

Researching the Zone: Tony Barrell, the Auteur and the Institution

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Introduction

They (*Australian Broadcast Corporation*) can sell drama. They can tell you that you will listen to plays on radio because they're good for you, and they support writers and actors. But do they really want a program that doesn't have a beginning, middle or end, and just does weird things? (Barrell 2005c).

Luckily for ABC radio documentary producer Tony Barrell, the answer to this question was a largely unqualified "yes". Barrell's prolific thirty-year career includes conventional current affairs and historically based TV and radio documentaries. However he's best known for his more innovative work: what he calls his "hybrid" radio programs, examined elsewhere by this author. Described less politely as "weird shit" by one of his former managers, many of these works can be heard as aural equivalents of the avant-garde cut-up: a montage of interviews, location sound, music and found audio. The legacy of this style can be heard in the ABC Radio National program *The Night Air*. *The Night Air* is a program that continues to tease at, and subvert, rigid categories of style and content, refusing to recognise the barriers between politics and pop culture, "serious" analysis and entertainment.

This ethnographic study of an internationally recognised Australian radio and TV documentary producer during the last part of the 20th century draws on interviews with Barrell and his colleagues, including sound engineer John Jacobs and former ABC documentary producer and arts editor Roz Cheney. These sources bear witness to the collaborative nature of Barrell's broadcast work. In particular, Jacobs' engineering and production skills were crucial in developing the "hybrid", as was the work of another ABC sound engineer Russell Stapleton. The first editions of *The Night Air* (2002) were produced by Barrell, Jacobs and Brent Clough, with Jacobs continuing to put his stamp on the program's distinctive "remix" style. Producer Rick Tanaka was another long time collaborator, working with Barrell on a number of documentaries based in Japan and Okinawa, and also the *Nippy Rock Shop* (1981-1993) along with Craig Donarski and others.

Barrell and his work represent something of an anomaly within the public service broadcasting culture of Australia and the United Kingdom. In the continental European setting, public broadcasters have allowed, and in some cases encouraged, the emergence of feature and documentary makers whose work has a distinctive sound and authorial "voice". But in the Anglo-Saxon cultures of the BBC and ABC, there has been much greater ambivalence about letting producers put their own distinctive stamp on programming. There has been a tendency to insist on rigid program formats with a house style and generally uniform sound, behind which the producer with her or his individual "hearing" of the world becomes invisible – or rather, inaudible (Hendy 2004; Madsen 2008).

Despite these restrictions, this article charts how Barrell carved out a space for innovation within Australia's public service broadcast environment and navigated the technical and structural shifts that were (and still are) part of the game. It argues that with his "hybrid" style, Barrell not only produced a distinctive body of work, but also was able to be an important influence on other producers. Thus he also helped to evolve new program formats.

Singing to the Network, Seeing with Your Ears

Any medium of sound reproduction is an apparatus – a whole set of relations, practices, people and technologies. The very possibility of sound reproduction emerges from the character and connectedness of the medium (Sterne 2003: 225).

In his book *The Audible Past* Jonathan Sterne describes in absorbing detail the emergence of sound production technology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and hints at the role of the producer in an institutional context. We go further by suggesting that by focussing on the audio documentary producer we are exploring this "connectedness". The producer is one of those who interprets, creates within (and struggles against) the wider apparatus that is broadcasting.

In his description of opera singers and their early radio broadcasting presentations, Sterne again makes reference to radio as being not just a vehicle for the communication of the singer's song, but a medium absolutely implicit in the style and technique of the performance.

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The medium does not mediate the relation between the singer and listener, original and copy. It *is* the nature of their connection. Without the medium there would be no connection, no copy, but also no original, or at least no original in the same form. The performance is for the medium itself. The singer sings to the microphone, *to the network*, not to the listener at the other end (Sterne 2003: 225-226).

This article suggests that the radio documentary is analogous to that song. It is sung or created *for* the network and takes its nature *from* the audio medium itself, rather than the audience or individual producer.

