



Ian Rawes

Interviewed by Cathy Lane

I meet Ian Rawes in the 'control room' for the listening service at the British Library Reading Room. In this digital age it seems a strange and arcane throwback to a bygone age of wood panelling, reel to reel tape machines, turntables, and an almost lost, polite, caring world of individual service—it is incredible that it can still exist. Ian seems so much a part of this world that it is almost impossible to think of him anywhere else. His sense of detail, painstaking research and dedication to a very individualistic documentary form of making and presenting field recordings is evident in every aspect of his incredible project, The London Sound Survey which is constantly growing and developing. The interview is punctuated by Ian responding to requests from listeners. When the interview ends I am led through the 'behind the scenes' labyrinth and out through the staff exit on to the dark wet Euston Road, and this seems like the icing on a very informative and enjoyable few hours.

Why did you start field recording?

I picked field recording as a way to document London and explore its current character, and that's down to working in the British Library Sound Archive. But the urge to do something like that pre-dated coming across field recordings.

My first job there was as a Vaultkeeper, which is like a storeman. It's mainly a manual job, but you need a reasonable memory because there are maybe 4-5 million recordings in the collection in different formats, and you have to know where everything is kept. Everything in the vaults revolved around crates. Recordings are taken off shelves, put into crates and sent off to curators, and then they come back in crates. You're handling recordings all day long and you can't help but become interested in them. You start to read the notes on the boxes and discover that there are lots of field recordings made by professionals and amateurs related to all kinds of subjects from ethnomusicology, to oral history, to wildlife. Then there are odd things, like the Yorkshireman who recorded the sound of every bus in Yorkshire and wrote very detailed notes on the tape boxes. So I thought, "Why don't I go around and record London, the city where I was born and grew up?"

In my late teens I had moved away from London for about ten years, and when I came back I didn't really feel I was settling in again. I had been living in Glasgow and Edinburgh which were much smaller and so, by contrast, found the scale of London intimidating at times. Many of the people that I had known had moved away or were out of contact, so I felt like I didn't entirely belong. Maybe to help solve this I wanted to document those curious aspects of the city which I liked, humble things like cafes, street markets, pubs and curiosities of various sorts.

But why sound recording in particular as a form of documentation?

One reason was probably a desire to be noticed and not to push crates around for ever more in the Sound Archive. I thought that if I made recordings of London as I knew it, then I could add them to the Archive and get some sort of recognition because I would be producing recordings and not just shifting them around. I had once tried documenting London with pictures but I was never happy with the results.

Did you ever get the chance to actually listen to any of the recordings that you were dealing with?

No, not often. I didn't have any easy way to listen to open reel tapes. The first field recordings that I listened to were on one of Steven

Feld's *In the Time of Bells* CDs. I saw that Feld used a strange set of microphones that you wore on your head, not in the ears but on a headband. There's a picture of him kneeling down on a beach recording the sounds of waves while wearing them. They're made by an American sound engineer called Lenny Lombardo, so I bought a pair of these Sonic Studio microphones. On his website Lombardo showcased various amateur recordists who used his gear, and I wanted to go around London and record things like street markets, stadiums, and pubs and make recordings as vivid and evocative as theirs. The very first recording I made with them was at the local corner shop where I bought a can of beer or something, and then I went to Petticoat Lane market on a Sunday morning. I remember it well, I wasn't monitoring things with these mics on, I walked very slowly up and down a number of times and I couldn't wait to get home and listen to what I'd recorded. Then I just wanted to go out again and again because, as I wasn't monitoring, it was like I had a little box with a surprise in it each time. I'd get home and listen to it and be excited about what I'd captured and how it sounded in the different setting of my home.

In the early days I wanted to get peoples' voices. I originally had an idea that I could do a series of CD-Rs called 'London Voices' for the Archive. The idea was to record preachers, demonstrators, or football crowds—voices in public places, not private conversations.

