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PROLOGUE

The seductive power of sound

I once interviewed an extraordinary Australian woman, Ingrid Hart, who had entertained US troops in Vietnam during the war. In the audio trade, Ingrid was what is called good ‘talent’. She had amazing stories to relate, full of detail and feeling, and she told them eloquently, in the mellifluous voice of the singer she still was.

One story was about a night when Ingrid and her band were to be escorted from a base at Qui Nhơn on the coast to An Khê in the high country. It was a treacherous route, vulnerable to attack by communist Viet Cong forces, and therefore usually negotiated by helicopter. But on this night, only a truck and a jeep showed up. Ingrid was unimpressed. ‘You mean to tell me we’re going through the hilly terrain in *that?*’ she snorted at the US escort. Worse, the rear gunner, supposed to keep watch, failed to show. ‘They did have an M16, which I was used to firing, and a bulletproof vest. So I volunteered to be the rear gunner’, Ingrid, the cabaret artist, tells me now, deadpan.

Listening intently, as I always do when recording an interview, I absorbed this huge statement. An interview goes two ways: there’s a time for interrupting and a time for giving the talent free rein. If someone is a bit incoherent or shy, I will let them get to the end and then go back and try to fill in the gaps they’ve left. But Ingrid was not going to be put off by a question, I could see. So I asked the obvious one: ‘How were you so used to using an M16?’

She replied with enthusiasm. ‘Well, being on bases all the time, you get to know the guys, and they have target practice. And being

adventurous, I wanted to find out what it was like to fire a machine gun. Those M16s, they're magnificent guns! They're so accurate, so light, there's no recoil, nothing. We used to go to the riverbank, line up some cans.' Here Ingrid made a rat-tat-tat noise. 'Fabulous!' she added pensively, before resuming the story. 'So I'm sitting there like Rambo, with this M16, and we're slowly winding up the hills. And I tell you if anything had moved, in those bushes – anything – I'd have killed it.' She paused. 'I can realise now, the feeling of survival – what you don't even *realise* in civilian life. If anybody was there behind the bushes, I would have *known* it would be enemy, and I would have shot.'

In crafting Ingrid's interview for an audio story, I had many choices. I could have run the voice straight, lightly edited as above to cut repetition and remove 'crutch' phrases, such as 'you know'. In that form, it would provide useful insight into a little-known aspect of the Vietnam War: the mettle of a female entertainer, the psychology of being in a conflict zone.

But if I really wanted the listener to place themselves in Ingrid's shoes, I needed them to *feel* the tension as the jeep wound up each hill and past each bush that could be concealing an enemy shooter (from Ingrid's point of view). I found some throbbing, synth-driven music and lined it up to start after 'I volunteered to be the rear gunner'. Instantly, a sense of expectation arose: something was about to happen. I let the music run by itself for a phrase or two, building anticipation, then faded and held it low under the next bit, the question and answer about how Ingrid knew how to use a M16. The music phrasing worked perfectly. A drum roll followed Ingrid's exclamation 'Fabulous!' and we were off again, sitting in the jeep, scanning the terrain for snipers. On it would go, phrase by phrase.

After 'if anything had moved, in those bushes – anything – I'd have killed it', there had been a natural pause. (Ingrid was a performer and knew how to create an effect.) I could mirror this with the music, because it fortuitously changed at that point to a sighing chorus of women. As they exhaled, over the percussive synth, Ingrid's words had

time to sink in. *This woman, a cabaret singer from Sydney, had been prepared to mow down anything that moved in the night.* That realisation demanded acknowledgment. Now, ideally, I might bring the music up to its reverberating end – a definitive end is better than a fade, as it inherently sets up anticipation of what is to come next.

And here it comes: Ingrid's voice, unadorned, ruminative, reflects on how the war zone changed her on that night, as she ponders a universal truth. 'I can realise now, the feeling of survival – what you don't even *realise* in civilian life. If anybody was there behind the bushes, I would have *known* it would be enemy, and I would have shot. Something happens to you in a war zone which is completely different to the way you are at home, having fish and chips!'