Although sound culture practices differ greatly across the globe, it is a culture that is still unexplored territory. As Michelle Hilmes stresses; “[The]...explicit consideration of radio as a *sound* medium, examining its modes of representation and diverse narrative forms as specifically *aural* and as such distinct from other modes, still remains in its earliest stages” (Hilmes 2005). Barrell’s detailed descriptions of his working methods perhaps go part of the way in addressing this gap. They examine this unique form of audio documentary, and posit the difficulties of presenting work that is distinguished by a unique character and strong authorial voice.

Later in this article we focus on examples of Barrell’s programs produced for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s national broadcaster, originally known as Radio 2, retitled ABC Radio National in 1985. Firstly however, we address Barrell’s “hybrid” style, with its beginnings at another ABC radio station in the 1970s: Double J. (Now known as Triple J, the station then only broadcast to the Sydney metropolitan area).

Early Experiments

Like many of his generation, Barrell attributes his passion for popular culture and music in part to his radio listening.

I was brought up in the era of radio in the late 1940’s and one particular person who must have influenced me later on was the disc-jockey Jack Jackson who used to have a music show on the BBC and he used these very funny cut ups. Using pre-recorded vinyl discs, he’d insert himself into the material – answer back and ask questions in the dialogue, give it a different meaning (Barrell 2005; Jackson 2009).

Barrell’s radio listening took place in a small town in North Wales. From there he went on to do an economic history degree at the University of Liverpool and began writing for student and local papers. After finishing his degree he landed a job in London.

I worked for possibly the world’s first media monitoring company in London run by two Australian ex-pats – a place where the tape recorder (although not the microphone) was a tool of trade. I occasionally borrowed a primitive portable recorder (with very bad mike) to make field recordings (in Wales) and satirical dialogues (in the style of Peter Sellers) with flatmates. At school in Chester sixth formers had access to use a large flat bed tape recorder and we made a program we submitted to the BBC in 1958 (Barrell, 2009).

In 1965 Barrell started work as a researcher/writer for the Pathé film company in London where he did the first of his audio cut-up experiments. These were made with sounds borrowed from the library and dubbed to quarter-inch tape – with the aid of the library editor – then mixed with tracks of music from his record collection: The Beatles, Charlie Mingus etc. Through these experiments Barrell realized popular music could be “excerpted” to perhaps create a new narrative. (The term “sample” was not in use in the late 1960s).

By the early 1970s, Barrell was still in London, working as a publisher’s reader and blurb writer. He had produced four novels (unpublished) and was attempting (unsuccessfully) to get work as a broadcast journalist. Realizing the BBC was a closed shop to young men from the north with no establishment connections Barrell took the plunge and migrated to Australia in 1974 with his Australian wife, film production designer Jane Norris. He even described himself as a “journalist” on his passport – more an aspiration than a reality- and despite his lack of radio experience it wasn’t long after he arrived in Australia that he landed a job with ABC Radio.

The 1972 election of a Labour government after 23 years of conservative rule in Australia had opened the way for enthusiastic social experiments including a new youth-based radio station under the umbrella of the national public broadcaster, the ABC. The federal government acknowledged the existing ABC radio networks’ success in catering to a rural audience, to children and to mature listeners. But it was concerned that teenagers had abandoned ABC radio in favour of commercial radio with its Top Forty music formats modelled on American commercial stations (Inglis 2006: 376). Marius Webb, one of the first two

co-ordinators of Double J, met with government advisors to discuss the setting up of the Sydney station in 1974. He realised immediately that young voters were very much on the government's mind: "They were thinking about education, they were thinking about health and all those sorts of things, but they were really thinking: "How do we stay in power?" (Webb 2005).

In his history of the ABC, Ken Inglis writes how Henry Rosenbloom the press secretary to the Minister for the Environment Dr Moss Cass, told his minister:

Rock can be the language of cultural radicalism...it can put people in touch with their emotions; it can free them from an automatic acceptance of the artificial rhythms of urban and suburban life. In a very real sense Double J is a de-conditioning agent (Inglis 2006: 375).