I also started to listen to recordings by other people and I tried to think what it is that I liked to hear. I got some sense that a satisfying recording is one that has many different sounds in it. I was also influenced by Aaron Ximm who does a website called The Quiet American. He had a series called 'One Minute Vacations' where he invited people from around the world to send in a one-minute sound snap of wherever they were. Through listening to these I realised you don't have to put hours of audio together but just find and extract the good minute; maybe one that has a natural beginning, something that introduces it or something else that makes a good ending.

Do you always select a continuous chunk of recording or do you edit things together?

I sometimes tried to edit things together at first because I found that when you walk around your environment there are long periods where nothing much of interest is heard, so I'd get rid of those. Now I tend to research the area better so that I can work out a route in which the boring bits don't last as long. As I became more confident in producing listenable recordings I wanted to experiment with

quieter places and different kinds of subjects. But the Sonic Studio mics weren't really up to it, their self-noise is too high. So I started buying others and I learnt that microphones are best thought of as tools for particular jobs. There isn't a single microphone that is good for everything. I was interested in places that were meant to be quiet, like local libraries, but which in my experience usually aren't. The recordings showed that they all sounded different to one another because of the type of people going in, the shape of the building, the furniture and so on. That eventually led to a project called the 'Waterways soundmap' where I thought it would be a nice idea to try and get away from the traffic and follow all the water-courses in London.

What form did that take? Had you heard things like Annea Lockwood's river sound maps at that time?

No I hadn't. When I started recording I was thinking of making CD-Rs that I would lodge with the Library, and only later did the idea start to form of making my own website instead. I was beginning to think of how to make taxonomies of different sounds that were signals, like whistles, hooters or people shouting. I thought of these as tools or 'sound acts', which is borrowing the idea of speech acts, from philosophers such as John Searle. Their idea was that you could analyse speech in terms of its function, which is what I tried to do with sounds—for example sounds that denote making money, expressing a sense of camaraderie, or calling people to worship. But it's quite hard to keep finding examples of those, so I thought that if I wanted to carry on recording I'd have to find other things to record as well.

The London Sound Survey went online at the end of May 2009. I thought it'd be a laugh to make it look like some obscure government or council department that had somehow gone weird, as if they'd been left on their own for too long. I got the idea for the site's colour scheme from the fried chicken boxes that people throw on the pavement and which I feel symbolise my part of London—grey pavements covered in red and yellow boxes with greasy white interiors. So the initial colour scheme was shades of grey with white, tomato soup red and bright yellow.

Had you seen other sound maps at that time? Yours is essentially about the historical and different categories of recordings.

No I hadn't come across any. I once overheard someone use the term 'sound map' in conversation and very quickly had an idea of what one would be like.

The use of categories stems from a tendency on my part to think in terms of systems and interfaces. First you come up with the system in outline, make sketches of webpages, see how the interface is going to work, and that creates slots that you then have to fill with recordings and off you go.

Among other things, I divided a map of the city into dozens of grid squares, worked out the Ordnance Survey co-ordinates for the exact centre of each square, and then tried to get to it with a GPS receiver. Some I couldn't get near, and it was a problem with the ones near Kent and Essex because you have to walk along country roads with no verges and risk getting run over by someone belting along in a black Range Rover.

Were you always interested in the historical dimension?

Early on I became aware there were old BBC recordings. For example, there's a recording of an exercise class at a Butlins holiday camp from 1946, and on the other side is a rent tribunal. There is something on there, a vanished quality of sound that denotes authority. I think it's in the reverberance of sound that comes from a wooden floor and no soft furnishings in the room. The court room, the school room, the rent tribunal, the council office: those soundmarks of authority probably don't exist any more. The proceedings themselves are very humdrum, but the quality of the recording in the room, the voices and everything else is part of a vanished sound world. I wanted to use these but I didn't at first because I wasn't sure what intellectual property issues were involved, so thought about quoting from books instead. There are lots of books on the internet that are out of copyright and you can search through them very quickly. I've got about fifty search terms like 'tumult', 'cacophony', 'clang', 'bang' and so on, and you can look them up or you can pick promising sounding books and see what comes up. That became the kernel of the historical section.

