



Lyndon Bird: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee:

Lyndon Bird

Name of interviewer:

Mike Salisbury

Name of cameraman:

Mark Wheeler

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Place of interview:

Bristol, United Kingdom

Length of interview:

c. 60 minutes

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1. How Lyndon first became involved in natural history programmes and sound recording

Int: Just so that we can identify this in future can you tell us your full name, your nickname and your nationality and so forth.

DB: Well, full name is Lyndon Bird, L-y-n-d-o-n. I've always been called Dickie Bird for pretty obvious reasons even though I don't play cricket. British.

Int: British, and have you retired now?

DB: I've retired now, yes.

Int: But when you did retire what was your title in the industry?



DB: I'd still call myself a film recordist. These days it probably became known as sound recordist.

Int: Right, and the date today is?

DB: The 21st April 2006.

Int: Great. I've never talked to you about this but I wonder how did you first become involved in any way in natural history programmes?

DB: Because working in Bristol I was a sound recordist. I came to Bristol initially in television but then I joined the Film Unit and the Film Unit is obviously intimately involved with the Natural History Unit (NHU). So we weren't working exclusively through the Natural History Unit but over the years it became a major part of my time actually working for it.

Int: Going back further then, how did you become interested in sound or become a sound recordist?

DB: I initially started in the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) back in the early 1960s actually. I started in radio of all things because I used to work originally for what was then the Post Office. I started in radio research laboratories and quite a few of us sort of moved off for more interesting jobs. Quite a few actually joined the BBC but I joined in London in the overseas in Bush House.

Int: So was that in studios?

DB: In studios, yes, then I transferred to the television service back in the TV Centre in London, and decided I wanted to move out of London because it was getting quite expensive and came to Bristol. I was still in sound in Bristol and then I joined the Film Unit in the late 1960s, and from there moved into the NHU.

Int: So when you first moved to Bristol you'd have gone into the studio?

DB: Studios and sound recordings, yes.

Int: So when you started in the Film Unit, that was really what started to take you out on documentary jobs and so forth.

DB: Yes, that's it.

Int: And dramas?

DB: Yes, dramas. For a while I did exclusively dramas as well, for a year or two.

Int: Okay, so you did a lot of different jobs for people, recording sound for film. Can you remember what the first actual natural history programme you worked on was?

DB: Well the first major one was the Eastward with Attenborough (1), do you remember those? It was long before your time, back in the early 1970s when we did six 30 minuters with Richard Brock who was producing it. We went out to the Far East for about three months I think it was, just over three months. All we managed to produce in that time was six half hour programmes which you wouldn't do these days, would you, a documentary.

Int: I remember that series very well and it was one of David [Attenborough]'s first one when he left being a sort of executive isn't it?

DB: It was the first one when he left. He was Managing Director of TV then.

Int: So had you had any experience of doing a combination of presenter and wildlife before then?

DB: Not to that extent, not for such a long extent as that.

2. Working in the field in the early years

Int: Can you recall what it was like? What were the difficulties in those days?

DB: The difficulties in those days was the equipment was quite a bit different of course. Going off for three months into Borneo you had to take quite a pile of stuff with you, and we didn't have modern day batteries and things, alkaline batteries. We had to take lots of recorders which were quite big and heavy, and rolls of films of course, huge amounts of ten minute roll of films. Quite a weighty item, wasn't it?

Int: Yes, absolutely. From the sound point of view did you have radio mikes or did you have to be linked to the camera in those days or what?

DB: We did have quite rudimentary radio mikes. They were the old style, big with quite a large microphone before the transmitter, microphone two inch, before these new little ones came in like we are wearing now. So there was quite a difference, you couldn't actually stick a presenter in a spot, you had to carefully conceal this mike under bits of clothing and things. Gun mikes, rifle mikes, had only just arrived then as well really so it was quite a difference in equipment in those days.

Int: You had to be quite strong really. I remember carrying maybe even your early Nagras around for a while and they were much heavier than you'd imagine.

DB: Quite a bit heavier, yes, and I say carrying the rest of it was quite a business transporting everything around.

Int: Did that ever affect you physically?

DB: It did actually. I used to have bouts of back trouble from carrying this heavy recorder. You used to twist your spine around a bit and things, yes.