The station went to air in January 1975. The very first music track played on Double J was You Just Like Me Cause I'm Good in Bed by Australian band Skyhooks, which had been banned by commercial radio stations. Hiring of staff was up to the station. They were seeking an alternative sound to disc jockeys who in the main had come from commercial radio. "Old fashioned announcers were out here... and there was argument at meetings of the Unit about whether they should sound like commercial disc-jockeys" (Inglis 2006: 376). According to Roz Cheney, Double J's first program coordinator, the approach to staffing was radical in other ways as well:

Staff were hired in a broad range called producer/presenter. Whether you were a sound engineer, a producer, a presenter or a music programmer - you were all called producers, so it was experimental in that way. The ABC had never done anything like this before (Cheney 2008).

Rigid demarcations between production roles were dissolved, and staff were able to develop a range of skills according to individual interests and the station's programming needs. According to Cheney, the station's brief was to produce its own news, drama, features, documentaries and music features, and to actively seek alternative points of view from writers, comedians and cultural commentators.

Soon after Double J went to air, Barrell was approached to write comments for announcers to use between music tracks. Barrell had been writing and presenting on-air book reviews for ABC Radio 2, and writing articles for Nation Review and Rolling Stone (Australia). He jumped at the opportunity to work at the station, but had doubts about the tasks involved: "I was always interested in radio because that was the place where I found music, but I thought that talking about music was ridiculous" (Barrell 2005). Still new to the job, he came up with a proposal to create a radio show using the cut-up technique that he'd experimented with ten years earlier. His script proposal, You're not Listening to that Rubbish in this House (now lost), attempted to fuse music and one-liners sampled from the (vinyl) music/words of Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart and more popular chart music, again to create a surreal comedy show. The producers tried to mix the show "as live", but it was impossible to "cue up" all the excerpts to play in sequence so the project was abandoned.

Knowing Barrell was keen to extend his broadcast skills, Cheney suggested that Barrell work on the Sunday afternoon shift on Double J, a place where original comedy material was aired. He was to present with Graeme Bartlett producing. Since the budget for comedy had been spent, the station needed a cheap alternative. Bartlett had a background as a technical operator, a skill still missing from Barrell's repertoire, and together they were able to produce more complex "layered" narratives using inserts, samples and other atypical audio material. Barrell and Bartlett were in effect experimenting on air. They wanted to prove that there was a young audience available who would respond to a different listening experience, one embedded in what was primarily a music station. Both Sunday Afternoon at the Movies (1976-77) and Watching the Radio with the TV Off (1978-79) made social, cultural and sometimes political humorous commentaries by juxtaposing both similar and apposite (sic) cuts or grabs and creating dialogues and whole narratives. In his book chapter on the radio feature Barrell expands on the theory behind his approach:

Audio images can be arranged, heard, felt and understood in a non-literal, non-linear way. The mind engages in active listening, storing, ordering and even re-ordering audio material almost subconsciously, using the patterns left by fragments, as well as solid expositions to create three dimensional images that takes involvement far beyond the common linear listening most radio demands and imposes (Barrell in A hern 2006).

But what did Australian teenagers make of all this? Barrell's long time collaborator John Jacobs remembers:

You'd have the radio on and you were up around the house being a teenager and you didn't know what the fuck this was, but it was cooler than anything else. It wasn't like a comedy

show and it wasn't just music; it was bent. It was bent stuff and it was attractive to the teenage mind. This was the weird shit on the radio, but somehow it was on the mainstream government radio, it wasn't some underground *zine* (Jacobs 2008).

Barrell's first opportunity as a radio presenter came in July 1976 when regular presenter Mac Cocker went away on an extended holiday and he was asked to present Double J's weekday 4pm news show. Most talk content was provided by station journalists, except for the last hour where Cocker played music of his own choice. Barrell did not feel confident broadcasting information and opinion about music, and so constructed a library of cut-ups or one-liners used as inserts. Instead of announcing the names of tracks he would play these inserts. Effectively they were pre-recorded on tape, then played "live" in the studio via a cartridge player. As such they were a primitive form of sampling, whereby the same phrase might be heard every night creating a kind of continuity of "conspiracy" (Barrell 2005c). The result, according to Barrell, was that listeners felt they were in on a joke that was very different from the usual form of announcing. Barrell says he got the idea from another station announcer, Russell Guy, who interspersed his breakfast shift on Double J with a series of effects and grabs, such as bird songs, excerpts from NASA talkback and so on:

Some (listeners) would ring up and say; "what the hell are you doing?" And others would ring up and say they really liked that weird stuff. The whole thing was to keep it moving. We didn't want people spaced out and thinking what the hell was going on but we did throw it at them a bit. We did get lots of feedback. We didn't get a mass audience but we didn't lose Double J's audience doing this sort of stuff (Barrell 2005).

As Barrell concedes, there were precedents for his approach. Disc jockey and comedian Jack Jackson was using "cut up" in his comedy programs on the BBC as early as the 1950s. At the more literary or "high-cultural" end of the spectrum, pianist/composer Glenn Gould and writer William Burroughs were also experimenting with the cut-up technique and its application to the world of sound.

In a lecture given at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics in 1976, Burroughs describes the cut-up technique developed by his close friend and collaborator Brion Gysin. It was a style borrowed from visual artists, and applied first in the cutting-up and relocating of text, and then to manipulation of quarter-inch audiotape. For Burroughs, this technique created new meanings in the text: "when you cut into the present the future leaks out". It also demanded a kind of re-thinking, a disruption of creative confidence: "...cut up can put you in touch with what you know and do not know" (Burroughs 1976).

Burroughs' collaborations with Gysin and mathematician Ian Sommerville included the physical manipulation of audiotape, the slowing and speeding-up of the sound through spool speed changes, creation of rhythm, repeating sounds, and inching and manipulating the tape back and forth across the tape heads. Sometimes the results were fed into a computer and then randomly regurgitated. This radical physical intervention in the (audio) text here most commonly employed Burroughs' distinctive voice. It deliberately drew attention to breaks with cultural, historical and technical conventions, and was seen by many as a search for new modes of creative expression (Burroughs 2001).

Audio excursions in the radio broadcast mode were also being made by Canadian pianist/performer Glenn Gould. His work included radio documentaries and lectures covering topics such as mass media, recording techniques and music. These have been extensively explored in critical literature and are also widely available through online archives, most notably those of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. For the purposes of this article it's worth singling out Gould's thirty-minute radio feature *The Search for Petula Clark* (1967). In this program Gould's narration of his own road journey across Ontario ranges across topics from pop music to sex, radio listening and the Canadian landscape. The work is structured around four of Petula Clark's greatest hit tunes that sit and swell under Gould's astonishing radio script:

Petula minimizes the emotional metamorphoses implicit in these songs extracting from the text of each the same message of detachment and sexual circumspection (Gould 1967).

Neither Gould nor Burroughs were employed as career radio producers. Their audio experiments were a curious addition to their individual artistic repertoires. Arguably, established careers enabled them to pursue with "new" technology their desires for innovative artistic forms of expression. But working to a weekly deadline in Australia in the mid 1970s, Barrell was oblivious to the international artists who had preceded him. He was instead teaching himself how to record, cut, mix and dub quarter inch magnetic tape and sometimes just resorting to chance: "A point about vinyl: it was/is easier to cue quickly. Just dropping the needle on the disc to find a starting spot is more effective and sometimes more serendipitous than spooling back and forth through tapes" (Barrell 2009a). Prior to Double J, the ABC had a strict demarcation between journalists, producers and technical engineers: "the journalist would go out and get the interviews and the producer would cut them up in a room with a technical operator. Well, I didn't want to separate myself from the production of the stuff and so once I discovered that I could do it, I did it" (Barrell 2005).

