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Survey on Location and context based media

#1 [winter2006]

conducted by Mark McLaren

interview
with **Chris Watson**

CHRIS WATSON Is a sound recordist who specialises in documenting the sounds of animals and their habitats around the world. He was a member of both Cabaret Voltaire and The Hafler Trio in the seventies and eighties. He has worked for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds as well extensively in film, television and radio. From the middle of the nineties he began to release CDs based on pure environmental recordings on the Touch label. These albums [Stepping into the Dark, Outside the Circle of Fire and most recently Weather Report] have become touchstones in the world of field recording as examples of the sensitivity and passion needed to create these amazing recordings. When he isn't travelling he lives near Newcastle in England. Brief history profile

1972 to 1981: Cabaret Voltaire

1981 to 1984: Tyne tees television; sound recordist and founder member of The Hafler Trio

1985 to 1987: Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; sound recordist and Hafler Trio projects

1987 to 1993: freelance sound recordist

1994 to present: partner with Hoi Polloi Film & Video

'Stepping into The Dark' won an Award of Distinction at the Prix ARS Electronica Festival

'The Life of Birds' for BBC TV - BAFTA Award for Best Factual Sound

Mark: I was wondering how being a professional listener has effected the way you hear day to day sounds?

Chris: You mean when I'm not recording, how do I react to everyday sounds?

Mark: That's right.

Chris: I find it very difficult to switch off in that sense, I was just talking to my kids about this the other day. I am bothered and effected a lot by noise pollution. But when I'm out recording I can be very very selective about what I choose to listen to and record and how I deal with it, but I find it interferes, noise in particular interferes with my daily life. I do find it quite a problem even psychologically, if I try to switch off it tends to focus my attention more on the things I don't want to hear at that particular moment. So I am bothered by traffic noise and electronic Muzak and distorted sounds and sounds in the wrong place, which is my very general description for noise. It does annoy me and it can effect my mood, because I use sound so much as a thing to react to and to sound off to. And even when I'm out shopping I'm listening and enjoying some sounds, but I can easily be frustrated by others.

Mark: But is it more that the environment is overloaded with sounds in the wrong place?

Chris: Well say when I'm at home I like to do all the domestic stuff, because I'm married and I've got three kids and Maggie my partner works full time, when I'm at home I take over all the domestic stuff.



So when I go shopping or when I'm ironing or something like that I think a lot. I spend a lot of time thinking about projects and how I'm going to apply myself to different recordings or how the next time I go somewhere of for a particular project or how I'm going to steer it. I've got a little workspace upstairs in the loft where I do all my post production and I quite often, during the day, when I'm not away doing recording, I'm at home and I'll have projects on the boil up there and spend a couple of hours and then come down and get a meal ready or something, but I'll think about what I'm doing a lot, it's not that I'm obsessive about it, but I think about it a lot, and that's when sounds, other sounds can intrude and distract me and really piss me off, especially if I'm not in control of that environment. It's fine when I'm at home, but when I go out shopping or doing something outside then, even conversations or something, I find it very difficult not to just tune in and then I start to lose my thread about stuff and then get even more frustrated. So it can be quite pernicious, it's very invasive.

I think that's why I like putting headphones on I enjoy that world that we enter when we put a decent pair of my favourite headphones on that I know the sound of and you hear the result of microphone placement and all the set up and all the field craft and it works and you hear sounds sometimes as you imagined them or even when I'm surprised by them or by a particular acoustic and I really enjoy that. And I guess maybe it's that, I haven't really thought about it actually, maybe it's when you don't have headphones on your not in control of what you're hearing or what you're listening to, or what's being sort of pumped out at you.

Mark: Well some Field Recording CDs are so quiet in places that you have to listen to them on headphones if you live in a city, just to block out the traffic sounds. When I try and listen on speakers to some music passing buses sound about ten times louder than the CD I'm trying to listen to..

Chris: It breaks that sort of surface tension, it not only interacts it can also wipe things out I feel. It's a good point.

