WILDFILMHISTORY
100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

Edward Williams: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee:

Edward Williams

Name of interviewer:

Martin Kiszko

Name of cameraman:

Bob Prince

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1. The early years - how Edward became interested in natural history and how he broke into composing music for film

Int: Edward it's a real privilege to be doing this interview with you today, to talk about your life and your work and your contribution to natural history filmmaking. I wonder whether we could start with you giving us your full name, including any nicknames that you may have, your nationality, your current job title and the date today, please.

EW: Yes well, my name is Edward Aneurin Williams. I don’t think I've many nicknames. In the navy, of course, I used to get called Lofty and Bungy, that’s right as all Williams' were named. Now the date today is the — .

JW: The 8th.

EW: The 8th of February and my job title, well, I'm a composer by trade and have been since, well, all my life and still am.

Int: Edward, let's start with your childhood. Could you tell us about your parents and where you grew up, and whether there was any inspiration in that environment from your parents about starting off and getting and interest in natural history?

EW: Well, I think there certainly was. I was born in London, well, I was born in Surrey but brought up in London. My parents lived in London.

I think my parents were really important in starting me off with an interest in wildlife films which I was able to exploit later on. My father was an amazing man with many, many interests and talents. He was a poet, a published poet. He wrote one very successful poem during the First World War. He was a journalist, he was an expert on books, 18th century books. He wrote a number of books, anthologies of 18th century poetry. He was very much interested in wildlife, he was a botanist and he was also an ornithologist. All these as an amateur, of course, in the days when that was quite a respectable thing to be. And after which he got to earn his living as a working journalist on The Times (1).

Another of the interesting things that he had done was to collect folk songs. He'd been one of the first group of English people collecting folk songs, and in fact he became the secretary of the Folk Song Society before it was merged with the Folk Dance Society into Folk Dance and Song Society. So he was interested in wildlife, he was a specialist in grasses. He was a specialist in folk music particularly and birds, the two great interests of him. And in fact, he was a great friend of Peter Scott's or a friend of Peter Scott's. He used to go off with Peter Scott on expeditions across the world to look at geese and so on, and I've got a drawing by Peter Scott, a rather nice one too.

My mother [Mother] was a very musical woman, very musical indeed, she played the piano quite nicely. And she was American, she was a daughter of a rancher in Colorado, and she was very much looked down on by my father's family I think when she came to England in 1921. Anyhow, she took me to hear a lot of music and a lot things, and I remember particularly her taking me to see a film called *Caribou* (2) which was, I don't think it was by Flaherty [Robert], it might have been by Flaherty. It was a film about the caribou on the plains of North America. I must have seen it when I was 7 or 8 at the old polytechnic cinema in Regent Street in London. I can remember now a shot of a beautiful caribou stag sitting on a rock about to die of old age, I think, probably, and this beautiful horn call ringing out. I was in tears naturally and I'm quite certain that had a profound effect on me when I was 7 or 8.

So there's my parents. Yes, my father, the other thing that interested me that I've only recently discovered, he was really much interested in ecology and he himself had done a broadcast for the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] in the 1930s about ecology (3). So you can see the various connections with wildlife from my parents' time. He used to take me up to the Hebrides in winter and we used to watch the geese coming in, doing much the same things that they're doing at Slimbridge (Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Gloucestershire) nowadays. And he was always drawing attention to on all of our holidays. We used to have lots of holidays in the Hebrides and all over the world to various interesting bits of wildlife. I know buzzards were a great excitement in those days.

Int: So the seeds of your interest in natural history and the music were firmly planted at that stage. But did you have any inkling that you might turn out to be a composer or a film composer in leading natural history?

EW: No. My father and mother sent me away to boarding school when I was about 8 or 9 because my sister and I quarrelled so frightfully that he couldn't bear to have us both there in the same house. So I was sent off there. But at that point I was really very interested in being a filmmaker funnily enough, I was much less interested in music than in film making. I remember using the class wastepaper box to mount up on the thing and go round looking and things like that. I did a production of Midsummer Night's Dream there when I was about 12, I suppose, before I went away to a public school.

So I was interested in film. When I got to public school music I had taken over by that time. I had an extremely intense and very splendid musical education. I sang in the choir every day of my life from the time I was about 9, I suppose, to the time I was 19 and I played various instruments and did all sorts of things one can do. So I got a bit of a musical education. I was never much good at it as I'll explain later but I went through the motions with pleasure.

Int: But you didn't pursue that when you went on to university did you?

EW: No. Well, no, not at all although I did a lot of music. But I —. It's difficult to say this but I really had very few talents of any kind and I had the most amazing amount of luck, World War II being the best bit of it. What a dreadful thing to say, I don't really want to remember how to further my career but that was actually what happened. As a result of World War II, when I was finally thrown or nearly thrown out of university for not going to any of the lectures I was supposed to be studying, I'd made a bargain with my father. Can I study music? "No." It wasn't like that, of course. "You must learn a profession first." My father had an artistic profession and knew how difficult it was to earn a living and he said, "No, you must go and study something which will get you a living and then if you still want to be a musician, I'll pay for it." This was 1940, something like that.

So I went up to Cambridge and I'm afraid I never went to a single lecture in the faculties in which I was supposed to go to. And in the end my tutor very nicely said, well, I'm afraid we'll have to send you down. Luckily I had got a job by then, or at least I'd been up to see a friend of mine who was secretary of the Cambridge University film society, said "Why don't you go and talk to Muir Mathieson." Now Muir Mathieson was even then a youngish fellow, I suppose when in his 30s when I met him, quite young, 30s. He had been taken on by Alexander Korda, the great British film producer, to do the music for Arthur Bliss's Things to Come (4). The story I heard was that Malcolm Sergeant, the great posh conductor of those days, had been asked to do it and sneered. He couldn't possibly do film music you know because film music in those days was a very low class sort of activity. So he turned down but he said "I have student at the college, Royal College of Music, Muir Mathieson and he might do it well." So Korda took him on and Muir was brilliant at it because he'd found his metier. And from then on, which is about 1935 I think, he worked as a freelance, musical director for films. He did a huge amount of documentaries. So by the time I arrived on the scene at Cambridge, documentary was the in thing to be interested in. I don't know if that sounds a silly thing to say. So what I mean is that everybody was interested in documentary as the sort of avant-garde, politically correct, all sorts, left wing. It had absolutely everything, interest in society and that kind of thing. So I was really keen on documentary. So when my friend Peter Price was secretary of the university film society he said "Why don't you go and see Muir because I know he needs an assistant." I did, I went up to see him. And of course this is about 1940, 1941, and in fact he —. Sorry, I've lost the thread.