Int: I mean we'll get on to it later but I remember you being absolutely hobbled in Madagascar by a back problem, which you said was to do with carrying this great weight of batteries.

DB: Yes, it always used to hit you when you least expected it.

Int: So part of that job was recording David Attenborough doing pieces to camera, and suddenly you were faced with also having to get wildlife sound separately. Can you remember what problems that threw up for you?

DB: Well the biggest adventure was actually, as I said earlier, the gun mikes had actually arrived then. The rifle mike which was a light mike which made it quite a lot easier for moving around, especially as part of a crew. Instead of these huge big dishes, the big sound dish we used to carry, we suddenly had these rifle mikes which were much easier to operate with, to actually get into situations where you could work much more effectively.

Int: So if an animal is making a sound in the bush 50 yards away, what would you have to do to try and get that call?

DB: Depending on what the animal was, wasn't it? You could either try to get closer.

Int: But I mean the rifle mike helped?

DB: Yes, it was much more directional than the mikes we'd had before, so you could actually use it much more effectively.

Int: On the technical level, I mean was that mono or stereo in those days?

DB: It was still mono in those days, yes. In fact stereo didn't really arrive until the mid 1970s. We didn't actually have a good stereo recorder 'til the late 1970s, 1980s.

Int: Nowadays recording is all digital and you wonder how on Earth it sort of does it. But in those Eastward with Attenborough (1) type days that would have been, what, reels of tape. What sort of size tape?

DB: Quarter inch tape, yes, with five inch reels normally. Again, you had to take a great pile of those away of course, so you ended up carrying a hundred reels of tape or something, big boxes of everything.

Int: So that gave you a start into some of the things that the Natural History Unit were doing that you got involved in. Of course, Life on Earth (2) came fairly soon after that. From your experience of Eastward with Attenborough (1) did you want to work on Life on Earth (2)?

DB: Yes, and I jumped at the chance of course, and I was lucky to be chosen to do it. So that took, what, two years, two and a half years of filming. So that was a lucky break for me really.

Int: Were you interviewed for that?

DB: Well, I mean the action unit knew who worked best and I'd worked with David [Attenborough] before and Richard [Brock] before, so we all knew each other as a team. Maurice [Tibbles/Fisher?] was the cameraman on it. We'd all worked together as a team so it was an easy option really.

Int: It's when I first met you because I also got my first assistant producer job on Life on Earth (2) through interview. So I remember meeting you on that and going on trips together.

DB: You were with Richard [Brock] then, weren't you?

Int: I worked with John Sparks actually, yes, but I did stuff for Richard [Brock] as well. We'll get onto Life on Earth (2) in a minute because obviously it was a quite important marker for natural history film making generally. But for the likes of you and me it was very formative too. But were there any other people when you were starting out in the industry, characters you met, who influenced your decision to head in the natural history direction when you could?

DB: I don't quite know what you mean.

Int: I mean were there any other producers or presenters other than David [Attenborough] who you worked with?

DB: Obviously I liked working with Richard, I seemed to get on reasonably well with him.

Int: That's Richard Brock.

DB: Richard Brock, yes. Generally I find most of the NHU producers interesting people to work with. They're a nice, interesting bunch.

Int: Did you work with any other presenters at the same time as David [Attenborough] was back in the field? Any of the other well-known ones that were around? I mean Armand and Michaela Denis or any of those ones?

DB: No. I'm trying to think who they were employing in those days.

Int: Johnny Morris?

DB: Johnny Morris. Yes, I did quite a bit with Johnny Morris for Animal Magic (3).

Int: Tony Soper?

DB: Tony Soper, yes. Yes, Johnny Morris we did quite a lot with it. Tony, did one trip to —. The only foreign trip I think we did, sent to Kilimanjaro with Tony Soper which was famous, when we were all ill.

Int: You were all ill?

DB: No, not all of us, a couple of us. Ned Kelly was the producer on it.

Int: Yes, who was a great mountaineer. How did you get on with the height?

DB: Not too bad. We did actually have retinal haemorrhages, our eyes started to —. The retinas started to haemorrhage and things like that. We spent too long at altitude really.