Mark: I wanted to get your opinion on people who are working with field recordings in their mainly computer driven compositions. Your experience seems to be very non interventional - you set up microphones and then you move away from the situation to avoid influencing the recording. The computer driven method seems to be that sounds are collected only so that they may be processed by the computer. I wondered what your thoughts were on that, because I get the impression that 'Outside the Circle of Fire' and 'Stepping into the Dark' was created by editing down lots of material, rather than processing sounds recorded.

Chris: That's certainly right. With 'Stepping into the Dark' the whole creative process, if that's what it is how you'd describe it, was my very very careful selection from much longer sequences, so it was framing particular sounds in order to illustrate the point or the essence that I thought was represented in that place from those sounds without any sort of change or manipulation at all. And to compliment that 'Outside the Circle of Fire' was elements of the detail from a lot of those places. The key, almost like the brushstrokes which go to make up the overall sense of place, the overall sense, but then again without. what I wanted to do was to introduce a microphone into a place where we don't normally access, certainly not with our ears and be able to extract information without changing it and then really to present it as cleanly as I could, because I thought, rather like the atmosphere, it embodied that powerful sense of place, that I thought and I know other people have in lots of locations around the world. And I thought by processing that, it would just destroy it. Because a lot of processing, all it



does is take things away, it doesn't seem a very additive process. That's not always the case and I think there's a lot or there's some people's work I've heard who can introduce other interesting elements into original recordings. But my idea for those first two CDs was to represent the place as powerfully and completely as I could and I thought that was best achieved without taking anything away or adding anything from those locations.

Mark: And would I be right in thinking your latest release 'Weather Report' is more composed?

Chris: Completely, yes. It was a big change for me and it was something I'd thought a lot about. And what I wanted to do with that was to represent my own feelings and experiences of those places, the sounds and the musicality of those places, because a lot of places do have a real rhythm and timbre and a particular acoustic that is to my ears musical I wanted to represent that as best I could, because I knew I wanted to use a time compression, I was interested in how the sound of a place changes with time and how powerful and dramatic that is. Clearly you stand in the place in real time, but with repeated visits to all those locations on Weather Report, fortunately I've been back to those locations a lot over a few years in most cases I got a very strong idea of what the sounds were like and also the thing that suddenly struck me was the thing that controlled how a place sounds was the elements, the weather. The only way to do that was to use real recordings, but to compress the time during which you heard them to represent that idea of not only sense of place, but sense of change as well, and how things can go from black to white very quickly. Does that make sense?

Mark: Is that something like a dawn chorus which starts with certain creatures and ends with something else. where if that last an hour in real time, you might edit it so that it lasts ten minutes?

Chris: Exactly, and I've done exactly that. I did it for a radio program last year, where I recorded a series of dawn choruses from one place and then I compressed that into something like a twelve minute sequence.

And it's maybe because that's how our ears best appreciate or can best tune into sounds of a place like that, because we have such relative and particularly on any commercial media, short attention spans, something like that works. but it also highlights the changes as well and that was something I was really interested in showing and developing. i mean just to see if it worked, you know. And I think it does I've tried it in a few places and it seems to be quite a powerful and creative technique, because it's very subjective when you can, well everybody would come out with a different version, so it's very personal in that sense. Once you've experienced those sounds individually, what I like to think is that you can convey that sense of spirit and change in a piece without adding anything else to it. And I'm constantly amazed by that change of sounds in one place. This project I've just been doing in Liverpool, a couple of soundscapes. One in the city and one in the suburbs in a place called Sefton park and I've done exactly the same thing there, compressing a nine hour period from 3 p.m. until midnight into a forty five minute piece. And it's remarkable you know just making a series of recordings across that time scale, listening to them, becoming very familiar with not only the place and the integrity of the sounds, but also how they do change and then compressing that into your version of it.

Mark: And when you compress time, do you stick to linear time? So sounds that occurred after each other are still kept in that order.