So when my friend Peter Price of the Cambridge University film society said "Why don't you see Muir Mathieson, I know that he needs an assistant." I did, I rang up or wrote to him or something and applied, and he said "Come and see me" and so on, and I went to see him. And what I now realise, of course, is that all people who were qualified to do his job…….. what he wanted was an assistant - a chap with a good ear who had musical talents and could play the piano, conduct, and all sorts of things like that, and of course I couldn't do any of those things. I could scarcely play the piano. I had very few natural talents in any of those

directions but I conducted quite well while I was at Cambridge and did all sorts of things musical things, played the double bass and so on.

So he took me on but, of course, the people he would really have given the job to, I'd never got it if it hadn't been for the war. Because all the chaps who would have got the job, might have got the job, they were far away, they'd all been called up or volunteered to serve abroad. So he gave me a job. I knew I was only going to get six months because I was already on for the navy in September, I think.

So he took me on and that was the start of a huge series of luck. If you want me to I'll tell you a bit more about that first bit. But it led to him - after I'd been away in the navy it led to him feeling he ought to take me back on again because he himself hadn't been in any of the forces during the war. He'd gone on doing his job, and they all felt a certain obligation to young people like me who had actually gone off to the wars and done service, to take me back on again. But I wasn't any use to him really. So he took me back on for two years and after two years of being not much use to him he finally said to me, "Edward, I really do think you'd better go and get some musical education" and kindly gave me the sack. So that's that.

Int: I was just thinking, Edward, in a sense, as you say, it was a fortuitous time wasn't it, and especially in terms of filmmaking at that time. Because what we had at the end of the 20s was the Empire Productions that became the —.

EW: Empire Marketing Board, yes.

Int: Yes, and the GPO Film Unit [General Post Office] and then the Crown Film Unit and then later the COI Film Unit [Central Office of Information]. And, of course, what we also had was the post-war nationalised industry units, like the National Coal Board and of course British Transport Films for which you composed 24 film soundtracks I believe. And then, of course, the corporate industries like the Shell Documentary Film Unit and Dunlop and ICI [Imperial Chemical Industries]. And so in a sense of landscape it seemed like it was perfect for the—.

EW: Sculpted for me.

Int: Young composer to come into. Can you tell me about the first breaks you got in that kind of new landscape?

EW: Yes, I will. If you don't mind, I'd like to go back on the whole documentary thing. When I was at Cambridge you see, the film society used to show documentaries of all kinds and so every month, every week at the meetings. And Russian films and the British documentary were the two great sort of in things and we were all interested in that. All felt that this is where we ought to be, where film was going.

So when I got up as an assistant for Muir, he was already doing a very large number of documentaries and I can't remember many of them. I can remember two or three that for example, I'm pretty certain that The People's Land (5), a film for the National Trust with music by Vaughan Williams, was one of the films which I remember watching Vaughan Williams coming into the basement studio in The Strand, no Green Park up there in St Martin's Lane. Coming in there and sitting down at this little cocktail cabinet piano, white piano to play the music and he was hopeless. He sat with his great big stubby fingers and went 'bang, bang' but he

sounded absolutely dreadful. Anyway he couldn't play the piano and, of course, it was a beautiful score in the end.

So that was one of the films which I worked on, well, not worked on but I helped Muir with and there are two or three others. I remember two or three others. Of course, wartime films they were. Music maestro called John Greenwood and Richard [Addinsell] and all sorts of people who were doing documentaries with Muir then.

Can I just quickly say about Muir because it's —? Muir, by the time I met him, he had something he really wanted to do. What he wanted to do was to see that every British film had decent music written by a decent English composer. Decent in the sense of good stuff you know, what would nowadays be called classical music, and that's what he achieved really. Before that film music had been done by jobbing contractors like Louis Levy you know and tended to be not very good stuff. But Muir brought the whole thing up and of course everybody admired him, and they rushed to him to say "who shall I get?" So he was very much doing that.

Now when I got back after the war in1946, he took me straight on. But by this time he'd become the tsar of music, I'm talking about feature music. I mean he did every single feature except the Ealing ones. He did them for the Rank Empire, all those kind of things. A huge amount of films were being done and he had a staff of five or six people, I was one of them, and we did all sorts of interesting things.

I have a couple of stories which I should like to tell you. One of them at that point but one before that which shows why Muir felt he had to sack me really. When I got the job with Muir, I was 18, 19, I suppose, and although I had conducted student orchestras, on a done basis like that, I'd never really conducted. I'd certainly never conducted professionals. When I arrived at the studio at Denham, wherever it was, 1941, something like that, early 1941. Muir had said to me "when can you start?" "As soon as you like." "Right well come Denham studios Monday morning, we've got a recording for a film called 49th Parallel (6). It turned out that they were recording the music by Vaughan Williams [Ralph], my great god at the time, for a film called 49th Parallel (6) which is a Powell [Michael] and Pressburger [Emeric] film about a German submarine crew trying to escape across the year 49th Parallel (6) into America. Somewhere where they would be safe because America wasn't in the war at that time.

I was absolutely thrilled to bits, sitting in there, with them actually paying me. There I was sitting in this huge studio where, by the way later on I actually recorded all the music for Life on Earth (7), the same studio just before they knocked it down. Anyhow I was sitting there thinking 'marvellous'. I had no idea what Muir wanted me to do but I took it for granted he wanted me to bring his coat or bring a glass of water. So off we went, Muir started off. VW's [Vaughan Williams] there with his arm round my boss's wife because he always had to have some nice lady to have his arm around, wherever he was. That's libellous I suspect, but there we are.