Int: Hazard of the profession. Jeffery Boswall?

DB: Did very little with Jeffery [Boswall]. Jeffery tended to work on his own. Who was I trying to remember in the early days who the cameraman was with him.

Int: I can't remember either.

DB: He tended to be a lone operator, didn't Jeffery [Boswall], in his early days.

Int: So we get on to Life on Earth (2) and also going back to Eastward with Attenborough (1). Did you ever visit an area where the local people were unused to seeing wildlife film making, and can you remember any reactions from local people to suddenly having a film crew around them?

DB: The most distinctive one I remember was actually in with the Dinkers in southern Sudan, actually with Peter Bale down there. We were down in southern Sudan shooting the Wilderness (4) series with Anthony

Smith. I turned up with my Nagra and they were all fascinated by it, never seen a tape machine. Very tall Dinker people, all about two feet taller than me and I stand, little diminutive me, standing up amongst them with my Nagra. They were chattering away and I played back a bit of the tape to them, and they were absolutely amazed to listen to it and immediately they burst into song. They'd never seen a tape recorder before. They realised what it could do and they all started singing and insisted I recorded them singing, playing back to them, and I thought this is absolutely amazing. Never seen a film crew or whatever.

Int: Was the singing used on the programme?

DB: I think we did use a little snippet of it as an illustrator.

Int: Excellent. So that was the Dinkers. Well you were in Borneo for Eastward with Attenborough (1), any incidents there?

DB: Well, I remember flying in a helicopter once and we took the head man with us. He'd never been in a helicopter before in his life and he watched what we did, sat in there and he had tiger wool in his ears. Sat in there, strapped himself in and took off as if nothing had happened. The first time he'd ever seen a helicopter probably but he accepted it straight away. Amazing things you could do these days.

Int: It just shows how quickly humans will adapt and learn and do things.

DB: Odd little snippets like that stick in your mind from 40 years ago. Sit next to a head hunter in a helicopter.

Int: What's the longest period you've spent out in the field in a situation where it was quite tough going and so forth?

DB: Probably those Eastward (1) ones were. The days before bottled water. We used to camp. We didn't carry tents, we took a roll of polythene and built our own tent out in the bush in the rainforest and we spent days under a sheet of polythene drinking out of a stream. It's different these days where you can buy your water in the village.

Int: Absolutely, yes. Is that something you enjoyed and relished?

DB: Yes, I did enjoy it. It was a complete change from life back in the studios in Bristol. It was all good fun.

Int: So that's all part of what you liked about it?

DB: Well the experience, yes.

Int: Can I take you to Life on Earth (2). I mean two places that I went with you were both places where I was —. Because I did mostly just specialist wildlife sequences with cameramen like Maurice Tibbles. But I did get

two opportunities to direct David [Attenborough] in sync pieces and one of them was in Madagascar and the other was in Iraq. I don't know if you recall Iraq, but what can you remember about that trip to Iraq?

DB: I remember the assistant cameraman going off to fetch a bottle of water back for us to drink, and he arrived back and collapsed and said the buggers have drunk it. The drivers had drunk all the water.

Int: That's right. That was Paul Morris wasn't it?

DB: Yes.

Int: And we were in a place called Uruk filming the first writing tablet for the final programme of Life on Earth (2). It was extremely hot and, yes, our minder from the army and the driver had polished off all the water, great. Poor old Paul Morris nearly died. But do you remember being in a hotel? We'd had to change hotels because the army took over the hotel we were meant to be in. We went to another one and do you remember a dust storm?

DB: I remember the sandstorm, yes. Tremendous dust storm, yes. Actually inside the hotel we could hardly see each other across the table could we?

Int: That's right and all this door banging, and you had to feel your way up to the bedrooms, up the stairs, a terrible place. But, no, certainly Iraq doesn't feature in my best ever places.

DB: No, press the rewind button on that one, erase it.

Int: But Madagascar - a different sort of place.

DB: Fascinating wasn't it? Yes, great. It's the only time I've been to Madagascar and David [Attenborough] and I flew in from Australia. We'd been in Australia and flew in and joined you in Madagascar. Absolutely fascinating, wasn't it?