Chris: Yes, very much so. It's quite simplistic in that sense, that compositional sense. It's based on all the ones that I've done. I've done quite a few now. It's simply that, it's my experience of the sounds of that place and it is linear. I normally draw up, not so much a storyboard, but a timeline, and I cut and paste things, first of all on paper and then audio events into a timeline and fit them in that way and that's the compositional process.

Mark: And what about blending and cross fading? How do you work that into your technique, I know it's a very general question.

Chris: Well again it's to do with any particular place and what's there and that tends to suggest itself. On the track I did on the Masai Mara where things happen quickly there's so quite swift edits. The sun rises very quickly there, it's just two or three minutes for the sun to break the horizon, unlike say forty minutes here in our northern latitude. So, I tend to go, without wanting to sound clichéd, the natural pace of things and sometimes things suggest themselves to me, to maybe be cut more sharply. But a lot of the wild tracks, the foundation tracks, the atmospheres can have very long mix through times on them, because I like creating that seamless drift upon which you can then superimpose particular features and elements. So there's no magic formula in that sense, it's quite a simple process, but nevertheless, for me anyway, it's effective. Another very interesting thing that I've found out simply by doing this is a technique of layering atmospheres. So for instance when I was up near Glen Affric where I recorded all the tracks for the Highlands on Weather Report, I made lots of long recordings there. Because one of the things that I like is setting up a recording system up and leaving it, sometimes on long cables, sometimes a hundred, a hundred and fifty metres and recording for long periods, because I like those spontaneous events which occur within a particular place. And then say by having a recording of an hour long, it's then interesting to, and this is something I talked to Phill Niblock about, a guy on Touch, and it's a technique he uses for his music, when it then parallels lots of from, in my case, the same location. And quite often that creates what I'd describe as like a musicality, almost like a chord or more than one note when they are layered together, you can really hear that essence of a place.

Mark: So say if you made eight hours of recording, you'd just layer up eight tracks of an hour long each. Is that what you mean?

Chris: Yeah, that's right. And I was amazed, I didn't normally do it for that length of time. But I was amazed that it doesn't so much change the characteristic, but there are certain sounds that get amplified or reinforced simply but that layering process, whereas the atmosphere will remain the same. You can fine-tweak it by level controls and I also do some filtering as well, sometimes some quite extreme filtering within the audio spectrum and again when they are combined that sort of highlights it. For me I always have this strong place memory with sounds I guess like we all do and all of a sudden it will just jump out of the speaker, that was the sound of that place and there the ones that I like to use, and by doing that layering technique I've found that that's one powerful way of bringing them out. The best way I can describe it is it's like a musical chord or a series of notes which characterise any location.

Mark: Maybe we can go back a bit to when you mentioned listening on headphones. I was wondering what you think of the deep listening or immersive ethos of listening that people such as Pauline Oliveros and Francisco Lopez adopt? Is it something that you've started to move away from by



starting to time compress your work?

Chris: Well that's interesting. I find that technique that Francisco uses incredibly powerful and moving, but powerful to the point where I find it awesome and it becomes quite a physical experience. When I listen to stuff I don't usually distract myself with any sort of visual stimulus. But say something like Lopez's release La Selva is just incredible.

Mark: I think that is extreme layering and it's so powerful because city dwellers usually have this romantic idea about the tranquillity of nature and La Selva sounds like hell on earth, because all the creatures of rain forest sound like they are screaming all day and all night.

Chris: The point about it is though, and I've worked a lot in the Tropics is that all we hear is quite a narrow band of our audio range. And a lot of the invertebrates in particular, we're just hearing the bottom, the lower end harmonics. Their actual sound spectrum extends way up into the ultra sonic. But we actually just by natural selection just hearing quiet a short bandwidth. I've been doing a lot of insect recordings this year for a film project, a lot of grasshoppers and again we just hear the bottom end, god know what it would be like if we heard all of it. It's be like Phase 4 that film, I don't think we'd able to cope with the overload of it.