Anyhow Muir had some beautiful, beautiful title music for 49th Parallel (6), played it two or three times through. He said, "Edward!." So I went up to him thinking he wanted a glass or water or something. And he said "Just run this through for me will you." And I was absolutely appalled! I mean I'd never, never, ever conducted a professionial orchestra in my life and never, ever conducted any orchestra without having seen the score first of all. So white and pale and trembling I stood up there in front of all these old chaps who'd been there since you know —. Anyway I waved my way through this piece, just managed to negotiate a five four bar, just in time some how or another. And when it was all over they could see I was sweating and there was a certain murmur of —. Well, the leader, dear old George Stretton, lent forward and said to me "Well

done, my boy, you followed us very well." And I thought, well, that's it then, I'm never going to make conductor am I? So I understood very well why.

Do you want another comic story one?

Int: Yes, please. Yes.

EW: Herbert Wilcox. After I'd been —. The thing I learnt at that those first sessions at Denham, the most important thing I ever learnt – "Don'ton't touch a music stand, because if you do the whole studio will be out!". In those days the people had been so badly treated that the ACT had got very strong and there was demarcation disputes all the time and it was grips, not grips what's it called - Props. It was somebody's particular job to shift music stands and if anybody else did it - props I think it was - if anybody else did it that was it, the whole studio was out on strike. So I'd learnt that.

So by the second session we had it was for a film by Herbert Wilcox who produced a whole lot of famous films like Spring in Park Lane (8) and God knows what, romantic comedies, you know. So I got there nice and early and realised that there were not enough stands for the orchestra we'd ordered. And after a little chap came pottering in, rather nondescript and looking around at everybody, and I said, "Oh, props would you mind moving a few more stands, a couple up there and two up there." I he looked a bit surprised. Anyhow he went out without saying anything, Muir came in and two or three minutes later the same chap came in again and Muir said, "Oh hello Herbert, how nice to see you, good score for today I think." It turned out this chap I'd been asking to move the stands was Herbert Wilcox the producer. So, alright!

Now I've got one more story I should like to tell you, quite differently, about one of the most important things I learnt. Having explained to you about what Muir had been doing, by the time I got back in 1946 he had this huge empire. His job was to get really good music on to every British film made, not only features but documentaries as well, and that's what he was doing. And he had a stable of composers that he cherished, that he taught how to write film music. I can't remember everyone's name. William Alwyn, was of course the great one that I remember very well and all sorts of other good composers. He got Walton [William] in and VW [Vaughan Williams] of course and all sorts of other great composers and lesser composers, not so particularly well-known ones whose names I won't try and recite.

Anyhow first day I got back with Muir he said, "Come on, we've got to see a film called Odd Man Out (9) at Denham because we've got to decide where the music's got to go." So I went with Muir, me the lad, Muir the experienced boss and the composer, William Alwyn and it was —. James Mason was the star of the film and he was a wounded IRA [Irish Republican Army] man dragging himself round the docks of Belfast. But it was a very distinguished film made by the director Carol Reed —.

So we sat through this and it was tremendously powerful. Don't forget I hadn't seen much in the way of films since —. I didn't have anything to do with films or music film for five years, 1941 to 1946. This amazing film, there were police sirens and the ships' hooters and the dialogue, absolutely everything there except the music and it was terribly powerful, amazingly powerful. So we sat through it and at the end nobody said anything very much, and Muir - I suppose itmust have been, I wouldn't have the cheek to say what. Muir said, "Well, I don't quite know where to put the music." And the answer was, of course, that it didn't need it, it was tremendously powerful. Music could only have removed the drama and excitement of it in some way or another. So we had to go back two or three times and finally decided where the music was to go.

Well, that taught me a tremendous lesson. I really learnt from that thing that on the whole the less music there is the more powerful it is, that was the first thing I learnt. So I spent the rest of my professional career really trying to say not too much. Music can be very powerful, I'm sure you'll agree with this, Martin, don't you, music can be very powerful. But the more you use it the less powerful it becomes in a film I think.

The other thing that was interesting was the discovery that Bill [William] Alwyn had actually written the music for it, a beautiful tune for it, to accompany Mason dragging himself wounded round the docks before he finally dies. Now a beautiful, beautiful tune and they'd made a recording of it, flute and a piano, and then played it on the set all the way, all the time it was being shot. And there's a sense in which that seemed to me a very interesting use - I never did it myself - but the idea of using it before you get to the point of putting it on the film at the end.

Anyhow so that's —. I started off with Muir. Rather when I left Muir, I started off wanting to try and not have too much music, keep the amount of music from each film down because then it would be powerful and work —.

Int: So Edward, can I ask you what was the first film then that you scored? Was it a natural history film?

EW: First film what?

Int: That you actually scored. You got the opportunity to score.

EW: Oh I see. Oh no, it wasn't. Alright my first film of which I am really proud was part of the series on How the Aeroplane Flies, Part 4: Thrust (10), and that was part of a series made by Shell (11). Now the reason I got it was because in my short and inglorious period in university another friend of mine in the film society was a chap called Lionel Cole, who had been in the Fire Brigade in London, who joined film centre as a sort of protégé producer there. Film centre being the organisation run by Basil Wright, Arthur Elton, and Grierson —. No, Grierson had left it by that time. John Taylor I think it was and various others. And they took on Lionel, at the same time as I left university they took Lionel on, and he then got a job in the film unit and he's actually made this series about the various influences on an aeroplane in flight. So that was my first one and it was a terrifying ordeal.

Muir had sacked me - very kindly, it didn't feel like being sacked. "You must go and get some education" - and Bill Alwyn had very kindly offered to give me some composition lesson. And his view of compositions lessons was absolutely lovely. I only saw him twice. I went to see him in his room at the Royal Academy and he's sitting at the piano and he said, come and sit down, and I sat down there. He'd then turn over books, Beethoven Sonatas, find one he liked and start playing, and he said "Isn't it beautiful, all this, isn't it beautiful?" This went on for half an hour and I said "Thanks very much, goodbye." And then came back again next week. A lovely lesson in composition. They were actually funnily enough, they really were in the sense of the understanding of music written.

