

Loop Interview with Colin Black  
With Damian Castaldi

**Loop:** 4 years on from your award winning "The Ears Outside My Listening Room" Prix Italia award in the category of Radio Music can you tell us something about Radio Music, the state of radiophonic audio arts practice today as you see it both nationally and internationally?

**Colin:** I won the Prix Italia award for the ABC 4 years ago in the category of "Radio Music – Composed Work", so "Radio Music" for me is music that is specifically composed for radio. By that I mean music that combines sound recordings, musical instruments both acoustic and/or electronic with semantic elements so as to explore the works dual potential as an audio documentary and carrier of music and sonic experimentation. As an audio artist and musician, I also compose notated music, so I can look at a project from the composer's point of view and from a sound artist's point of view. Different projects require various approaches.

Unfortunately since my win, the Australian media landscape's participation with radiophonic and audio arts has significantly decreased. To me this is ironic as there are now much more powerful and sophisticated audio tools accessible to more and more artists than ever before. We are entering an age where if you can dream it you can probably create it. With extended wireless networks and GPS driven binaural simulated locative media, a whole new range of tools are on offer for the new breed of radio art practitioners. Surround sound works are becoming much more commonplace and a lot of calls for radio art works now state that there are "no restriction on the kind of sound presented, but recordings must be stereo-compatible". With such a strong acoustic arts undercurrent happening throughout the world, it's just strange to think that some of our cultural organisations have virtually turned their back on this vigorously evolving art form.

Radiophonic and Radio Art encompasses a wide range of practices and theories, so I would like to briefly share one small aspect of the practice. Many contemporary practitioners see Radio Art as a real-time sound sculpture that occupies the radio studio and all its received locations. This idea originates from the 1933 Italian Futurists LaRadia manifesto that clearly understood the implications of radio's simultaneous presence. So in this sense I see the radio broadcaster simultaneously generating and curating the gallery space and just can't facilitate the same function when the work is only offered as a pod cast. Because pod casts can't be real-time sound sculptures with a simultaneous presence in multiple locations using this method of distribution. So if these works are no longer broadcast on radio this kind of art form no longer exists. What bothers me most about this is how we can stand back and watch this real-time sound sculpture "gallery" virtually close in Australia and say nothing. I mean, if

the national art gallery closed its doors then there would be an uproar, it would be called barbaric, so why is it ok to all but kill off this “breed” of art and who is responsible for this national extinction? Contrary to this national trend I think that internationally Radiophonic and Radio Art are very strong and supported. There are some national public broadcasters in Europe that allow artists to curate with absolutely no content limits enforced. They even sometimes allow the artist access to the EBU satellite to facilitate all types of radiophonic experimental projects.

It would be great to have these kinds of opportunities in Australia. I think that Australian artists are at a disadvantage when it comes to developing radiophonic works and practice. While there seems to be a strengthening live experimental music scene, which is evident from festivals like Liquid Architecture & The Now now, the opposite seems to be happening with radiophonic practice in Australia. It seems that the main challenge live experimental performances face is that generally they are lucky if they attract an audience of more than a hundred, while one national broadcast can reach an audience of thousands to tens of thousands. While I have huge respect for, and enjoy these live events it would be great if the same solidarity could be formed to raise awareness for studio based and live radio art works that naturally reach maximum functionality when broadcast. In Berlin there is an event called Radio Tesla that holds weekly radio art events and attracts the attention and support of their national broadcaster, giving a voice to its practitioners. I mean one national broadcast equals a lot of gigs in terms of audience size and with Radio Art the focus is highly related to broadcast. It naturally follows that an increase in awareness for the practice adds weight for national broadcasts and that would not only support establish artists but also help our emerging sound artists to gain national exposure for their work.

**Loop:** You describe yourself as a composer first, then guitarist and sound artist. Can you talk a bit about your personal working methods, style, and influences? The audio mix so to speak between pure music, sound design, other...?

**Colin:** Firstly, there is no hierarchical order to composer, guitarist and sound artist for me. I guess I learned music originally through playing the guitar. I was a professional guitarist for a number of years before deciding to study composition at uni. Sound art practices are an avenue I have naively dabbled in from a very early age, and could bring into serious practice as I applied it to my increasing knowledge of music. All three are disciplines that I practice and use for works in varying degrees.

My personal working methodology varies from project to project, but what I tend to strive for, as an artist is usually some sort of underlying truth of the situation, subject matter or theme. With “The Ears Outside My Listening Room” it was

somehow distilling the essence of the diverse cross-section of Australians I interviewed and to weave their stories together with original music and soundscape that subtly highlighted human fragility. I wanted to artistically somehow preserve their spirit, even their bodies through sound recordings so I used the analogy of the sound archivist throughout the major work.

I find a lot of my work is about my respect for other people and trying to understand them so as to understand myself. I am not the type of artist who wants to tell everyone how I am feeling today, for me to personally do that, seems just a little egotistical, but its great when an artist can do that really well. My art is generally not about me. I am more inspired when looking at a larger field or other people.

I am currently working on a follow-up to “The Ears Outside My Listening Room” entitled “Long, Love & Loss” which this time deals with finding, having and losing love. This work will initially be a radiophonic work and then hopefully developed further into an audiovisual work that could include live performances. This is really where I want to go with it. As this work is planned to migrate into an audio visual work I have been thinking a lot about Michel Chion’s sound classifications: causal, semantic and reduced, while creating the balance for this work.