In 1979 ABC radio staff were issued with the professional quality cassette recorders. Lightweight,

affordable and easy to use, Barrell was eager to go out and record young Australian voices rarely heard before on the radio. His first ABC radio documentary, a sixty five minute long program titled *The Decade that Turned into a Radio Show*, was produced in 1979 over a six-week period and made with the help of nineteen year old Patrick Gibson. Its content focussed on youth concerns of the decade, as relevant then as now: the recession, pop music culture, fashion and drugs. Unlike much other ABC radio features of the time, the show had no narrator and the source material was spoken word records/music (all on vinyl). Interviews with two groups of school students were conducted; one from Gundagai NSW and one from suburban Sydney, plus six or so prominent cultural and social researchers. The first three and a half minutes of the program includes all the source material except for the expert comment.



Track 1. Excerpt: The Decade that Turned Into a Radio Program (1979) ABC 2JJ. 3'27"

In the environment of 2JJ - a youth station which tried to avoid expert opinion - I was very keen to find out what young people of school-leaving-age thought, without too much oversight and guidance. So I allowed them to set their agenda, and the experts in the show set theirs, but I didn't inter-cut them, so that the youngsters weren't, as it were "corrected." I wasn't the first to do this on JJ but I did do it without narrative guidance (Barrell 2009a).

Barrell was also determined to make complex listening enjoyable for his young audience. "*Sunday Afternoon at the Movies* was "art" as "entertainment", Barrell claims, "listening pleasure, if you like, so that the effect was more like listening to music or soundscape, rather than information and/or interpretation" (Barrell 2005a).

In 1979, when Barrell produced his first documentary, Double J was still a small budget, Sydney-based station poorly transmitting on the AM frequency band. A lack of audience clout no doubt contributed to Double J's editorial freedom, but by the early 1980s Barrell had outgrown the age demographic of Double J. In 1982 he made the move to a very different beast, ABC radio's nationally networked broadcaster Radio 2, known today as Radio National.

Researching the Zone

On location, I use the microphone as a camera with added ears, by which I mean when I make recordings I am not always aware of what's in "the frame". With sound it is the context and juxtaposition of foreground and background sounds that create new, or reflect existing meanings and understanding, not always apparent when I am "there". I act as an almost passive conduit for those messages. What happens is not altogether predictable so when I am "listening" with the microphone I am involving potential listeners in a research experiment. Researching the zone I'm in, if you like (Barrell 2005b).

Barrell's "researching the zone" continued for the next twenty years or so, as he produced (and continues to produce) numerous features for a range of ABC radio programs, each with their own content brief and stylistic conventions. Although there is pressure on many radio networks around the globe to limit the duration of programs - in the United States, for instance, it is rare to hear documentaries longer than thirty minutes - ABC Radio National continues to schedule radio documentary/feature programs up to fifty-five minutes in length. Content briefs for these programs are diverse; and include religion, history, social affairs, music and investigative journalism.

Barrell's international collaborations include series co-productions with the BBC World Service ranging from Korea to the Russian Far East. Barrell has also published half a dozen books drawing on his programs, including *Higher than Heaven* with Rick Tanaka (1996) and *The Real Far East* (2005). Barrell's book chapter (Ahern 2006), a "rhetorical analysis" of the radio feature, is one of just a handful of Australian references that critically engages with the radio feature format. His are not just instructions on how to research, interview and record for radio, but rather reflections on practice, and an exploration of what distinguishes the feature from other radio forms:

A feature can be noise and excitement. It can use the techniques of drama. It can tap memory and emotions. It can be poetic. The feature goes beyond the simple literal presentation of facts, opinions and explanatory narration. It is an experience that can be heard and enjoyed more than once (Barrell in Ahern 2006: 13).

Coming from the relative anarchy of Double J, Barrell had to adapt to a different industrial and managerial culture at Radio 2, and was frustrated with the station's attitude to listeners: "I had formal issues with producers who assumed that "content" always spoke for itself. I didn't agree. If nobody was listening how could it?" (Barrell 2008). He also bristled at the station's more hierarchical organisational style. Producers

were not allowed to operate studio equipment and instead were required to describe to technical engineers what they wanted to achieve in their program editing. John Jacobs describes how Barrell would bring into the studio a collection of recorded material and then proceed to improvise sections of the program:

He'd say; "the program is in this box, and whatever isn't in here isn't in the program." I have a clear image of him leaning into me with his eyes popping: "make it go zchoooooo". He'd make sounds with his mouth rather than saying a specific thing, and in part he wanted you to just go and push the knobs into the wrong position- and he was ready- giving permission for mistakes to happen, and then he'd integrate them back into his production (Jacobs 2008).