Mark: Are there any scientific devices or microphones that can transpose these ultrasonics into the audible bandwidth? I know there's some gadget you can buy for hearing the high frequency sounds that bats make.

Chris: There's quite a few techniques. There's a very interesting technique that scientists are using at the moment which is real time frequency shifting. You can get something which is like a demodulator which is sort of a bat detector, which picks up the ultrasonic echo location call of the bat and some insects and just modulates them down into our audio spectrum. There's another application which I'd really love to try out, which I've not let come across, I've not let had the access to, where these high frequency sounds are time expanded in real time, and so apparently it's a much more accurate representation of what the sound is like and I'd love to hear or experience some of that.

Mark: It that similar to bird song. I read somewhere because bird's have a higher heart rate and a shorter life span that there songs are faster that if they had a similar heart rate to humans. So I think some scientists tried to slow down some bird songs to analyse them.

Chris: To a degree, I think what you might be referring to is something again I'm really looking forward to get a chance to work with and that's the temporal resolution. And you're right the classic example of that is birdsong. In our garden here today there was a wren singing, that very rapid trilling. A wren can produce sixty four separate notes in eight seconds. Now our ear-brain relationship resolves that as a sort of swirling blur of notes. But apparently the current theories are that birds, as you say, because they live their lives faster and although we can see them and exist alongside them, in fact, they exist in a completely parallel but different time range. So their temporal resolution is much much faster than ours. So they don't hear sixty four notes in eight seconds as a blur of notes. Birds can apparently, and I don't know how they worked this out, can apparently resolve all those individual notes and can hear all the tiny changes and even the gaps between the notes to make sense of what the bird is singing about, which is about its sexual status and its defence of territory, and where it is



fittest to reproduce. An astonishing amount of information in eight seconds.

Mark: And do audio recordings contain all that information?

Chris: I think so, maybe it does. But the thing is, I can't see that we could ever resolve the information and I also hope that we would never either, I really enjoy that sense of not knowing. It's all rather crude techniques that have to try to tie everything down and refine it and explain it away. I would imagine even if we can do it with bird song, when it comes to the higher animals, mammals we've not even close. I worked with a marine biologist from sea mammal research unit at St. Andrews called Vincent Janik. And he's the guy who discovered that bottle nosed dolphins around the murray firth have individual signature whistles, which are rather akin to names. So a female when she gives birth will repeat a particular whistle which her young dolphin will learn and carry as his or her signature whistle for the rest of their lives, so it's like a name. And I was out with Janik a few years ago using some hydrophones, picking up bursts of echo location, which you know we were talking about bats, dolphins use the same thing for navigating, identifying prey, getting close to it and when they get really close they can also stun and kill the prey by a high powered burst of echo location sounds, ultrasound ruptures the swim bladders of fish. But he was also saying that they communicate using echo location as well in these bursts that are several seconds long. And I said to him, have you ever tried to break this down and examine it. And he said, well the closest equivalent that he could come to was that in one of these bursts of three, four, five seconds of echo location sound there carrying about the same information as in an average paperback book. So he was saying dolphins are communicating at speeds that our fastest computers can't even approach.

Mark: That's mad that we think of dolphins as these whistling clowns.

Chris: I know it's very arrogant. So if you ever get a chance to read any of his work, it'll be interesting to, him along with Ben Wilson who have done all the work on dolphin vocalisation.

Mark: Well I don't think we would have ever strayed into this territory if we'd done the interview by email.... Okay let's get back to some more questions about recording. I read recently that you were involved in some teaching, could you talk a little bit about that?