Anyhow the Shell one came about simply because Lionel by this time was working in the film unit, and he and I were friends as undergraduates, and friends when I came back to London after the war, and he obviously thought I could do it. So I'm jolly glad he did too.

Int: So what was the progression after that Edward and the move into natural history? Was it by - you mentioned John Taylor.

EW: Well, it's quite a long time. I did this work for Shell. I did a lovely film for my friend Michael Law for Richard Massingham called- what's it called? Oh What a Life (12). No not Oh What a Life - What a Life (12), and it was all about the horrors of London in post-war time, rationing and travel and all that kind of thing. And I did various other films for Shell and finally, I can't remember how this came about, but my brother-in-law [Ralph Keene] was a very well-known documentary film director. He'd made a famous film called "Cyprus is an Island" (13) with words by Laurie Lee and he worked a lot with words. He made a film with words by Dylan Thomas as well, about Persia I think, Iran. And he was commissioned but I think he probably persuaded Edgar Anstey [Edgar] of the Transport Commissioning Film Unit to do some wildlife films. They decided to make a series of wildlife films, the Transport Commission, the message of which was you only have to get in your train and travel half an hour, and you'll be where all these lovely things are. And they actually made in the end four or five of them.

But the first one was a beautiful film called Journey into Spring (14) and was nominated for an Oscar actually. It was about Selborne, Gilbert White's parish in Hampshire which he wrote about at the end of the 18th century. He kept a diary of the wildlife and about various things that happened there, and they used the book, The Natural History of Selborne (15), as the basis for the film and Laurie [Lee] wrote the words. One of the best commentaries I think I've ever heard for a documentary. It sounds a bit slightly over worded now. I think it's a brilliant piece.

Anyhow, so I did the music for that and that was conducted by an old boss. My brother-in-law was extremely nervous about asking this callow youth to come and do this great film that we did. I suppose he was kicked into by my sister I expect, I don't know. Anyhow he did employ me for this and luckily I managed to bring it off. And you know —. They then made four more natural history films and I got employed by the Transport Commission to do a whole lot of other things, a number of films on all sorts of subject, train times.

But I did the music for Between the Tides (16) which was the next natural history film. It was my first electronic film and my technology was like this. I wrote some piano music and I took it round it to my friend who had a studio and said "electronic it up for me will you please?" And he put lots of echo and that kind of thing. It sounded quite sort of weirdish then. Then it was Wild Highlands (17) and then finally Wild Wings (18).

2. Edward's first natural history film scores

Int: Edward, I'd like to talk now about some of the first natural history films that you worked on and certainly some of them which were remarkable films. I mean Ralph Keene of British Transport Films who started that whole natural history film thing going in British Transport Films. Journey into Spring (14) 1957, which picked up 15 international film honours and was nominated for an Oscar, and the following year your score for Between the Tides (16) in 1958. And then much later Wild Wings (18) 1966, which of course won the Oscar for the best short film. Perhaps you could tell us something about your approach to the scores of those films?

EW: Yes, of course. Well, electronics was absolutely buzzing about one's ears the whole of my adult life. I mean I can't remember, particularly at 18 when I came back, after all absolutely every bit of music I wrote was actually recorded at that time. I may have written one or two things but mostly it was written and

recorded in a studio. So I began to see there was a tremendous interest in electronics in various capitals of Europe. I mean in Germany and Italy and in the States, there were all sorts of people who were starting to think about music in those kind of terms, making funny noises and music more creative. And I was certainly interested in those developments. So I suppose being constantly in studios. I mean I can remember friends in studios saying to me “listen to this, I've just done this.” Just quite simple modifications using studio equipment. I suppose I must have been very keen on getting somewhere with it because when the opportunity to do Between the Tides (16), which was the second of those transport commissioned natural history films came up, it was all watery stuff. You know a lot of it was underwater, a lot of it was the seashore and so on. So I thought I'd try and do it using some nice piano music and then getting my friend in the studio to electronically size it up a bit, you know by putting lots of rather exaggerated echo on it. All that was quite new so it did sound quite sort of interesting, you know.

Then after that, the next two seemed to me to require conventional music and I was also interested in writing, I'd love writing. I'd used woodwind a lot in what I was doing. It doesn’t always record very well but it bites through the commentary without wrecking it I think, a lot of the time. That was one of the things I felt I had to think about, the pitches of the voice which was speaking the commentary, and make quite sure that what the music did was not to interfere with those, however good the mix it was. That was very important.

Anyhow, I don’t think I did any more electronic stuff, I'm trying to think about it but I don’t think —. There were one or two other enjoyable wildlife films. Those four natural history films were so successful that John Taylor, my great friend who had been head of the Crown Film Unit during the war, of whom there's a very splendid photograph as a small boy leaning out of a boat photographing something for Flaherty, on “Man of Aran” (19), whose sister was married to John Grierson who was the great father of documentary. It was very, I was going to say incestuous, it's not incestuous at all, but a very close family of people. Edgar Anstey, Arthur Elton at Shell, they were all friends and worked together and so on.

So John did at least two more wildlife films, one of which was called River of Life (20) about the Wye or the Usk, Usk I think. Then there was Winter Quarters (21). I can’t hear you.

JW: Seals and Seawater.

EW: Oh and Seals and Seabirds [Sea Sanctuary] (22), the Farne Islands, yes, in which I emulated John Taylor as a small boy, rowing him round the Farne Islands to get shots of seals and seabirds, that’s right. So that’s what happened there —.

Now, I'm trying to think where on earth the electronic bit came from. I myself got more and more interested in it, and I think really the turning point for me was the emergence of a synthesizer called the VCS3. Now that was developed by a chap called Peter Zinovieff in England and it was the first British synthesizer. And what I used to say when I lectured on this subject was before that the Moog synthesizer was about half the size of this room and cost the price of a small house and the VCS3 was that kind of size and cost the size of a small car, an Austin 7, and by that time it was accessible to me, I could have one of those. So I started to play on it and I was absolutely stunned and excited by what I began to understand about electronics, about the physics of music about which I shamefully knew absolutely nothing at all.