Jacobs, who has won numerous awards for his technical and editorial contributions to radio features and documentaries, says that alongside his desire to experiment, Barrell had a strong sense of the audience and the program-maker's relationship with the listener:

He wanted to trust the listener to work out the story and not to tie up all the knots to the puzzle. He'd always rail against the broadcasters who wanted to be educators and he's always had a problem with the worthiness of public broadcasting, where the "nurses and doctors" would get on and want to "fix up" the world (Jacobs 2008).

Think back to *The Decade that Became a Radio Show* (1979) (Sound excerpt 1). The teenage girl's raw Australian accent telling the listener "we were young in the 70's and didn't know much" is an example of how Barrell would use loops or voice icons as repetitive devices that would be 'treated' in various ways. Barrell, according to Jacobs, could "identify open-ended material and use it in different contexts so that it poeticized speech, but it also helped listeners climb into the material" (Jacobs 2008). At Radio National, Barrell also wanted to include non-interview material in his conventional reportage work, such as the programs he made for investigative current affairs program *Background Briefing*. Rather than just the usual opening montage of voices he and Jacobs would work together for hours in the studio creating "drops" (pre-produced mixes) for audio variety and listener interest. The *Choice of America* series (1988) produced for *Background Briefing* and awarded a bronze medal at the New York Radio and TV Festival that same year contains many such examples.

This non-literal, non-linear approach to storytelling and structure was shared, in spirit at least, by a small number of ABC Radio broadcasters already working at the station. Ken Inglis, in his history of the ABC, describes how in the 1970s the ABC Radio Drama and Features Unit was influenced by producer Richard Connolly who travelled to Germany, France and Italy on a Churchill Fellowship in 1971, to study new uses of radio (Inglis 2006: 360). Connolly's path was followed by other Australian radio producers such as Andrew McLennan, Julianne Ford and Kaye Mortley, who went on to produce radiophonic works that brought together composers and international radio "artists" (rather than journalists) to create work that was meant for stereo broadcast and concentrated listening. The *Listening Room* (1988-2003) broadcast on ABC-FM (primarily a classical music station) was the site for most of this work. In her article that charts the 1960s "renaissance" of the acoustic documentary feature in Europe, Madsen describes the format and qualities of this work as being "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" (2005: 189). Working in Australia in the 1970s Barrell had heard and was intrigued by this European style. However he was determined to go his own way:

I had heard wonderful radio pieces...preparing and killing and slaughtering a pig, I think it was made in Ireland. In my memory it was fly-on-the-wall radio and I thought, that's amazing, and I thought I wasn't going to do that. I wasn't going to go out and make those programs, but I thought that sort of audio feature should inform what I'm doing (Barrell 2005).

Neither was Barrell much interested in what former BBC documentary producer David Hendy calls the dominant "realist" style of audio documentary. Hendy explains the conundrum of the BBC radio documentary, one that applies as much to the Australian context: "...The genre is expensive, the audience small". The feature and documentary is seen as catering to a niche audience: "...its presence on the schedule (is) a deliberate and well-advertised marker of public service commitment - a commitment which allows the rest of a broadcaster's efforts to be devoted to winning the ratings battle with more popular and lower cost fare in peak times" (Hendy 2004: 220-238).

As a result of this somewhat marginal status, the feature and documentary output of the Anglo-Saxon broadcasters has tended to justify its existence by a preference for a "realist" style, one that embraces both the narrated journalistic documentary and the audio verité social documentary. Tending to privilege character and narrative over experimentation and playfulness, it can assume a very limited set of possibilities in the relationship between the program maker, the listener, and the program. Barrell found this

realist style no less constraining than he did the orthodoxies of the European radio feature:

The art thing: obviously there's art in all feature making – art as craft – but the idea of a radio piece just sitting there solely as a piece of art is not something I've allowed myself to do much because I am mindful that listeners have to be prepared for that (Barrell 2005a).