Chris: I got asked by the Sonic Arts Network to run this course in the summer school at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park for this organisation called COMMA which stands for Contemporary Music Making for Amateurs. So I got asked, they said we've heard your work and were interested, can you come along and talk about it. They were all sorts of people who were interested in using location sounds in particular and introducing that into all aspects of their music whether it was composing using location sounds or creating pure soundscapes or using recorded sound alongside convention instrumentation. There was one guy who just wanted to go out and record a dawn chorus, he was a classically trained cellist, and he just wanted to play outside alongside a dawn chorus and capture the whole thing. I was there with Justin Bennet as well who was doing the site specific installation stuff and wanting to use all sorts of location sound. So I took my kit down, but I'm just keen for people to get out and start listening and then start recording or the other way round. I normally recommend something like a pair of binaural microphones and a mini disc, not that that's the best thing to go for but it's the most cost effective option for decent sound.



Mark: Yeah, I think listening back to your own binaural recordings can be the powerful. You must of noticed the weird hallucinatory experience you get when you listen back in the same place you recorded.

Chris: It can be really disorienting, I like that. In fact I was doing it last week. I was in Liverpool city centre at about eleven o'clock at night recording a load of the people coming out of the bars and pubs for this urban soundscape I was doing. And I thought the last thing I want to do is walk around the centre Liverpool at night with five grand's worth of recording equipment on my shoulder. So I just used a pair of binaural mikes of mine some little DPA mikes and my flash card recorder inside my jacket and I could just wander around and nobody knew what I was doing either. And it's very effective as you know, it worked really well. So if I go to these classes and there's people who don't have any kit at all and want to start. I normally say go to the microphone madness website <> and get a couple of their matches binaural mikes and any decent mini disc recorder with plug in power and your away.

Mark: What's the flash card recorder you were using?

Chris: The one I use is called a Nagra ARES P2 It's just brilliant I got it in april this year. It uses camera memory, so I've a one gig card and 512 meg card. And it records uncompressed audio straight onto the card. Fostex also make one now called the FR2 and Marantz as well. So there's one or two around now. The great thing is, up until now they're all recorded Mp3 audio, but this is completely uncompressed so it's 44 or 48 Khz and 16bit so it's the same as Dat, but there's no moving parts, there's no motor, so I just runs off AA batteries and it'll run for a couple of days like that. It doesn't make a noise it doesn't get hot, it's instant start, the millisecond you touch the record button it's recording so it's really nice to work with. It's been a real revolution for me going over to file based recording. I mean the big advantage for me is I can take the card out of the recorder and stick it straight into the side of my Laptop and drag the files into an application.

Mark: Have you tested the new Nagra in extreme conditions?

Chris: I have, the first place I took it to was La Selva actually which was one hundred percent humidity and I went straight from there to the Mojave desert which was forty four degrees centigrade and zero humidity and it was fine. It worked really well.

Mark: Let's go back a bit. What was the project you were doing in Liverpool?

Chris: That was with some residents in a tower block near Sefton park who had all the tower block refurbished. They're about twenty floors high and there's about five of them and they look out across Sefton park in the suburbs of Liverpool. So most of them can see it but they can't hear it, so I spent a week recording in the park with some of the residents, with binaurals mikes and mini discs and we were in the park until two in the morning some nights.

Mark: Is it going to be presented in the tower block?

Chris: Yeah, They're got this fantastic delivery system that they're devised. also did a parallel one in the city for the people who don't look out over the park, who look out over the skyline of Liverpool. So we've got two parallel soundtracks presenting the same period - from three in the afternoon until



midnight, both running at exactly the same time and we're burning masters onto four channels of a DVD. And FACT which was the commissioning agency, who got me the residency are installing DVD players in the utility space of the roofs of each of the tower blocks and they're buying cable TV modulators and getting the cable TV company to tune everybody's TV, and there's over three hundred residents in these tower blocks, so spare channels will receive these soundtracks. So there's two stereo loops played into two spare cable TV channels. SO you can get in and you put on, I don't know, channel 44 and you get the Sefton park soundtrack, and you put on channel 45 and you get the city and the river soundtrack.

Mark: When is it going to happen?