So I had this, I started using it and I got a commission from Shell to write the music for a film about the geology of North America, called ThisLand (23)?

JW: This Land (23).

EW: That's right. It obviously could do with a lot of electronic designing stuff so I did at least half the music for electronics, and the other half from quite a comfortably big orchestra, and that was quite stunning for its time. I mean you know, it worked quite well and I think that that was one of the reasons which got me the job for doing Life on Earth (7). Judy [Williams] and I by that time had been married and got four kids, and decided that we were presented with an absolutely unacceptable educational situation in Dorset where we lived because it was secondary moderns or grammar schools. We decided we wanted comprehensive education for our kids. So we looked round the place and found a house here in Bristol and moved here '68, something like that, yes.

And I did, I must say, have in the back of my mind, well, perhaps I shall get some work with the Natural History Unit. And sure enough after a bit somebody must have got to hear about me because – whose the producer for Life on Earth (7)?

Int: Chris Parsons.

EW: Chris. I was invited to sit with Chris and debate whether to have music in wildlife films or not, against two other people. One of whom was another Natural History Unit chap. Well, Chris and I more or less won the day. I think on the day people were prepared to sympathise with us, the other side.

And shortly after that I got a job doing a very electronic score using frog calls, what was it called?

JW: Amorous Amphibians (24).

EW: Amorous Amphibious (24) that's right, which continues to bring us in small royalties, I'm glad to say. Anyhow and I think the next thing after that was Life on Earth (7) but I think it was also my use of electronics in This Land (23) which had tipped the scales in my favour. Because the first two or three programmes had a lot of things which could do with an electronic score.

So that was fine and then, of course, there was a lot of series of wildlife stuff, more or less 13 hours I think, or 13, 50 minutes, absolutely the most marvellous thing that's ever happened to me.

3. The score for Life on Earth

Int: Yes. Well, let's just talk about Life on Earth (7). Transmitted in 1979 and the first of the great flagship series for the BBC which I suppose changed the way that we look at natural history filmmaking from that point on. Edward, I think what was remarkable about the score for the series was, of course, you've already mentioned it earlier on, the use of music against commentary which I hope you'll tell us about in terms of the pitch of commentary versus the pitch of instrumental registers. And secondly, I know the use of silence which you are very interested in. And also I think there were very inventive uses of, for instance, how you modulated the key for each programme in the 13 part series (7), emulating the evolution of Life on Earth.

EW: Well, yes. Well, Martin, you reminded me of that. I'd forgotten all about it I'm ashamed to say so I'm really glad you remembered. Anyhow. Yes, indeed, it was the most marvellous possibilities. Funnily enough, as important as the musical development for me was the charge it gave to my life. I suddenly began to understand about evolution and what its implications and its importance and what it really meant, and it's lasted most of my life. My interest is still going strong in evolution. I devour any interesting book that comes up on the subject and I'm really interested in the **genome** and all these other things.

Of course, the problem for composers is how do you go on for long enough if you have to and one of the ways to do it is, of course, using intellectual skeletons of the kind that you mentioned, of using perhaps a different key for each of the 13 sessions. Also, of course, each one often required quite different combinations. I used to think, I think I still do, that one of the jobs of a composer, well it probably doesn't make so much difference now. But in those days when the orchestra was really the basis of the whole thing and electronics was a sort of tiny side issue in a way. I used to think that I earned half my commission fee by choosing what instruments were to be used in the thing. I mean I had a lot of fun doing films. I remember doing a feature which, as usual, they come along and say, "oh, I'm afraid we haven't got very much money." I was doing a feature for three bassoons and timpani. It seemed to me a good idea at the time, luckily I haven't seen it since.

Anyhow. So each of the 13 films had its own requirements and the orchestras were all different. Obviously they wanted quite a big band for the titles and that kind of thing, the end titles. So that was quite easy and enjoyable to do. Pat Halling was the leading violinist who played the sort of solo violin piece at the end. And then the various instruments, of course, I could pick and choose who I wanted, and I must say Chris [Parsons] left it very much up to me what I did. I suppose one ought to mention that most appalling moment. I mean I'd put a lot of work into it. I worked at it for a year and a half almost without stop, and when I was told how much they were going to pay me I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe how little it was because I'd been paid extremely comfortably by documentary filmmakers who all really had some kinds of commercial backing, and composers were highly regarded as they had a sort of respect, very much respected position. A sort of Britishness of you understand how to read music. There was quite a lot of respect for composers and you got very well paid. So when I was offered £1,500.

JW: £1,800 for a year and a half's work.

EW: £1,800 for a year and a half's work I thought what are they talking about? However, somebody said to me, "come on, it's worth doing" and it was. That's to say that the money that I took in the royalties ever since, we're still getting it. What I would regard as really quite comfortable sums, thank you very much, every now and again. So that was worth doing from the professional, economic point of view, and from the personal point of view it was a hugely interesting training. I learnt such a lot developing all sorts of different instrumental combinations, and also forced to find myself this having to think very carefully about what instruments to put behind David's [Attenborough] voice. I mean he was the only voice, I think, I don't think anyone else spoke on it. But it was absolutely essential that he should be clear all the time and I had to think about that, work out what frequencies would confuse what he was saying and so on. So that was also useful.

There was one other funny, it wasn't very funny really at the time. We all went up to BAFTA for the grand opening you know and we all sat in this big theatre, and they played a couple of sequences, they played quite a lot of things. And it was absolutely awful, the sound was dreadful. I've never been so disappointed in all my life. I was so upset I got up and walked down Piccadilly in a gloom. The sound system was just absolute rubbish, it was really horrifying, and of course that's actually typical of what composers have to put up with, it appears not to matter what it sounds like!

Int: That's right. The golden moment is only in the recording studio, isn't it?

EW: That's right. The only time you ever hear it the way it is, absolutely.

4. People Edward has worked with

Int: Just going on with Life on Earth (7) again. What about some of the characters that you've worked with? What about conductor Marcus Dods? You developed a relationship with him, Edward.