Int: Yes, because me and Maurice Tibbles had been there doing wildlife stuff and then you came in.

DB: Completely unexpected too. You normally consider Madagascar as more African until I actually went there, and you realise it's paddy fields and burial ceremonies directly linked back to the Far East. I did actually find it a fascinating country.

Int: And fascinating animals as well.

DB: Fascinating animals.



3. Particular sounds of interest

Int: From a sound recordist's point of view, can you remember any particular sounds from Madagascar that you heard through your headphones - that different sorts of lemurs make and so forth?

DB: Well, I'm just trying to remember which was the most impressive one we did - in the thorn forest, do you remember the aye-aye?

Int: The indri which howls, makes an incredible —.

DB: Yes - probably the loudest wasn't it, the most impressive one.

Int: Yes, and then the Lemur catta, the ring tailed lemur, was more a mewling sound.

DB: Ring-tailed lemur down the coast, yes. Down at Berenty, yes. Strange how quickly you got used to them wasn't it? The first day you're absolutely fascinated, then and you realise it's just in the air all the time.

Int: Did you ever record gibbons because that's quite a similar sound, isn't it?

DB: Jeffery Boswell took me to task one day for one of the gibbons I'd recorded out in the Far East, out in Sumatra or somewhere. It had been identified as a particular gibbon and I had this irate phone call from Jeffery Boswell saying, "You've identified the wrong gibbon." He'd used it in one of his programmes - he'd used one of my recordings. It was a terrible phone call. I said, "Jeffery, I didn't actually identify it, somebody else did - one of the locals for me," but it was the wrong sub-species apparently.

Int: But, yes, some of those primate sounds must be extraordinary when you're hearing them through your headphones.

DB: Yes, it's amazing.

Int: When you were filming did you get enough time to creep around on your own, after —. Because you were there to do the sync filming, often as not with a presenter or whatever. Then it was your job to get lots of background sounds, both wide angle atmospheres and specific birds or animals: mammals, frogs, whatever. Did you ever feel you were not given enough time to do that sort of thing?

DB: You had to make a time yourself. Usually, most of the forest atmosphere things happen in the mornings and evenings and it'd be quieter in the daytime. So the advantage was you could actually get up earlier when it was still too dark to film, not quite light enough to film. So as a recordist you could wander off on your own, you could have your own quiet period before it got too light, and later in the evening when it was still getting dusk. The cameraman would say it's too dark now, we can't carry on anymore. So then you could creep off and do your own recordings then, you could make your own time doing those. That's what I tended to do, get





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up long before the others and sneak out and get back for breakfast.

Int: Excellent. I mean some people would think, "Oh God, that was a bit of a hardship," but was it?

DB: No, far from it, much easier to work your own quietly. That's the time I used to really enjoy it when you're often in the forest alone, provided you didn't get lost of course. A couple of times I've scared myself trying to find your way back to the camp.

Int: Where?

DB: Mostly in rainforest where you thought you knew the path you'd followed but because you're so intent on following a particular bird or something, you're actually creeping after or following it, you'd suddenly realise you hadn't actually been paying attention to where you were going. Days of GPS now, of course, you can carry a GPS in your pocket.

Int: Exactly, have a GPS and just go back on your waymarks, it's easy. It's like a lot of things. It's like contact with your families when abroad. Can you remember from 30 years ago the difference between then and more recent trips you've done?

DB: Exactly. The first three month trip, that Eastward with Attenborough (1), I managed one phone call home during that period. We were away for three and a half months I think, I just managed one phone call home. Letters - of course you're always in different places and letters very rarely arrived. So that was quite hard on long trips with that, without any contact.

Int: But in more recent years, I mean you retired a couple of years back now, so in the days now you were more recently you would have had a —.

DB: A mobile phone in your pocket - yes. Rarely a day went by without —. You couldn't contact your family back at home.

Int: Yes, that's made a lot of difference.

DB: The trouble was, of course, the office could contact you as well then. Back in the days when you were away from the studio for weeks on end, of course you did have a bit more freedom.

Int: Yes, the office couldn't say, "I want to bring you back early."

DB: Query your expense charge, yes.