Chris: I've finished my part of it. They've got to do the mastering and the DVDs in the next few weeks and it's going to be launched, they're going to have quite a big press launch in February. And then it's going to run in the flats for about three months I think. And press launch is going to be interesting that I devised with Alan Dunn the project manager. We are going to set up a space in FACT [the foundation for art and creative technology] based in Liverpool in one of their cinemas with opposing soundtracks, so we are going to fix a four channel rig up at each end of the room, so you can walk into the room and you'll hear the park on one side and the city on the other and you can walk around and do your own mix. But then for the press preview, they've got one of the guys who lives in a top floor flat and they're going to take over his apartment for the day and the press people that are invited up, they are going to be taken up in the lift and one by one they are going to be left in this room, overlooking the view with just sound on the TV. So it's not going to be a group of journalists listening together, you go in on your own, you've got ten minutes fifteen minutes to stand or sit there.

Mark: That's got to be better than twenty journalists together with a glass of wine each.

Chris: Yeah, that's what we thought, they'll hear the soundtrack and see the view at an appropriate time and then they can go to another flat where the soundtrack is set up for the city view. So I was really pleased with that, I thought it was a good project. They really put a lot of effort into it. And I like the idea that it was a bespoke piece for those three hundred people. And I made sure in the post-production, that the eight or so people that made recordings, some of them were quite elderly, they were really keen, we were in town, we recorded all sorts of stuff. made sure that everybody who recorded things has got a piece in it. And I took a lot of advice, because I don't know Liverpool that well, and we had several meetings when I asked the residents what the sort of key elements of sounds were, because some of them can't even get out much and they rarely go into the city. So without being too nostalgic, what were the sounds that they were familiar with, that they could identify different parts of the city. So I went out and recorded those sounds and I've woven those into the piece, again it's a time compression. And a couple of minutes of nothing but that very gentle, but quite rich cityscape where there's nothing very close perspective, it's all sounds that are way off, I did it from the roof of the building and it's quiet immersive even though there's no much happening, but there's all sorts of stuff in there, but it never breaks the surface. And in the piece I let that sound run, before all the clubs and bars turned out and it kicked off a bit.

Mark: I'm guessing that you sustain your living mainly through TV and film work rather than record sales. I want to find out more about how you see the different work you do.



Chris: Well if I could, I'd love to just make my living by just releasing my work on CD. Also I enjoy the performance aspect, the presentations and installations that I do, and some of the talks and lectures that I give. I love that diversity, that's where I learn, by meeting other people. Because it's quite a solitary activity as I'm sure you know. I enjoy that exchange of ideas. I mean, that's why I enjoy doing things like this, because it's two way, and it's something that I benefit from as well. They're always useful learning experiences. What's happened recently is that some of the TV and film producers that I work with have started to take on board a lot more than they did, certainly ten years ago. Some of the ideas, not just my ideas, but they consider sound much more richly in the productions and that's really satisfying and there's some really interesting work coming up in areas that have become quite dry and less interesting, like television films. With things like surround sound people are really starting to have to think about it and I'm really enjoying that. When I'm thinking about doing some location surround sound and then following that up in post production <> that's what I enjoy about working in television, following things through, which is something I have more with the CDs and some of the radio productions I do. I can work very closely with some radio producers or on my own or with Mike and John at Touch and also perhaps some of the few collaborations I've done. I'm not goal oriented, but I like that range and diversity of all the areas I work in. I'd like that to continue.

Notes and links:

Chris Watson
<http://www.chriswatson.net>

Phase IV.
http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1016251-phase_iv/about.php

Vincent Janik, Marine Researcher
<http://biology.st-andrews.ac.uk/gatty/>

Sonic Arts Network
<http://www.sonicartsnetwork.org/>

Yorkshire Sculpture Park
http://www.yssp.co.uk/ix001_flash.htm

Contemporary Music Making for Amateurs
<http://coma.org/>

<http://www.microphonemadness.com>

Touch Record Label
<http://www.touchmusic.org.uk/>

Alan Dunn, foundation for art and creative technology
<http://www.fact.co.uk>