhaps more than any other historical evidence. There are meanings that can be detected from a voice – captured in tone, timbre and vocal range - that can never be uncovered through even the most faithful transcription. Recording of voices remind us as historians that their owners are not just textual traces but were once breathing bodies, trying, just like us, to make themselves heard.

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