Int: Of all the wildlife programmes and so on you've worked on from Eastward with Attenborough (1), Life on Earth (2), and so on over the years. I mean you've worked with me on other Attenborough series as well,

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Private Life of Plants (5) and Life of Birds (6) and so on. Is there any particular either single programme or series that's given you particular pleasure or pride to have had your name on the end credits of?

DB: Life on Earth (2) stands out, I think, because it was groundbreaking in everything it approached at that particular time. He was prepared to spend some time and some money on actually getting the sequences he wanted. That was the biggest breakthrough I think, the most impressive one.

Int: Yes, and I think that's fair. It set a new benchmark didn't it?

DB: Especially from my point of view, actually getting David [Attenborough] in positions where he's actually doing sync sound which nobody had ever attempted before in some of the places he did. So that was quite groundbreaking.

Int: In terms of environments for getting him to strange environments to do sync pieces?

DB: I mean the famous one - getting David [Attenborough] amongst the gorillas in Rwanda, nobody had actually tried it before really to that extent.

Int: That recalls for me, for instance, that famous gorilla piece (7). Did you ever feel an incredible burden of responsibility? I mean we all know that cameras sometimes, the old film cameras had hairs in the gates or you might have loaded the film badly and got scratches, or you might have got light in and ruined the film. But you had an inkling that that would have happened. Was there a burden of responsibility also - you felt ever - in those magical moments like with the gorillas? I mean you were recording absolutely vital sound.

DB: Yes, I did, and I used to cross check to try to make sure everything actually was working before he got into that situation. I was actually quite keen, for my own benefit, to actually try to make sure everything was working in top condition, just in case you did miss something which was vitally important and you knew you couldn't repeat, basically. There was an onus on you to actually try and produce your best.

Int: And that's where the real professionalism comes in, isn't it? I mean it's something the general public probably don't appreciate is, "It's just sound." But actually you've got to be there, everything's got to be connected right, everything's got to be working.

DB: Yes, in a small team.

Int: And that's what in a way makes it fun and satisfying as well, isn't it, that you get it right?

DB: A great degree of satisfaction when you know that you've actually got it and it's worked.

Int: Conversely, have there been any moments where you've had to shudder because it has gone wrong and you've had to admit?



DB: Of course not.

Int: I didn't think there would be.

DB: Never.

Int: Never.

DB: Always perfect.

Int: Excellent.

DB: No, sometimes of course, the elements you're over taken by, things out of your control but you still have to, especially in hurricanes and gales and winds, and microphones tend not to work very well. You have to accept second best but at least you can view yourself that you actually really tried hard to get the best out of it.

Int: As a sound recordist and doing all this stuff, has the world become a noisier place or was it always the bane of a sound recordist's life that even in a remote rainforest there might be some blooming airliner coming over?

DB: Yes, aircraft I suppose are the biggest problem really of anywhere. Most situations do tend to be much noisier - most locations do tend to be much noisier. We certainly noticed it over the years. I mean even up in Wales and things you get much more traffic than you ever did before. Motorways are everywhere now, you can't get anywhere near a motorway. So like Bristol Airport, how many aircraft go in and out every day? So it has got generally noisier.

Int: So I mean what people tend to call noise pollution has made it more difficult for a sound recordist?

DB: Certainly I think it has.

Int: Yes, I thought so.

4. Favourite stories

Int: If you're at a party or something and people ask you, "Well, you must have had some real funny experiences where everybody fell about laughing." Is there a particular favourite that you like to tell, any story you like to tell - rhinos in Nepal?



DB: It's probably fooling around in the 'vomit comet' with David [Attenborough]. It's quite a good story.

Int: Tell us about that.

DB: It's when we did the NASA training flight for *Living Planet (8)*. Where they undergo their zero gravity training. So we had great fun in flying on that in those trips.

Int: That was where they attempt to see what weightlessness was?

DB: Where they fly in a sort of a sine wave pattern and you have about 30 seconds of weightlessness at the top of the flight. So we did quite a few of those flights and it ended up, of course, where we actually got the sequence and we'd filmed everything we wanted to do. Then we just enjoyed ourselves, floating around in space - cart wheeling around and things like that. One of the great advantages of doing something that you wouldn't normally do.