Do you feel that historical work has given you new insights into the contemporary work?

There is a great discontinuity between the ages. In the past most people had to use the air to get their points across. But now the atmosphere has largely been abandoned for impersonal broadcast in the same way that short wave has now been abandoned by radio stations. Now we get information from the TV and the internet. Electricity has changed everything. Many of the sound practices which might have been around for thousands of years, such as those developed by a team of

people, usually men working together in a group for a common end shouting at each other or singing together, have gone. There are parts of the world where that need to communicate over distances has produced things like yodelling or whistling languages, and now these highly optimised ways of projecting voices are becoming redundant.

Electronic voices telling you what to do seem to be on the increase, however.

There has always been an attempt to try and standardize things. I see it as part of the desire for centralised control. It breaks down sometimes on trains, or in some stations where the staff have some clout and can be idiosyncratic. But if you go somewhere where the staff don't have much power and are poorly paid then they either probably won't get near a microphone or they'll have tight scripts to follow. Or they'll be replaced altogether with a centralised channel of an in-store radio station populated by the voices of trained actors. So it becomes professionalised, or even completely automated.

Is it usually a modulated female voice?

The voice of authority and information has nearly always been a man. There were only a few exceptions to that, like in the school room, and bus conductors from the time of the First World War. Now I would say the majority of recorded announcements use female voices, I guess it's a form of soft authority. There is an odd precedent for that from the 1960s, when fighter planes were fitted with special tape machines which played critical systems messages to the pilots like 'fuel is low' or whatever. They used women's voices to cut through the radio chatter of men's voices and get the pilot's attention. I read recently that more modern systems use the voice of an older, middle-class woman.

Are there historical descriptions of places that you have visited and recorded more recently?

Yes, but many writers have a generic place in London in mind. For example Joseph Conrad in *The Secret Agent* creates two different sound worlds for dramatic purposes, the world of the winner and the world of the loser. The anarchists inhabit the world of the loser where all the sound is muffled, and the police and the MPs inhabit the world of the winner where all the sound is deep and resonant. Dickens, however, is very precise. He does a brilliant description of Smithfield Market in *Oliver Twist*, and completely mad things happened there then, like mule races in order to show off the health of the animals to prospective buyers. But the mules would run off and career through the crowd sending people flying.

You must be reading a lot of historical texts?

Yes, but I would like to do more. I want to know how the sounds came about. I've started the Holocene Sound Project which is an ambitious new part of the site. 'Holocene' is the scientific or geological name for the current epoch which goes from the present day back to the end of the last glacial period, about 11,500 years ago. Given the amount of data we have access to nowadays it's possible to make reasonably informed guesses of what particular places, in this case the Thames area, might have sounded like over that period. We know what the climate was like, what plants and animals were there, so we can work out what it might have sounded like. This will become a big section of the site and have a lot of multimedia chucked in—sounds, video, 3D rendered landscapes, writing, the lot. I'm against the idea of synthesising past sound environments, I think it's much better to find real present-day environments which have some of the sound features of the past. At the moment I'm doing it on my own but I'll have to branch out and get others involved.

So all of this has got you more recognised both inside and outside the British Library?

Yes, the Sound Archive decided to get me involved in the UK Soundmap project. This was a crowd-sourced sound map. People uploaded recordings made mainly with their phones to the map and I would edit it. I did that for a year. After that I moderated an accent map which was linked to an exhibition called 'Evolving English'. Then this opportunity in the Listening Service came up. My work here consists of arranging appointments, finding things for people to listen to, answering their queries and giving some help with their research, or else putting them in contact with a curator who is an expert in that field.

