Bush House memories

As the former home to World Service closed to staff, Brian Willis sent in his memories of working at Bush House 40 years ago.

I was a technical operator, recording and editing programmes, and was also a continuity operator. In those days recordings were made in two ways: 78rpm discs (gramophone records) and on 1/4" tape. Discs were declining and tape was in the ascendency.

The 78s only lasted three minutes each, and I used to literally cut the groove on the disc using a (sapphire?) tipped tool, which dug a groove out of the soft shellac surface. Quite a skilled job, which even involved a microscope to ensure you did not cut too deep and made a 'washer' instead of a recording. Mind you, the cutting tool could not have been very robust, as I remember, whilst being taught disc-cutting at Bournemouth, the instructor, Percival Guy (now why do I remember that name?) sharpening one with his penknife.

Night shift we used to amuse ourselves by making our own discs. None of my family had a telephone so I used to rig up a microphone and send a message home on these discs by 'saail mail' (I still have a couple of these).

It was also a rather dangerous operation, as the swarm which came off the recording was extremely volatile and could easily catch fire. Needless to say, one night we filled a paper bag with the stuff, set it alight and threw it out of the window to land as a moat. Filling dance five floors below in the courtyard.

Tape editing

This was fun, because we were working with 41 different languages. The producer would nod where he wanted you to cut, then nod again where he wanted you to come back in again. I loved tape editing! You really felt you were actually handling language and sentences.

But with a foreign language I often wondered what sort of bash I was making of the item. In one language (forget which – might have been Indonesian), the way to make a noun plural was to just repeat the word. Somali had no written language. The scripts were in English and the announcers and contributors would translate as they went along. (In the early Seventies, Somali became a written language, based on Latin characters, for the first time.)

A Swedish producer would often arrive with a brown paper bag full of lengths of tape. These were sentences which he had saved from a previous editing session and which he wished to add in to the current programme.

Continuities

There were about eight 'continuities', each being a small room with a mixing desk and loudspeakers. They were colour coded, but couldn't be named by language, as in any 24-hour period one continuity would handle many different programmes in many different languages. Here the various programmes would be joined together and sent to the transmitter. I would sit there listening to some exotic language until it was time to change to another studio and language and – even if they were still chatting away – would cut them off and start the next studio. Ah the power!

At pre-arranged times, I would throw a key and broadcast the 'Int Sig'. This was the Morse code 'V' sign played on a drum. This was on a tape loop. I think this started during the war to identify the General Overseas broadcasts. We also broadcast the 'Old Bobers' tune too – but was probably done from the studio.

The whole operation was run by a complicated series of switches, a unisector, which controlled the distribution to the various transmitters.

Crash Start

Of course, this was the Cold War era, so a lot of the effort went into broadcasts to Russia. I don't think it is a secret any more, but occasionally we would do a Crash Start. Normally a transmitter is prepared with signals, tones etc but with a Crash Start, sometimes 16 different transmitters would all power up with the same programme simultaneously. This was done to try and outfox the Russian jammers.

We used to re-broadcast the Voice of America programmes and often you would hear these jammers trying to home in on the material as it arrived on the receiver. You could hear their calls sign over the cacophony (white noise) they were transmitting.

Night shift

Night shift was enjoyable. The building never rested, with programmes being broadcast throughout the night. Bush House overlooked the Strand and it always intrigued me that no matter what unearthly time of the night, there was always traffic rushing past.

I was also fascinated by the light at the top of Big Ben. We were several floors up so had a nice view out over London and across to Westminster. That light was put on whenever Parliament was sitting. I was able to look across and sympathise with those also working in the wee small hours.

Split shifts

During some of my day-time shifts, I would get two hours off and then go back to work. Two hours off was not long enough to get home, so I was forced to wander London. What joy! I visited museums and art galleries, walked along the embankment, watched the river, and sketched. (You can see some of my sketches from my time at Bush House by putting 'Bush House Continuity' in a search engine.)

Canteen

The canteen at Bush House was an amazing place, full of different nationalities and languages. But perhaps my most abiding memory of the canteen was the elderly lady who every day would stand at the entrance to the canteen and silently count us all. I never saw her sitting down for a meal. I was told she was a survivor of a German concentration camp. Who was she? Has any Prospect reader memories of this lady?

Album captures the sound of Bush House

The Portland stone and high ceilings of Bush House provided the acoustics which inspired studio manager Robin Warren to create an album capturing the sounds of the iconic building.

Far from the radio broadcasts that have transmitted all over the world, he has turned his ear to the creaks and murmurs around the building.

The album of two tracks, both over ten minutes, bends the atmospheric hum of Bush House's corridors and crevices.

Recognising that the sounds may not keep everyone's attention, Warren has split the tracks to 'make them more palatable' to form the album 'Ghosts of Bush'.

Warren recorded the album in the downtime during night shifts as a studio manager for the World Service language services, where he has worked for almost four years.

He explains that in between programmes there can be up to two hours when there isn't anything to do.

"Some people sleep, some people watch "Top Gear", others play video games. But I wanted to do something more meaningful and quieter."

Warren says Bush House has been the perfect place to record these atmospheric tracks because 'everything created an aural experience'.

He is the first to admit that he is "completely obsessed" with sound, something he had not been able to experiment with in his day-to-day job.

"We don't get to flex our muscles creatively as studio managers at the moment so it was a chance to do that," he explains.

"There's a history in the BBC of people being a bit frustrated by what they actually have to do and then doing their own side projects while no-one is looking," he adds.

Warren pinpointed the central clock as creating the scariest sounds but says "it's amazing how little effort you have to make Bush House sound spooky."

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