DESIGNING SOUND DOCUMENTS

by Barbara Diggins

Ms. Diggins is a free-lance broadcaster residing in Vancouver. Her article is based upon a presentation made at the Canadian Oral History Association's annual meeting held in Edmonton in September 1977.

The various uses of oral history have been discussed in the journalistic sense, the academic sense, and the archival sense, but what about in the area of entertainment? I don't think we need to re-define oral history, but I think historical documents can become entertaining sound productions. It is possible to entertain and inform at one and the same time and this is what I'll endeavor to explain using some production ideas. A broadcaster knows it is part of his job to choose entertaining people and to collect information his audience will be interested in hearing. The oral historian, on the other hand, might do an interview purely for the information and the historical value of a particular person's voice and/or expression, but how do we make our subjects more interesting?

In broadcast production, all oral interviews collected on audio tape solely or accompanied by video, remain unfinished until post-production work is done. The subjects need not be insipid as some might think. The precious conversations should not be shelved like books. Let's produce them and have them heard.

In choosing a topic and a focus, let your imaginiation run free. How about working on a sound track to accompany a slide sequence in the lobby of your local library? Or try presenting a short production to your favourite radio station? They might even help produce it.

Here are some production ideas based on broadcasting experience. Always make a dub (copy) of the original interview; the original is to be catalogued and transcribed. The copy is yours to play with. So many of us have access to reel-to-reel tape recorders; these definitely have the best quality, so whenever possible take advantage of this medium. Portable machines to suggest are the hand-made Swiss Nagra 1V, the Sony TC 800, and the Uher in various models. They take a five inch reel (Nagra 1V adapts to 7 inch), so an interview recorded at the usual $3\frac{3}{4}$ i.p.s. gives a recording time of thirty minutes. It is wise to record on one side of the tape only to make editing easier. The tape recorders mentioned above are portable; however, some larger machines are transportable and are recommended if you can handle the weight. Cassettes are the most common, and there are techniques that will accomplish adequate results. For instance, if you buy a quality microphone, the sound reproduction is heard with greater fidelity. A popular broadcast microphone is the EV (ElectroVoice) 635A. This is an unidirectional microphone and will pick-up with equal facility from any direction without any lost characteristics.

Microphone technique is very important especially when good quality is required. Practice with a friend; point the microphone back and forth adjusting volume levels in record then playback and analyse the quality. Sound recorded in the "mud" is pretty well impossible to boost later in the studio because there is too much tape and machine hiss. On your cassette or reel-to-reel you probably have a VU (volume

unit) meter. Use it to attain voice levels peaking in the red indicating proper adjustment of volume control. When dubbing from cassette to reel-to-reel, it is necessary that the levels were recorded properly for good quality.

Another easy mistake when recording is to finish with a lack of "presence" in somebody's voice. "Presence" is the quality of being on the microphone, at the correct individual distance from the microphone.[1] This is carried out by practicing holding the microphone directly in front of your interviewee, and then back to yourself when asking a question.

Your conversations will usually take place in a quiet room, but if appropriate to the topic, collect "wild" sounds along with the voices. This will add interest to your program. Imbert Orchard is well known for his trips around British Columbia recording oral history. His programs are all produced. One trip he made was with pack horses covering the same route as David Thompson, and another was a conversation with two natives in B.C.'s Cariboo country. You could hear footsteps in the long grass as the people reminisced. This technique gave life and reality to the recollections of the Indians. Suggestions might be to talk to your subjects in their surroundings. If he is an engineer, for instance, take a ride on an old steam engine and talk to him there, or when interviewing an old seaman, take the time to capture sounds of the waterfront, seagulls screeching and the dock creaking.

A workable story idea in the preliminary stage requires brainstorming either with a partner or on your own. Designing a sound documentary that will be successful depends upon the appeal to the listener. Sometimes the easiest way to figure this out is to define your audience, and program to them, as broadcasters do with their surveys.

I'd like to use a fifteen minute program about the dangers of snow avalanches to illustrate one procedure to scripting a documentary. First a partner and I attended classes in snow avalanche control. Next, we sought the best persons to interview for our program. For this successful documentary we realized that the introduction must be appealing to the listener. Usually a narration works best alone. However, we added to our narrator's voice electronic music in the background.

> It's that time of year again when thousands of B.C. winter sports enthusiasts look forward to the snow season. No matter what the sport, snowmobiling, cross-country or downhill skiing all these areas have one thing in common; they are prime targets for snow avalanches. Already this fall an avalanche has been the cause of a death. We contacted ---------
> of the National Research Council to get statistics on snow avalanche accidents and to find out if the numbers were significant.

Next, our narrator introduced a three minute interview with the hill Manager at Whistler Mountain. Then we used an interesting programming device, the montage. We asked a crowd of ski enthusiasts whether they considered snow avalanches a danger to their winter sport. By splicing five or six of these comments together we gained an effective and interesting mini-social commentary. Finally, we talked to the coordinator of the course being offered in avalanche control. With a sound effect of an avalanche at the end of our wrap-up, the program finished in fifteen minutes. With three interviews, a scripted narration for sound continuity, some excerpts of jazz and classical music, and a sound effect, we had an effective item ready for broadcast.

Elspeth Chisholm, well known for her sound documentaries described the special approach of the braodcaster to the collection of oral documents as requiring solid research, brief but intensive and highly structured interview sessions and careful editing. Remember, when interviewing ask only the questions you want answers to. Don't be afraid to cut the tape; the original is still intact. The trick in editing is what to leave out, not what to include.

By adding the quality of recording and well produced programs the uses of oral history are only bounded by imagination.

FOOTNOTES

1. R.S. Oringel, Audio Control Handbook for Radio and Television Broadcasting Fourth Edition. New York: Hastings House 1975, p. 116.