Int: I don't know if you remember rhinos in Nepal but David [Attenborough] always tells a story about trying to film a sync piece with him and an Indian rhino. I'm not sure he ever gets it right so I'd love to hear it from your mouth.

DB: That was where David [Attenborough] was on the back of an elephant and as he moved he dropped his radio mike and it fell off. He subsequently had to get off the elephant to film the piece. I was still safe enough up on the elephant myself.

Int: And was there a rhino near?

DB: There was a rhino right near which we were attempting to film. I said, "David, you've lost your radio mike." David [Attenborough] was searching round and couldn't find it. I said it's in the grass somewhere. Meanwhile I was quite safe sitting up on the elephant. David was on the ground, with the rhino a little distance away. So he said, "How can I find it, how can I find it?" I said, "Well, you shout and if you get louder I'll say warmer, warmer." So David was shouting and I was saying you're getting warmer, getting warmer and eventually he got quite close and he found the microphone hidden in the long grass - sort of great relief. There was this strange situation with David shouting in the grass and me shouting warmer, warmer, warmer, until we actually found it.

Int: Like a party game.

DB: A party game. Meanwhile there was a confused rhino watching on.

Int: And then you did the sync piece and David [Attenborough] was very keen to get it done in one take. I remember the piece because this rhino was beginning to look a bit annoyed by all this noise going on. David did the piece and then quickly got back up on the elephant but he was definitely looking over his shoulder a little bit, wondering what was going to happen.

DB: That was where the elements turned against us, wasn't it? That and the great floods.

Int: God, yes. The monsoon was meant to be over and it actually carried on for a week after.

DB: Yes, 48 hours of non-stop rain or something. Going out on the backs of elephants across the river.

Int: It was a good trip.

5. Favourite sound recordings

Int: In terms of the wildlife that you've recorded or even just seen, but probably recorded as well, are there any particular species that we haven't mentioned yet that you're particularly pleased that you've had the opportunity to see in the wild, that other people might have dreamed of seeing and you've seen because of your job?

DB: Desperately trying to think of a few now. Probably recording, it sounds strange, little frogs, little small, like South American frogs and things, and actually recording those probably for the first time. I've always found quite fascinating because you spend hours trying to get one little frog to get a noise.

Int: And they make wonderful noises as well, don't they, and often in the night. You have to go out at night.

DB: I used to always find that quite enjoyable.

Int: Though more enjoyable than seeing lions on the Serengeti?

DB: Yes, strangely enough.

Int: No, I can sympathise with that.

DB: And Galapagos Islands, of course, that's fascinating. That was the first time we'd actually used stereo really, in the Galapagos Islands.

Int: Right. What programme was that?

DB: That was with Johnny Morris of all people. No, I went out with John Sparks for Life on Earth (2) but Johnny Morris as well.

Int: And what were you recording there, can you remember?

DB: Actually getting lots and lots of the finches and things like that —, boobies and things like that. To actually get those in stereo for the first time was quite good. I used to do a lot of wandering off on my own trying to get away from the crew for those.

Int: Was Life on Earth (2) then the first time stereo was used fully?

DB: Yes, I think it probably was the first time we got any portable stereo equipment. It was the first time we'd had a stereo Nagra. We used to get out in the field.

Int: If you hadn't been a sound recordist and been involved in wildlife films, is there any other branch of the industry or anything else you'd have rather have done?

DB: I was always fascinated by sound. I probably would have stayed in the sound department of the BBC, along that line. I mean studio work or something probably.

Int: But you would have had opportunities or choices I suppose to do quite high powered dramas rather than wildlife documentaries. It seems to me that when given that choice you've sometimes made the wildlife choice.

DB: There's no choice really, choice between stuck doing a six week drama or getting out into the Far East. What would you choose?

Int: I'd choose the Far East, yes.

DB: Exactly, yes. I very rarely turned down a wildlife job for a drama.

Int: Right. No, that's good.

6. Sound recording in the present day

Int: Imagining for a moment that time and money and travel were not an issue. Is there a wildlife programme or series or anything that you'd have liked to have worked on that you didn't get the opportunity to, just recalling what you've viewed and so on?

DB: The new ones.

Int: The new ones? What just because you miss it?