I would love to be the Curator of London Sounds, but that job doesn't exist and there are not enough such recordings anyway. The other curatorial collections each have many thousands of recordings, and they need someone with a degree or a doctorate to take charge of them and speak authoritatively about them. I don't even have a degree.

What you do on the London Sound Survey takes an incredible amount of time. Is it a hobby?

Yes it is, it's done in my own time and with my own money. I'm happy and proud to put myself into the hobbyist tradition alongside

great hobbyists like Alfred Wainwright who made those beautiful fell-walking books about the Lake District. One day he decided he was going to do all these books and worked out very precisely that it would take thirteen years or something like that. I also like that tradition which is somewhat peculiar to this country of people going off and doing strange things, without the intervention of the state or the world of commerce, associating freely with like-minded people.

I record most weekends, but I don't always put the results up. I reject loads, maybe about 90% in terms of running time, for all sorts of reasons. I have a hypothetical listener in mind who is a very sceptical kind of person, and I'm trying to win them over. I've never met anyone like that. Most people seem to understand, but I'm always thinking whether they'll get the point of a recording without having to read the explanatory text. It's like a little mental checkpoint.

Are you ever in your recordings either explicitly or implicitly?

No, I want my role to be the one of selection only. My aim is to turn myself into the hole in the wall through which you hear what's on the other side. I determine where and when that hole is but I reject recordings if my own breathing or footsteps are in them and can't be got rid of. Otherwise it's like taking a photo when your finger's poking out over part of the lens.

You must have had people come up and ask you what you're doing?

No, not in central London, but I use discreet mics there anyway. Sometimes in the suburban areas if I'm using a more noticeable set-up people will come up and talk, and that's nice if you've been on your own all day, but in the centre or inner London people are much more suspicious. I hate it when you see something promoting a course in urban field recording and there's a picture of a serious-looking young man with big headphones on waving a mic windshield around. "No you won't make good recordings mate, you look like a chump! Just use little mics, you don't need super high quality mics in the city centre anyway."

Whose work in this area do you admire?

I learn from a lot of people. I think Peter Cusack's work is good. I particularly like Mark Peter Wright's ability to record elemental subjects like wind and water. High technical standards and a sympathy for the subject is apparent in many wildlife recordists, like Vicki Powys from Australia. I've heard some things by Francisco López recently and was impressed. Another really good street recordist is Des Coulam. He's

been recording Paris for many years, and he's developed the knack of finding the sweet spot where things sound the best.

Do you have favourite recordings?

Yes but it's not just for the sound. For me the recording rebuilds a mental model of the whole environment, the way the various elements are arranged in space. I don't even think video is as good as that, because it's doing too much of the work for you. I can't really listen to recordings dispassionately.

My best recording day was in Canvey Island during the World Cup. I'm not interested in football and I wasn't going to watch it down the pub. Instead I wanted to record the gas flares being burnt off at the Corringham refinery, which has since been shut down. The flares made this noise like 'whoooooosh', very deep, and then a siren started which sounded like the songs that whales make, a rising and falling tone echoing out over the estuary landscape. It had an epic feel. What a lucky recording!

After that I walked along the seafront and I came across a group of older Caribbean people having their Sunday service. They were all singing and didn't mind me recording them. So two smashing recordings made on a single sunny day. Then there are other less obvious things. For example on the Waterways soundmap there's a recording from Burnt Oak Fields in north-west London. It's very mundane, you hear a train recede in the distance, some bird song, someone putting their rubbish out, and a plane flying overhead. I don't know why, but something about it makes you think of a very damp day, cool with moisture in the air. It's almost like the essence of the mundane, a painting all in shades of grey.

I'm presuming that London is your favourite field, but if so, then what part or aspect of London? What gives you the most pleasure?

The recordings that give me the most pleasure these days are actually the BBC historical recordings which have the voices of people who are probably dead now. They give me some sense of being part of a biological stream and can be quite moving. They're like hearing grandparents that have long gone. Why do I like recording? I suppose finding things that surprise me—yes, the unexpected.