I have only one final adjustment to make. I will take that natural pause that she left after 'I'd have killed it' and instead insert it after 'I would have shot'. This will, in my view as the author/auteur of the piece, allow the narrative to reach a higher truth, communicate the *emotional* truth of what Ingrid is saying.

But what if I had a different view as auteur? What if I wanted to make a political point from this story, to inflect it away from the gung-ho attitude of Ingrid–Rambo, and make the listener see it from the viewpoint of the local Vietnamese, whose region has been invaded by a gun-toting, bomb-dropping US military? I also happen to have soundtracks I recorded while on my own field trip in Vietnam: out in the countryside, chickens mooching about making varied chicken noises. If I remove the music track and replace it with the clucking of chickens, Ingrid's story starts to sound very different. She is now an intruder, a menacing presence in this bucolic landscape, where the locals just want to raise chickens.

Taking things a step further, just as an illustration: what if I keep the chickens, and then creep in the music under them? If I start it at 'Fabulous!', the listener will sit up – looks like the chickens are going to get it in the neck! By playing around with where I drop in the music, and at which acoustic point – synth, drum or vocals – it is introduced,

I can make the chickens seem either sinister or vulnerable. And then there are the infinite possibilities raised by using a different musical choice. Adding in the sound of a machine-gun burst would further alter the impact and interpretation of Ingrid's story.

At one end of this spectrum lies artistry aligned with authenticity; at the other lies distortion and misrepresentation. And you, dear listener, will probably never know how manipulated, benignly or otherwise, you have been. That is the prerogative of the audio producer, who builds this invisible framework – the same one that also scaffolds great narrative podcasts.

Academics, fans and critics have spent many decades analysing how their favourite writers and film directors produce alluring story, but the craft behind storytelling in the audio medium is arcane. You usually only learn by doing it. And those who acquire 'The Knowledge' tend to talk about it only to other insiders, who speak the language of jump cut, music bed, atmos pause. Plus, outsiders assume it's easy – it's only *audio*, after all, not some hifalutin art like film, or canonical text like a book. Audio comes naturally, doesn't it? We can almost all talk.

But audio (and it's a lot more than 'just talk') has its own grammar and logic. Radio has been around for a century now and the people in that medium had to learn how it worked pretty quickly – otherwise listeners switched off. You wrote for it like you talked, in a conversational, informal way. You knew when to keep a listener hanging with a well-judged pause. You adjusted your tone and tempo to your time slot: morning radio was quick and lively, everyone rushing to work. Drive time was more relaxed, chatty. Late night was whisper-intimate, just you and listeners communing in the ether. Shock jocks, when they arrived, were shouty. Sports commentators built the drama, created sound pictures, as the famous Sydney rugby league caller Frank Hyde learned to do after a blind listener complained he couldn't figure out what was happening: 'It's long enough, it's high enough and it's *straight between the posts*' was his famous call. Sometimes the pictures in people's heads were so real, they could convulse a nation – as on Halloween in 1938, when

Orson Welles so convincingly delivered an adaptation of HG Wells's novel *The War of The Worlds* that listeners phoned the police to see if Martians really had invaded the US.

Radio's flirty first cousin, podcasting, arrived quietly as a tech innovation in 2001 and as a term in 2004, then exploded as a pop-culture phenomenon in 2014. That year, two events serendipitously collided: Apple embedded a purple 'podcasts' app in its smartphone, making listening easy and ubiquitous; and the American show *Serial* converted investigative journalism into gripping, episodic narrative, sparking millions of downloads. Right now there are over two million 'podcasts' on iTunes and more than 43 million distinct episodes online. Every man, woman and their dog seems to have a podcast, every brand wants one, and politicians, educators, entertainers, journalists, corporates and ideologues of all kinds are playing in the podcast pond.