DB: Because I miss it and because of the new techniques they've got in it. Super lightweight equipment, you can get to places you never did before. Look at the caves in Arizona and things - fantastic places.

Int: The new equipment is lightweight. Is it as good?

DB: Better.

Int: Better.

DB: Better sound quality with a digital sound —. You can get to places now which we couldn't dream of doing. It's fascinating. So I do envy some of the new —.

Int: Yes, I can imagine. Because it's more lightweight, perhaps easier to use, etc, does that mean that there's any less skill involved nowadays being a sound recordist than there was when you started out?

DB: I think it's just as skilful. Certainly we probably had skills which they probably wouldn't recognise now. I remember trying to solder a lead in Madagascar - heating up a screwdriver as a makeshift soldering iron. Then we tried to mend a camera lead with it which we did. They used to say to me, shall I temper the screwdriver for you? That's the kind of skills which are probably missing a bit now, don't need to. We had to look after our own equipment much more than needed nowadays.

Int: But actually recording the right sound is still —.

DB: The physics are still the same I think, yes.

Int: Yes, still the skill there, creeping around and so on. Do you regularly take the trouble to watch wildlife films still?

DB: Yes. I still have a great interest in them.

Int: Do you have any favourites, any new presenters you like?

DB: No new presenter of course. There is only one presenter, isn't there?

Int: Have you been watching Planet Earth (9)?

DB: I love it, I think it's absolutely fascinating, superb pictures. Nothing we could do —. Compared to 40 years ago, a whole new life isn't it? The helicopter mounts they've got and things.



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Int: And do you think that Planet Earth (9), say, now having just been on, been a new era of high definition, all shot on high definition, and as you say amazing camera mounts on helicopters that can use long lenses and so forth. The video cameras themselves being able to record images in much lower light conditions and so on. When you watched Planet Earth (9) did you feel that was going to be another benchmark, a bit like Life on Earth (2) was?

DB: I think it probably will be. I mean I'd love to see it in real high definition. I remember when I saw the first one I thought I wished I'd bought a larger screen to see it at home. The shots of the lions plodding across the desert, Namib Desert. And it pulls back and goes back and back, and I found it unbelievable the jump in technology over the last five years – I find it fascinating.

Int: Funnily enough the most technologically demanding sequences in Life in the Undergrowth (10) were the exact opposite to what you've talked about, and we used high definition cameras to get in to tiny animals in difficult places in low light conditions and ones that didn't like light on them - so at both ends of the spectrum. These new cameras are just making life easier and, as you say, new sound stuff as well. So it's good for modern wildlife film making.

DB: Actually recording fish now as well, aren't we, and things, the sounds of fish and things which we never dreamt of in those days.

Int: And sounds of insects as well.

DB: Insects, yes, with these little plate microphones it's easy, that they have.

Int: If somebody wanted to follow in your august footsteps now going into the business, and people probably do ask you, is there any advice you particularly give them?

DB: I tell them to phone up Mike Salisbury.

Int: No, I'm out of it now as well.

DB: I don't really know how the entry field is now. Now the BBC has stopped recruiting and training their own staff I don't quite know how they do it. I can't honestly answer that.

Int: No - so you don't know. I don't know how new sound recordists train.

DB: No, I don't know how the training is nowadays - we all had a recognised training. I don't know how they are recruited now.

Int: Fair enough. I don't know either.

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7. Other questions

Other: You obviously started off working in film, did you use video at all because it changes the nature of what the sound recorder does, doesn't it?

DB: Yes, we changed probably mid 1980s when what was called the Portable Single Camera came in, which was the big old Ikegami type cameras came in. We all fought against it actually. It was a retrograde step we felt because the pictures weren't particularly good and the equipment was big and heavy, and it wasn't at all portable as a film camera, as a 16mm film camera, a Nagra. So actually we objected to it for a long time because it wasn't done particularly on cost, they were determined to actually use it all, to try and push for its use which was a good idea I suppose to get it going. But as film recordists, as we were all steeped in the backgrounds of 16mm film we wanted to keep it that way for ages, so we actually dug our heads in the sand, against it. As soon as better equipment came along we accepted it and moved into it.

