

The wonderful world of wireless

Kate Molleson, The Herald, 8th April 2015.

A few year back, there was an episode of BBC Radio Four's In Our Time devoted to TS Eliot's The Waste Land. Mostly it covered the standard debates that crop up around the poem - was Eliot a snob for using so many obscure references? Was Ezra Pound's editing too heavy-handed? - but a passing comment from one of the contributors stuck with me. "The Waste Land reads like a radio play before such a thing existed," suggested Steven Connor, then professor of modern literature at Birkbeck University. "Ah yes," replied Melvyn Bragg. "The voices."

The phenomenon of disembodied voices: maybe the early term "wireless" better captures the early magic of radio's invisible means of transmission. A Rudyard Kipling sci-fi story dating from 1902 and called simply "Wireless" hints at the uneasy wonder that greeted the new technology: "Have you ever seen a spiritualistic seance? It reminds me of that sometime - odds and ends of messages coming out of nowhere - a word here and there..."

It isn't surprising that inventive artists were drawn to radio from the start. Wireless grew up alongside modernism; the radio dial appealed to a modernist sense of fragmentation and the erasure of linear history, but the new technology was also tangible and tactile, and unleashed a childlike impulse to touch and test. Artists watched their potential modes of dissemination changing, widening, democratising: the airwaves were free to anyone with an antenna and electricity, and soon the medium was more democratic than any book could be.

Writing in Germany, Berthold Brecht called for radio to be a two-way process. "Radio must be transformed from a distribution apparatus to a communications apparatus," he argued as part of his wider socio-political idealism. "Radio must make exchange possible." Contrast that with Italy's Marinetti, who had little interest in involving his listeners: his treatise *La Radio* demands that "La Radio shall be ... Essential art!" And so the experiments abounded, global airwaves playing host to politics and artistic novelty across the spectrum, from the BBC Radiophonic Workshop to Beckett's radio dramas to Pound's fascist rants to John Cage's dial-turning aleatoricism.

Next week, a new FM station will be broadcasting direct from Glasgow's Centre for Contemporary Arts. Intended as a platform for radiophonic sound art, Radiophrenia is the initiative of Mark Vernon and Barry Burns, aka the sound-art duo Vernon and Burns. With an aerial on the roof and a transmitter in the CCA's Green Room, Radiophrenia will be at 87.9 FM, 24 hours a day between April 13-19.

Setting it all up has, they tell me, been a monumental labour of love. "Let's call it a hubristic endeavour," says Burns, marvellously deadpan. "For our next project we're going to do

something easier, like maybe build an opera house in the Amazon jungle." So why are they doing it? "Well, we've been making experimental radio work for 20 years," replies Vernon. "We've been hosted by stations all over the world; it felt like time to reciprocate."

Both have long been passionate about the art of radio listening. "I was the classic kid clutching a Fisher-Price radio under the bedclothes when I was supposed to be asleep," says Burns. "I grew up in Inverness and John Peel was the first thing I really listened to... then going through the dial and finding Radio Luxembourg, Voice of America, and being curious about where these voices were coming from." In Vernon's childhood home in Derby, the kitchen radio was always tuned to Radio One or Two. "There was a man who delivered bread every day when Terry Wogan was on. As a kid I always associated him with that voice, so when I saw the actual Terry Wogan on telly I was outraged."

There's no small dose of romanticism to the Radiophrenia project. Vernon and Burns have dreamed up jingles - 45 or so - with the tagline 'Radiophrenia: the light at the end of the dial'. Mention of the dial is no accident here: they're broadcasting on FM first and foremost, with accompanying online stream as a necessary formality. "I hope we get listeners trawling the dial and finding us by accident, like people did in the old days," says Vernon. "FM makes the whole thing more physical. If you don't get a full signal on a digital station it's just a scrambled mess or nothing. If you don't quite get an FM signal you're still on the edge of something. I like that notion of being on the edge of something."

One obvious template is London's arts station Resonance FM, to which Vernon and Burns have long been contributors, or Dartington's Soundart Radio, or American stations like Wave Farm in New York State. Vernon has been involved with past radio projects in Glasgow, too: Hairwaves was a one-day broadcast involving interviews with barbers and pet groomers, and Radio Tuesday was a collaboration in the late 1990s with artists Alex Frost and Duncan Campbell. He describes that particular endeavour as "intermittent - and illegal, because we didn't have a licence. Then Alex and Duncan got busy with successful art careers and I was the only one left making this radio art stuff."

But Glasgow does make sense as a home for this kind of station, given the cross-filtering that draws visual artists and experimental musicians into making radio art. Could Radiophrenia be a permanent thing? Vernon and Burns look mildly panicked at the suggestion. "We'll assess that once it's over, when we've finished sobbing quietly in a corner," says Burns. "Actually, it's something I've thought about a lot," Vernon admits, "but there is just so much admin involved. We had 700 submissions for this week alone. That's a lot of emails to get through for two sound-art guys like us..."

700 submissions does suggest that there's a serious appetite for the platform. Some of the pitches were downright bonkers: badly recorded UKIP sci-fi, anyone? Burns listened all the way through to that particular file, convinced there must be an ingenious ironic reveal at the end (there wasn't). "Then I looked back at our call-out which said we were looking for challenging ideas that wouldn't get a platform elsewhere, and I understood why the guy had mistakenly got in touch."

The works that did make the cut sound intriguing. There's a five-hour manipulation of the universal time clock by Canadian radio artist Anna Friz; Beckett's *Footfalls* reinterpreted with synthesiser; Walter Benjamin essays read by Louise Welsh and others in Glasgow locations including the Scotia Bar, the Clyde Tunnel and the Necropolis. Every morning will feature a satellite forecast, informing us of the various satellites passing over Glasgow that day, and at midnight and midday we'll hear howler monkeys recorded in Mexico. "Our equivalent of *Sailing By*," offers Vernon.

Mostly, *Radiophrenia*'s schedule is a panoply of one-offs and experiments, which with no iPlayer or online archive you'll simply have to tune in to catch. And that's exactly the point, says Burns. "It's ephemeral, it's the here-and-now. Who knows what you'll hear."