EW: Well, I went to school with Marcus. Marcus was about three years older than me I think. He was my hero I should have to say at school and for some time afterwards. He was the most marvellous man. He'd been a conscious objector at school and he was very clever. I think he was head of the school, he was captain of rugby and that never would have happened to a conscious objector before that. He was intellectually also very bright and he went up to Cambridge two or three years before. We sang together. I mean he and I sang in the school octet for several occasions. First of all he as a baritone, me as a soprano, and later on of course I got up into the baritones and he'd left. We didn't really meet very much after that until he got a job with Muir [Mathieson] too. When he came back from the war, about a year before me, there he was already working away for Muir as a conductor. He was a very good conductor and he was good at film theme, and he did lots of opera and all that sort of thing. So he became the person who conducted practically everything but I was no good at conducting as I'd learnt earlier. Marcus did every single one up until sadly he contracted cancer several years later and died but irreplaceably. Anyhow he did that and we had a lot of fun together doing that.

Otherwise, of course, I enjoyed very much the various producers I worked with but some were closer than others. Some were more interested in the musical scene. John of course, Sparks, was a good friend.

Int: Mike Salisbury.

JW: Clem.

EW: I can't hear darling.

JW: Clem and Mike Salisbury.

EW: Clem. Neil Clemenson who I did various bits of work for who was also a great friend. We got on well together and he and his wife and Judy [Williams] and I used to do things together, so that was fun. I liked all the producers but some were more interested than others. It was altogether an absolutely marvellous time for us, ending up with me giving up smoking and having a nervous breakdown. No, I didn't.

Int: I mean of course Life on Earth (8) was a terrific success and that's the point that you and I met, I met you at Bristol.

EW: That's right you came on to make the disk.

Int: We started to produce your album of the Life on Earth (7) music and at that time you had your studio on Whiteladies Road, just up from the BBC Natural History Unit. And it was an amazing place, a labyrinthine collection of cables and plugs and wires, and spaghetti all over the place.

EW: That's right. Tape machines. We used to —.

Int: Of course, it was still the infancy of all that stuff and you were on the cusp, on the cutting edge of using it in the natural history score. So scores followed thick and fast, didn't they Edward, after that?

EW: Yes, they did. I mean I certainly did John Sparks's History of —.

Int: The Discovery of Animal Behaviour (25).

EW: Discovery of Animal Behaviour (25). A very good series which I hope is going to come out again.

Int: And with that series you went further, didn't you, into transforming orchestral material electronically?

EW: That's right, that's what I did. I'd got fed up with the sounds that my synthesizer made on its own, the various gadgets, sound making gadgets, oscillators. I started to use what I'd recorded in the studio, a clarinet piece or a flute piece, and mess about with it electronically with the gadgets which were available, the processes which were available on my synthesizer. Various kinds of filtering, various kinds of remodulation and all sorts of interesting things to do. So we started producing quite interesting sounds and new sounds in that way, and we did a lot of that, didn't we, at that time?

Int: Yes, and everything of course was built around still the VCS3 synthesizer and the old EMS [Electronic Music Studio] sequencer at that time very contemporary.

EW: That's right, and tape machines of course.

Int: Yes, that's right. Of course, we did everything on quarter inch, and I remember when we were doing the album, Edward, when we were trying to put very sophisticated tracks together, where one piece had to mix into another one. And we had to do it with four tape machines all rigged up by looking at their tape counters, and if you remember you had to hope that the end of the tape on one would hit exactly the incoming entry of the music on tape machine two and likewise with three and four. And if one missed the button by just a fraction of a second, then you had to start right from the beginning again.

EW: Yes, that's right. This, Martin, you remind me, was all taking place above the kitchen of the Chinese restaurant where occasionally the people who lived there and worked there could be heard playing Mahjong and making these tremendous shouts, 'ooh, ahh, eeh.'

Int: That's right, yes, and the cutting of meats.

EW: That's right, chopping up the ducks. There you are, happy days.

Int: So this film, Animal Behaviour (25), with John Sparks and as I say very successful in terms of how you went on with transforming material musically. What was next Edward? Was it The Living Isles (26) that came —.

EW: Must have been, yes, I think so. I'd done *Water Walkers* (27).

JW: Water Walkers.

EW: I'd done Water Walkers (27).

Int: Blake's [Pelham Aldrich-Blake] film wasn't it, The Water Walkers (27)?

EW: That's right. I just simply recorded a single violin and then messed about with it and that was, in my view, very successful and it was just right for the subject. That's right. Then, you're right, *The Living Isles (26)*. What was the producer of that called?

Int: Peter Crawford.

EW: Peter Crawford, that's right, yes. Sorry.

5. Controversial incidents

Int: During your time of working on those series, Edward, were there any moments of, well, amusing incidents you've told us about, but any controversial incidents or anything that was particularly interesting for you?

EW: Well, I've got one controversial.

Int: I'm thinking about the story you told me about the whale off the Falklands.

EW: Well, I was just thinking of that, yes. I just wanted to mention another wildlife film that I did the music for around that time, that was Neil Cleminson's film about the practising grounds for the army in Europe, in Germany.

Int: Oh yes.

JW: Home on the Range (28).

EW: Home on the Range (28) it was called, that's right, and it was a brilliant film. Because of course what had happened in these places, since all humans were kept out of it and only tanks went in there, it had become tremendous wildlife preserves and Neil Cleminson went out and made a lovely film about them which I accompanied with just a horn and a harp.

Int: A beautiful score it was as well, yes.

EW: Well, that led to the only piece of music I've ever written which — concert music, because I produced a piece for violin, horn and harp based on the music for that.

JW: Piano actually.

EW: What did I say? Piano. Sorry yes. Piano, violin and horn, that's right. The sort of thing that fits into a programme all right. We had it played in the Oxford music room, that's a great moment for me I can tell you.