I also find that I am not drawn towards light-hearted things in my work, I tend to find sad or melancholy things more interesting as they tend to expose the things that we take for granted and reach a deeper truth. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t explore joyful movements within my work, just that the joy is usually tinged with some degree of sadness, pain or at least deconstructed somehow. What makes light seem brighter to me, is always a shade of darkness.

**Loop:** Do you ever collaborate as an artist and if so can you give us some examples of work you may have or are now collaborating on?

**Colin:** I have collaborated on a number of projects including NORPA’s multi-site work that the press called a “traveling theatre, music and performance art show”, entitled “The Flood”. I was responsible for creating the sound design for the large-scale work that strangely dealt with the theme of floods. I created a sound installation as well as designing a dynamic spatialized soundscape that followed the performance from site to site.

I also often collaborate with Yanna Black and have worked on a number of projects with her including the ABC commissioned 'Soundprints: The Greek Imprints Series' and 'Greek Imprints: The Asclepia and The Conscious Dreamer' which were radiophonic works that emerged from recordings we made in various locations in Greece. These works aired as part of the ABC’s “Greek Imprints”

2004 Athens Olympics programming.

I find it very stimulating and rewarding when collaborating on projects, the brainstorming phase is fantastic. What also fascinates me is the link between acoustic art forms with visual and/or kinetic art forms. I have composed a number of scores for film, TV and theatre and it's just amazing when it works. It's always bigger than the individual artists working together. It takes on a life of its own and that to me is just a great space to be in and to be part of. I would really like to work with more artists from all different backgrounds and disciplines in the future.

**Loop:** Can you tell us something of your recent 2006 work 'Alien in The Landscape (Extended Enviro Guitar)'? How was this commissioned, by whom?

**Colin:** 'Alien in The Landscape (Extended Enviro Guitar)' was commissioned by Deutschland Radio. With this work I was trying to ask, how does an Alien in the Landscape adapt to the environment and is the environment also changed by the intrusion... forever? I was aiming to express the psychological, physical and spiritual osmosis of this exchange between the enigmatic explorer, Ludwig Leichhardt and the ancient Australian Landscape that he ventured into and eventually became a part of.

This sound artwork reaches into the locations that Leichhardt passed through, spiritually tracking the residue left by this alien in the landscape with the "Extended Enviro Guitar", an adaptation of the traditional guitar that is played upon by the environment. Through text from the "Journal of Dr. Ludwig Leichhardt's Overland Expedition to Port Essington in the Years 1844 - 45", first published in 1846. This sound artwork plugs into the mental impressions made by the Landscape and its indigenous peoples upon the alien Leichhardt.

I conceived and created the "Extended Enviro Guitar" which has additional 2 -15 meter strings attached to the conventional guitar strings and is played by the environment and processed by various effects. This traditionally European instrument when enhanced and extended (into the 'Extended Enviro-Guitar') acts as an audio interface with the Australian Outback sonically tracking sites traversed by Leichhardt. Leichhardt's mysterious disappearance plagued the minds of the other early Australian explorers, and over time his legend grew to iconic, almost mythological status within Australian culture having towns, highways, rivers, fauna and flora named after him.

For this work I worked with indigenous Australian language, location recordings of remote sites once visited by Leichhardt and his own words/thoughts from his historical journal. I then used the 'Extended Enviro-Guitar' as a sonic metaphor of Leichhardt's physical, psychological and spiritual metamorphosis, resulting from

his continuing exposure to the Australian Outback landscape. For me Leichhardt is still out there somewhere and his atoms, being the first white man's to have ever journeyed to these regions, have somehow changed the composition of the Australian Landscape forever.

**Loop:** Your work has a wide appeal overseas. Can you talk about this; how it came about and apart from awards tell our readers something about the different events you have been a part of such as EnRed 0 in Barcelona and the festival Synthese in Bourges, France?

**Colin:** Winning the Prix Italia award opened a lot of doors for me overseas. It is still very strange to me that such an Australian work like "The Ears Outside My Listening Room" translated and resonated so strongly in Europe.

I think naturally things just evolve, I mean like while I was working in Kyiv in Ukraine, I interviewed an Ukrainian lady who told me what she believed to be a real story from her village in the northern region of Ukraine, about a family who made a pact with the Devil. They traded their male offspring for an endless supply of cows, pigs and chickens. I then combined this oral history with a treated audio documentary of descending deeper and deeper into the Earth on one of Kyiv's high-speed subway escalators. I mean they really dug their subways deep into the earth in Kyiv and it kind of feels like a mysterious underground down there. Anyway, ripping across this sonority of moral decay I then recorded myself aggressively playing a house brick with a wood saw. Now back to the point, this work was included in the Festival Synthese Bourges, in France then Swedish National Radio picked it up for the "Limbo" web interface. 'A Tale From The Ukrainian Underworld' can be found on their website at <http://www.sr.se/p1/src/limbo/> so things just kind of evolve I guess.

Having BBC Radio3 choose to play my work "Wish" to David Toop for a surprise on air critique and having my work broadcast on other European stations like Deutschlandradio Kultur, the BBC, YLE Radio and Dutch National Radio's (VPRO Radio has introduced my work to a much larger audience.

If you go to the Dutch National Radio's website you can still hear an interview I gave in 2004 and "The Ears Outside My Listening Room" the link is <http://www.vpro.nl/programma/cafesonore/afleveringen/15336458/>

The reality is that it took a lot of focus, energy and hard work to do what I have done so far and I thank everyone deeply for the support that I have received along the way.

More info can be found at [http://users.tpg.com.au/users/cydonian/c\\_black.html](http://users.tpg.com.au/users/cydonian/c_black.html)

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