THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

The BBC’s Radiophonic workshop was the cradle of electronic experimentation in the UK

IF YOU WANTED to locate the Year Zero of British electronic music, you could do worse than alight upon the theme tune to Doctor Who. Originally written in 1963 by composer Ron Grainer, the work done on it by Delia Derbyshire (aided by Dick Mills) – an innovative use of analogue tape manipulation, white noise and oscillators – produced a track that sounded like the future nearly 30 years before A Guy Called Gerald’s ‘Veck-O-Ray’. Even now it could pass for a particularly grungy slice of Euro-techno if it didn’t up conjure images of flying police boxes and sentient dustbins.

It was the work of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, an organisation founded in 1958 by a group of BBC employees, that included Daphne Oram and Desmond Briscoe, with the aim of supporting BBC radio producers looking for interesting and unusual sound effects for their burgeoning experimental drama programmes. The Workshop lasted until March 1998 – almost exactly 40 years – before being closed as part of wholesale changes to the BBC’s internal structures.

Although most people have likely never even heard of the Radiophonic Workshop, chances are you’ve heard its work, so deeply is it embedded in British culture – from the voices of the Daleks to the space-age delights of Hitchhiker’s Guide To The Galaxy and a cornucopia of FX-laden Radio 4 dramas, the Workshop has arguably had a gigantic yet apparently untraceable influence on British electronic music (it’s no coincidence that one of our most iconic DJ mixes, Coldcut’s 1995 classic, ‘70 Minutes Of Madness’, includes one of their pieces).

Today we’re sitting with two of its gentlemen adventurers, Peter Howell and Roger Limb, both of whom joined the Workshop in the early 1970s. We’re here because five of the members of the Workshop have collaborated on a score for the recent Matthew Holness-directed horror movie, Possum.

“Matthew had wanted to use old tracks of ours from our early vinyls as something to edit the film against,” explains Howell. “It was working quite well, and he was thinking ‘I’ll have to get the rights to use these tracks, but somebody said, ‘Why don’t you ask them to do it?’ The end result is pure Radiophonic Workshop, with all its mastery of psychological disturbance; opposite, given that Roger Limb recalls someone once suggesting, “You should have a sign up saying you specialise in nervous breakdowns.”
Although they'd garnered a reputation, via Doctor Who and Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy, of specialising in sci-fi, the Workshop's output was hugely varied. "We worked an enormous amount for schools programmes, and they were not science fiction by any means," explains Howell. "A lot of them were quite simple stories, things like Ali Baba's Magic Carpet. In fact, the first job I did at the Workshop was about a flying steak and kidney pie." Roger Limb's explanation of their modus operandi is suitably succinct. "We dealt with outer space and inner space. So a lot of the subjects we covered were psychological." 

Howell and Limb joined in a period in the early 1970s when the early tape experiments of the Workshop founders were gradually giving way to the modern age of synthesisers. The Workshop, thanks to its relationship with inventor and engineer Peter Zinoviev, were one of the first organisations to use the EMS VCS3, the first British-designed synthesiser, which came on to the market in 1970. The employees at the Workshop dubbed the larger version 'The Delacroix' after the road in which the studio sat. Like many early synths, it was frequently a temperamental beast. "It could make some lovely sounds and I used it almost like a condiment to add to other stuff," explains Howell. "But on the very few occasions I used it entirely for something I was never very happy and always felt it sounded a bit thin. In many ways, it was very inspirational for lots of synth that came afterwords."

The use of synthesisers, common in the Workshop, was not without controversy. Some of its early members, like John Baker and Delia Derbyshire, had their suspicions about them, but they also regularly came into conflict with the Musicians Union, whose attitude to anything new — commercial radio, disc jockeys or synthesisers — was outright hostility, fearing a threat to members' jobs. "There was a lot of distrust at how we were operating and the fact we were taking work from jockeys and musicians," says Howell. "Although theoretically, that might be true, the number of programmes we worked on was infinitesimal, compared to the number of programmes using BBC orchestras."

The mere fact that the Radiophonic Workshop existed seems to have been a source of continuous wonder for its adherents. "I was lucky to be there," claims Roger Limb. "When I arrived in the 1970s, the feeling was 'This is wonderful, it can't possibly last.'" Peter Howell concurs: "Yes, you felt like you were going in every day and thinking, 'How can this possibly exist in the BBC?'" Paradoxically, the Workshop could only have existed in the BBC, away from the constraints of the market-place. It permitted experimentation and the seeking of new ideas and methods of synthesiser haven hidden in a studio somewhere in Maida Vale.

When the Workshop eventually closed, it had narrowed into a dribble of activity before finally being put out of its misery in 1998. There were no fanfares, no acknowledgement of its significant impact on culture, not even a goodbye party. So when, some years later in 2009, a Radiophonic Workshop concert was mooted by the Roundhouse in London, it came as a shock to the stalwarts, half-surprised that anyone had even been listening. "We disappeared off the scene for nine years and then we came back for the concert and there were all these fans waiting for us to return," says Peter Howell. Their final piece? An extended version of the Doctor Who theme. Adds Roger Limb: "You could say we arrived on the shoulders of Doctor Who." And like the Doctor, they've always been ahead of their time.