Yes now there was another company, whose name right now I can't remember, who specialise in films, like wildlife films, but they were actually much more about exploration and that kind of thing. They made the Everest film (29), a chap called Grahame Tharp and a chap called Leon Claw and perhaps John Taylor was concerned with them too, I can't remember now. But anyhow they made a film about the Falkland Islands (30), and I can remember - let's say it was sort of mid 50s, something like that, and it was a good job and I enjoyed working for them. But they had this extraordinary picture of a whaler working off the Falklands. Beautiful ice over there and one of the most beautiful, deep blue sea here, and the bows of the whaler, and they harpooned this whale. And the shot showed the whole sea going red like that [indicates spreading], and they decided to cut it out and I thought that was really mealy-mouthed. I was sweating in a fury, I don't know what the composer's going to write to this but I did anyhow. Went into Leon Claw in a fury and said, "Well, if people want to eat margarine I think they've got a duty to know how it's procured, you know." It was one of the few times I actually complained to my employers.

6. Animals and people Edward has enjoyed composing music for and views on current output

Int: Edward, what about natural history, people and animals, people making films about animals. Are there animals that you have really enjoyed composing for or are there specific people that you've really enjoyed composing for?

EW: Well - second half - of course, there are people that I've enjoyed working with. John Taylor is the first and foremost of them because he was like a father to me in a way. We had that sort of relationship and talking about living on the Farne Islands with him. We were staying in a ruined lighthouse and every night we'd retire after the day's shooting to the lighthouse, drank a lot of rum, played poker or something, cribbage, that's right, he taught me. So that was a good part of my education and I was really, really fond of John.

Yes otherwise, of course, it's not often that one actually had a great deal to do —. Editors in many ways were much more influential and friendly with you know. Working with the editor —. Now, just a little bit of boasting. The first editor I ever worked with, guess who - David Lean. Muir [Mathieson] sent me off for 49th Parallel (6) to the cutting rooms to help David Lean put the music in the right place. My word, I didn't realise how grand he was going to be.

Anyhow. Yes, I think it's people more than anything. The lovely thing about films, and I'm sure you'll agree with me, is that you form very enjoyable relationships with people, creating relationships. You work well together and then you don't see them again for two years but when you do see them again, it all works again absolutely beautiful, like clockwork, and that's happened to me over and over and over again with teams which were of which the editor was an important part. Not only editors, directors as well.

I mean I don't seem to have done —. When I think about it, wildlife films were only perhaps a quarter of my professional output, so to speak, during that time. But it was a very enjoyable bit of it, very enjoyable.

Int: What about animals then? Which have been the most challenging or the most enjoyable to compose for?

EW: Come on Judy – what do I think? I don't know what I think.

Int: A lot of people always mention the duckling sequence in Life on Earth (7).

EW: That one in Life on Earth (7). Well I have got one, it isn't that one. No the one I have absolutely no doubts about at all, funny you mentioned that, I'm glad you asked me that. There's a beautiful sequence in the bird one (31) of Life on Earth (7) of birds in flight, five or six minutes simply of, you know, birds gliding. I was practising the whole thing to myself. David [Attenborough] only interfered about once, I don't mean that. It was only about one sequence and David's in the middle of that but otherwise it was entirely a musical verse. Then every time I saw it moved me to tears because it was partly my own part, and partly because it was such a beautiful concatenation of beautiful gliding flight, of all sorts of different birds.

So, yes, birds actually I have to say and I very much enjoyed doing Prokofiev pieces for the birds, little English birds in Journey into Spring (14) and in Wild Wings (18). We were watching last night. Watching Echoes of Prokofiev (32) I hope.

Int: Do you watch wildlife programming nowadays? Are there any types of wildlife programming that you particularly like or dislike, or the approaches to wildlife filmmaking?

EW: Well, I don't watch a lot of television quite honestly and quite often when we do watch one - I feel very critical about the amount of music. Funnily enough I think Chris Parsons [phone rings] let me know that when they finished Life on Earth (7) there was very great difficulties with the Americans. The Americans said there wasn't really enough music and they wanted more, and I don't think I'm making this up. I think Chris said, "No, we think that's right, I'm sorry either you have it like that or you don't." I find nowadays that what's happening is so many composers are having to write great washes of music which go on and on and on, and I think that's a pity. I really do think that's a pity. I think that the kind of effort which used to go into editing sound, I mean music, words and picture together, the work that used to go into that seems to have

disappeared. I don't mean that editors don't work but we used to take such trouble to interlock the whole thing, so that happened there and then that happened there and then that sound happened there. I mean the whole thing, you know as well as I do.

Int: Well, it's almost like one's dealing with a kind of an internal punctuation in that both embodies of bilingual language, isn't it, of film and of music.

7. Advice to young composers

Int: Edward, you've been talking about the importance of interlocking, taking the care to interlock music, sound effects, dialogue or commentary. Almost as a kind of a punctuation in the film soundtrack and we know that that's a very important facet in terms of composing the score for films. So what advice would you give to young composers that want to start out composing a natural history soundtrack?

EW: Well, I do think it's very different now and I do get asked that quite a lot. And I mean the straight answer nowadays is, well, make as much music as you can and send it to as many people that you think might be interested, and I don't think that's changed very much. But there are many, many more people doing it and, of course, the equipment for doing it has got so much closer to the ordinary person. You don't have to spend huge sums of money as I did to start with, however, or fairly comparatively large sums of money to get the equipment to do my own stuff. Nowadays it's stuff you can buy in the high street shops that you can do your stuff with, and all you can do, I think, is to do what I said, which is to make as much music as you can, put it to sequences so people could see how you would treat sequences, and send it to people who are in a position to employ you. I don't think you can do much else.

You were talking about this interlocking bit and we were talking about the relationship between music and what was going on in the picture, and various things. I'd forgotten, I remember being immensely struck by finding out, a long time ago - I'm talking about just after the war or within five, six years of the war - finding out about John Cocteau as a filmmaker, his technique. He employed Georges Auric as his composer, Aurique who wrote a lot of music for Ealing Films by the way. But his technique was to do just this: he would give Auric, as we all know about, well, "I'll give you the measurements for the sequence about the girl going down the stairs, and I'll give you the measurements for I don't know "the lovers kissing and for the dagger descending." All sorts of things, and you'll do me three pieces of music for that". Then Auric would go away and write these three pieces of music for those specific situations, then he'd bring them back to Cocteau. And Cocteau would pay not the slightest attention to where these pieces went. He'd say, "Oh that's nice, I'll put that to the girl going down the stairs, oh, that's nice I'll put that—." He simply appropriated the music in a way but, my God, he didn't half make it work. I mean really it was very powerful. It was what you said Bob [Prince – cameraman] made me think about that. Anyhow —.