This book is my attempt to distil the magic of narrative podcasts, and the podcasts I survey have one common denominator: storytelling. You can tell a story in many formats: through an empathetic interview, a poetic sound-led work inflected with voice, a beautifully written first-person essay or memoir, even the ubiquitous 'chatcast' or 'chumcast', when two or more hosts who have chemistry, presence and focus reflect on a theme. The epitome of the form, for me at any rate, is the highly crafted narrative podcast, be it fiction or nonfiction.

There is an ineffable quality to a compelling podcast that guides my discussion. It's something to do with mastering the medium of sound, connecting with the audience and being real. Although a lot of my own experience comes from Australia, these core principles of making lean-in podcasts are pretty universal, as I discovered when I recently ran a free online course called *The Power of Podcasting for Storytelling*. It had more than 35 000 participants from 150 countries, and while

cultural differences obviously came up in terms of the content they wished to make, it was a joy to see not just how participants engaged enthusiastically with the learning materials I presented, but also how they interacted generously, dispensing advice and support to each other.

The feedback on the course convinced me of the appetite that's out there – from Nigeria to Japan, from Pakistan to Mexico, from the US to the UK – for a deeper understanding of the seemingly simple medium of audio. To get there, I'll introduce you to diverse podcasters from around the world who, to me, make listenable, likeable or remarkable podcasts. I'll share my own insights on where a podcast idea starts, sometimes simply by being inquisitive or being a good listener. Interviewing is a vital part of delving into a story: I love sitting down with a stranger, feeling when to stay quiet but also figuring out the right questions to ask. It never ceases to amaze me how deep a relationship can form in that setting, in the space of only an hour or two – but I've learned from my mistakes there too and have drawn on my experience of doing hundreds of interviews to guide you. But if interviews are often the spine of a true story, other kinds of research supply the heft: digging through records, finding evidence in letters, official documents and personal memorabilia.

Then comes the artistry: how to combine all these elements in such a way as to keep the listener agog rather than overloaded, confused or, worst of all, bored. I'll give you my tips and I'll also bring you the views and expertise of podcasting friends and colleagues. Today's feted podcasters didn't just emerge in some audio big bang: they stand on the shoulders of pioneering broadcasters from the 1930s on, who influenced each other and moved with the technology to evolve new ways of telling audio stories. I'll trace some of that history, from the first tearful radio news broadcast describing the implosion of the *Hindenburg* airship in New Jersey in 1937, to the global village of audio storytellers today.

To illustrate this under-appreciated art of audio storytelling, we'll go inside how one venerable newspaper, *The Age* in Melbourne, shifted its investigative journalism from a print format to make three hit narrative podcasts: *Phoebe's Fall*, *Wrong Skin* and *The Last Voyage of*

the Pong Su. I was on board as a story editor and consulting producer for a wild and rewarding ride. I'll show you our breakthroughs and our misjudgments, including actual before-and-after scripts, until finally we got all our moving parts working in glorious harmony. All three podcasts had more than a million downloads and won a slew of awards, so they clearly chimed with the audience. I'll help you understand why.

In addition, I analyse two absolute classics of the genre: *Serial* is one, of course. The other is *S-Town*, another gamechanger, hailed as 'a nonfiction novel for your ears'. Finally, I'll look at trends in the podcasting industry, from the push for diversity, equality and social inclusion to the explosion in news digests and the corporatisation of what was once a homespun medium. I'll end by giving you some recommended listening, in different genres.

It's no surprise to me that when people get the podcasting bug, they fall heavily for it. It's often because they underestimated just what sound can do, in some deep, subconscious place we all carry within. Walter Murch, who composed the music for the *Godfather* films and *Apocalypse Now*, makes a living from film. But without the right sound, he reckons, the visuals can't fire. That's because, he says, we are 'suckled by sound'. Sound is absolutely elemental – hearing is the first sense we develop, still in the womb, and the last sense to leave us as we die.

So whatever stage you're at, whether it's listening in your earbuds, beavering in the studio or roving around with a microphone gathering your sounds, let's podcast – with passion!