As he says, his style of work moves along the axis between acoustic entertainment and reportage; it is neither avant-garde sound composition, soundscape or "acoustic film", nor straight reportage, but a hybrid that draws on and deploys the tricks and techniques of all the styles along this continuum. In the 1980s, this style attracted the attention of young broadcasters including some who would go on to become some of the country's best investigative journalists, such as Liz Jackson of ABC-TV's Four Corners, Geoff Parish from SBS-TV's Dateline and Radio National's Sharon Davis, who all worked at Background Briefing in the late 1980s and 1990s.

I think he had a real influence at Background Briefing in those early days. Young people coming out of University looked to him and his style and work as the kind of things we wanted to emulate. You could do more with a microphone than just sit in front of someone and record their voice. Tony's ideas brought a different sound for all of us (Davis 2008).

Barrell at Background Briefing was – in a variety of cultural settings – now exploring elements of location based reporting. His style was characterised by colloquial yet sparse and understated scripts delivered on location with an attention to collecting both "wide" and "close-up" background sounds, and talking with (rather than interviewing) a range of disparate people across Asia, Europe, the US and most importantly, Japan, where he collected material for some of his most successful ABC documentary series.

I think my main motivation was de-mystification of the exotic, an attempt to make Japan seem normal if not ordinary. That was what lay behind the *The Nippi Rock Shop* (Barrell and Tanaka 1981-93) and also *Japan's Other Voices* (1984). The discourse of the 1980s was dominated by business and politicians instructing Australians to improve productivity, work practices etcetera in order to be reliable suppliers of resources to Japan. The idea that Japan had non-conformists – political or cultural, including oppressed but activist minorities was not on the radar (Barrell 2008).

Barrell's work at Background Briefing in the 80s had inspired younger program-makers to experiment, but Barrell suspected that ABC radio management did not welcome his unique contributions on their flagship current affairs program:

There was suspicion at Executive Producer level (never really expressed I have to say), that every "story" should be explained in the linear mode, that all "cuts" had to be identified and the listener led through the material by the hand (or the nose as I thought it). Nothing of this sort was actually said to me directly, but I detected a lack of enthusiasm for me and my work, where I took liberties with music, pausing, extraneous audio not literally "relevant" to the story and so on. I certainly had no interest in making dull programs, or chasing ambulances. (Barrell 2009a).

Consequently in 1993 he joined Radio National's new documentary programme *Radio Eye* (1993-2009). A mix of the "cultural studies" agenda and social documentaries, it was also under the guidance of Roz Cheney, who by then was Radio National's Arts Editor (1995-2001). According to Barrell, Cheney's wide experience as a program maker, and her background at *Double J*, meant that she recognised producers' need for a free hand, and deliberately sought sympathetic engineers to work with her features staff. "[I] also enjoyed experimenting with the digital editing work stations introduced in the next couple of years. These enabled me to do more or less finished work in a booth prior to final mixing, much the same way I had done years before at 2JJ. I was back in control if you like." (Ibid) At *Radio Eye*, Barrell produced one of his most ambitious and best-known radio works, *Tokyo's Burning* (1995), winner of the RAI special prize at the 1995 Prix Italia.

Track 2. Excerpt: *Tokyo's Burning* (1995) ABC Radio National's *Radio Eye* program. Sound engineer Russell Stapleton. 3'10"

In a formal sense, *Tokyo's Burning* (1995) could be said to employ many of the elements of the "realist" documentary. It contains eyewitness accounts of the bombing of Tokyo in 1945 from the Japanese survivors, and from one of the American Air Force pilots who dropped the incendiary bombs. There is

extensive back grounding of the history of air warfare and incendiary bombing; we hear wartime radio and newsreel actuality, and some excerpts from interviews with academic experts. But interwoven with this material are quotations from the Bible and a complex mix of sound and music. An eerie crackling and hissing, suggestive of flames without ever resolving into the naturalistic crackle of fire, underscores much of the spoken material. Ominous drones drift in and out, along with a murmuring of voices, and more obviously identifiable fragments of music, from German post-punk experimental band Einstuerzende Neubauten and the Japanese electronic composer Harry Hosono's soundtrack for the Tale of Genji animated TV series. The overall effect could be described as a kind of haunting of the "realist" documentary, a blending of the external space of reportage with the internal space of nightmare and incantation; in other words, a hybrid.