8. The invention of the Soundbeam

Int: Well, let's finally talk about the present and the future, and let's talk about the innovative device, Soundbeam, that you invented, Edward, in 1984 which has been a tremendous success and sold around the world and you've been using it in the professional arts arena as well. And tell us something about the Soundbeam.

EW: Martin you know, we were partners when this all started really. I've always enjoyed being a rather bad amateur player. I used to play the cello not very well and the flute not very well, and we used to play quite a

lot of amateur chamber music not very well. And as I get more and more into electronics and found myself producing these rather, as I thought, rather beautiful sounds, I wanted some way of articulating them in real time. I wanted to be able to play these sounds like you would play a cello or a flute or a —.

That started me, as you know, looking for some way of doing this, and after a bit a friend, I think from MS and the people who made the synthesizer, I think it was they who suggested why don't you try an ultrasonic sensor like the Polaroid. Ah yes Judy reminds that, of course, the reason I thought it might be possible to produce something that worked which didn't require a great technique for was that I knew about the Theremin, an amazing device invented by Mr Lev Theremin in Russia in about 1920, which used an **oscillator** sound, and you moved close to or far away from one conductor, metal conductor, and you moved your hand round a sort of circular tennis racquet for loudness and softness. It's a very difficult instrument to play. However, it did have some success. I knew it existed and I thought perhaps this was the way to go but we could never get anybody. We even had a bloke who made them in the shape of the I Chi but it still didn't work much better.

Anyhow, somebody said why don't you try a Polaroid or ultrasonic sensor, and so we did, and I got an engineer to adapt it so that it sent out streams of pulses. And the first one, the Lone Ranger, was produced. We were doing, do you remember, one of those workshops in Huddersfield at the [inaudible] music centre. We were doing a piece of yours weren't we?

Int: That's right, yes. Stratagem of Naupleus (33).

EW: Stratagem of Nauplius (33), that's right. Anyhow we had this amazing group of live performance which has always interested me. I've always been very keen on trying to organise live performance. The chap who invented the prototype brought it up to us when we were doing workshops for a group of handicapped kids, kids with easily breaking bones.

Int: Brittle bones, yes.

EW: Brittle bones, that's right, and they were whizzing around in their wheelchairs and doing wheelies as we arrived. But they had a lovely time with Soundbeam because we were hitched up to a synthesizer so that the closer they got up, went the pitch, furthest away down went to the pitch. It was fairly crude and simple.

However, afterwards along came an important development which is a language called MIDI, which is a language which enables keyboards and synthesizers and samplers of different makes to communicate with another. That really set Soundbeam off. Then you could arrange for movements up to 20 feet away from a sensor without touching, with an arrangement to be translated into pitched sounds played on an electronic keyboard, yes, electronic produced musical instrument. That turned out without my really expecting it at all of great use to handicapped kids. All sorts of people who'd never, ever been able to do anything before and nothing they could do because they had nothing they could use, suddenly found that by moving a little finger or an eyelash or the head they could control and make music, and compose music.

It produced the most marvellous results, particularly some of the work done by Phil Ellis in Warwickshire to start with and now in Sunderland, with greatly handicapped kids and you can suddenly hear that they are actually composing. They are actually saying, listening to it, yes, I like that, I'll do it again, now I'll do something else, which is after all basic composition. So that was really exciting and interesting.

Then I began think, we began to think, well, come on it isn't only handicapped kids who could use this. There are huge numbers of kids growing up in secondary schools today who never play anything. Sometimes they would bother about the recorder but most kids don't get any playing of anything at all, percussion perhaps but not much. And here is a way in which you don't have to have very great expertise. You don't have to learn that or that or anything like that [mimics playing instruments]. All you do is just move in the beam and it makes music, and if you listen to it and judge your movements, you can say I'll go up the scale, I'll go down the scale and so on.

So I began to think that maybe we could use this for group music making in mainstream schools, and that's what we were setting out over the last five years. Martin, you know all about this because in fact Martin's been commissioned by us to compose one of the pieces for the school in Worcester, which won him the award of Composer of the Year in the Community & Education Section. We're going in to do that in the hopes that we can develop this machine which now also is capable of manipulating images as well as sounds. So that the whole thing has become a sort of multimedia capability, and we've got some marvellous results from schools already. And that's as far as I'm concerned —.

Int: Well, yes, I think Soundbeam now, Edward, we've got the capacity to put all those multimedia constituents that were normally done by a whole technical team straight into the hands of one performer to control. And so what Soundbeam can do is translate all those bodily movements in a space into digitally generated sound and images. Do you think that there's an application of that or would you like to see an application of that in terms of natural history content?

EW: I can't —. The trouble is it's very difficult to try and foresee all the possibilities there are. There are senses in which it would be rather lovely to set up so that Soundbeam was interrupted by wildlife movements. I think there is a possibility there, though I think it's going to be somebody else who does that not me I'd rather —. I'm more interested than anything else in trying to spread music making as something that everybody grows up with, and this is a way - well, anybody can make the most marvellous sounds with quite simple gestures as you remember.

Int: And finally Edward, is there any final comment or memory or person that you can think of that could also be good to be interviewed on this archive? Any final comment that you'd like to make?

EW: Well, there is one comment I should like to make is that it's rather appalling the way that everything is thought to be one person's responsibility. Although I was a composer before I met Judy, I would never have got anywhere without her. So there you are, I think that's the best, the very, very best I can do. We've been a team all my career since we met and married 50 years ago this year.

Int: Hooray. Edward, thank you very much indeed and it's been a real pleasure and really illuminating. I'm sure it will be very interesting to everyone who hears it.

EW: And we're going to go on working together aren't we?

Int: We certainly are, yes. Thank you.

EW: You're welcome.

END

Glossary

Genome: The totality of the DNA sequences of an organism or organelle.

Oscillator: a device for producing alternating current.

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