The last audio example included with this article is Barrell's *The Last Collage* (2000) produced with sound engineer Russell Stapleton for ABC FM's Listening Room (1988-2003). *The Last Collage* re-visits and upgrades through digital aesthetics (and the skill of Russell Stapleton) a "dialogue" between Jane Fonda and Cecil B De Mille originally created for Sunday Afternoon at the Movies. A dense and provocative program, it creates collages from different pieces of music - a technique now known as "mash-up", and first used by Barrell in *The Decade that Turned into a Radio Programme* (1979) - as well as words and sounds. It is more show than tell and is as much about the visual technique and effect of collage/montage (and its history) as it is about audio. The program attempts to demonstrate with sound what the visual artist does with cut-and-paste. It also includes a commissioned work by performance poet Amanda Stewart whose (subliminal) theme is that genetic engineering or gene splicing is the ultimate collage.



Track 3. Excerpt: *The Last Collage* (2000). ABC Radio Nationals Listening Room (1988-2003) program. Sound Engineer Russell Stapleton. 2'32"

Conclusion

In this study we have focussed on a selection of Tony Barrell's aural excursions across one particular institution, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. We have shown how he was able to develop his hybrid style of radio feature making within the anarchic free-for-all atmosphere of Double J, a station that was itself a product of the "cultural radicalism" of the times. As programming formats and institutional structures rigidified in the 80s and 90s, Barrell sought new spaces for innovation and experiments with a range of collaborators from inside and outside the ABC. One could say that his progress through the ABC has been less a steady march than the sideways scuttle of a crab, sensing obstacles and finding a way around them. However, from her observations over the last 30 years, former ABC Arts Editor Roz Cheney sees the possibilities for this kind of independence as less and less likely:

In the early 70s the radio production departments had all the power. Now there are no radio production departments, only networks. ...Now producers really have got no rights and the production areas themselves don't control their budget. They don't control their staffing; everything is systematized. They don't control the sound engineers, and there is limited access to studios (Cheney 2008).

Virginia Madsen's research on podcasting is more optimistic about the future for producers such as Barrell, and suggests that online audio delivery platforms could support a more encouraging environment for "talk-driven high production values programming" (Madsen 2009). In the U.S. there are also claims that more conventional social realist audio documentary formats, such as those heard on NPR, are undergoing a renaissance and are attracting new audiences (Erlich 2008).

Barrell's continuing collaboration with, and mentoring of new talent, both at the ABC and in higher education, demonstrates his commitment to audio feature culture. In his current role as Adjunct Professor in Journalism and Media Arts at Sydney's University of Technology, Barrell has shown a willingness to engage with radio studies academic research, and has been able to reflect on his practice and contribute to contemporary radio cultural history from the position of an industry practitioner. He also extended the reach of his work using his audio research and transcripts for publishing in other formats - online and text. Key international recognition for his work has played a part in granting him editorial freedoms. In the context of a public service broadcast environment it is the combination of these things - Barrell's ability to look beyond the institutional walls of the ABC and across texts and platforms - that makes him a useful prototype of an audio auteur, rather than solely his program output within the constraints of the institution.

Barrell's legacy at the ABC is most clearly heard in the ABC Radio National weekly programme *the Night Air* (2002-current), a two-hour long hybrid form that celebrates the art of the cut-up, collage and the non-linear narrative. Similar in style to Barrell's earlier work at Double J, *The Night Air* recycles found audio material - this time from the radio archives of ABC features and documentaries. The program continues to be produced by Barrell's long time collaborator and "remix" artist John Jacobs. *The Night Air* is also very successful as a podcast - proof that the hybrid style is well suited to an on-line environment.

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Synopsis

Refereed articles

Information articles