Other: Reading between the lines, the thing that we really specialised in it seems to me is bits where you walk off into the forest by yourself. When you've got a video camera you're not in control of the recorder are you?

DB: That's, as I say, why we did fight against it a lot because you'd have to take this —. When it first started the camera and the recorder were separate, carried a tape recorder around as well, just a camera head. It was so unwieldy and so bulky and we were used to being able, as individuals, to be able to sneak off and do it. So it took a while for us to accept video technology until it became smaller, more usable and you could actually sneak off with the camera. I still even in those days when we were actually using video cameras, I always took a little DAT (Digital Audio Tape) machine away on my own, so I carried my own little portable recorder. Soon as the little DAT machines came in they were ideal.

Other: So did you also duplicate? Like you'd recorded the sync sound, did you also duplicate it on DAT?

DB: Sometimes I did if there were advantages in doing it, yes. But certainly as soon as DAT technology came in that was the biggest breakthrough for us.

Other: When did that happen?

DB: That was in the mid-1990s I suppose. Yes, mid-1990s the first ones came in. It was a huge advantage then to have a really good high quality machine small enough, so it meant you could carry two.

DKB: Are there any other sound recordists that you've come across that influenced you or you learnt from? I'm thinking of people like Ludwig Koch or as you said earlier.

DB: Who, sorry?

DKB: Ludwig Koch.

DB: Ludwig Koch. Well, of course he was an interest and that. I mean his recordings were so good that you actually tried to emulate —. You knew what standard you were working against to try and actually better some of his film, it was quite an achievement.

DKB: You've mentioned that you started off working in London for BBC Radio but you migrated here to Bristol. Was that generally what was happening to a lot of people from the London area?

DB: Yes, London was the biggest recruitment area obviously. People would often try and actually get out away from it when they had had enough of working in TV centre which was just a big factory really. You could have much more individual achievements down in the regions.

DKB: There was a bird of paradise that's recorded that was very strange, almost a feedback kind of sound. Did you record that one?

DB: I can't remember which one you're referring to. I probably did that. I mean I did the birds of paradise film (11) with Paul Reddish.

DKB: It's a very strange sort of noise.

DB: I can't remember. I remember a story there with David [Attenborough] with birds of paradise. David was whispering so very quietly. We were waiting for one to appear on its little patch and I could David's heartbeat on the radio mike, his heartbeat increasing. He said, "It's there." I said I know it is David, I can tell by your heartbeat increasing. He was getting so excited, David was, that his heart went bump, bump, bump. He was doing one of his whispers, very quietly.

Int: That proves that his enthusiasm is genuine.

DB: Yes, it's genuine, exactly.

Int: Can you recall what the very first wildlife programmes you worked on when you were in the Film Unit in Bristol?

DB: In those bloody awful bat caves in Borneo, right down in —. Remember the Eastward with Attenborough (1) series we talked about? They ought to be shown again, didn't they really, would be a cheap way of doing it. Were they in black or white or colour? Sorry, I can't think. I think they were colour.

Int: I can't remember. They were colour. But there is the famous scene with David [Attenborough] up to his knees in bat guano.

DB: That's a piece of the — caves which were part of *The Living Planet* (8). They're all dressed up in their white paper suits and things for camera. I saw Hugh Maynard recently and Hugh said, "Did you see the sequence in the mountain caves?" I said yes. He said, "What a bunch of wimps. There they were in their white suits," he said, "We were there in shorts and flip-flops. All these cockroaches crawling all over us." You're not supposed to laugh - very serious business.

Int: So was Hugh Maynard the cameraman on that?

DB: No, Maurice Fisher was the cameraman, he was the assistant. But Richard [Brock] didn't tell David [Attenborough] about the cockroaches in the back of the cave, he wanted it to be a complete surprise to him. So he took him back and there was this thin mound of cockroaches, took your breath away - literally - the ammonia as well, but it was amazing.

Int: You didn't catch histoplasmosis?

DB: No. Well we didn't know about it, no idea that it was there really.

Int: Because we had the Life of Mammals (12) where you had Tom Clarke and somebody else were filming these racoons in caves in Texas, and they both came back with histoplasmosis and were in hospital for a couple of months - it was horrible. Even though they'd taken precautions.

DB: Do you know I went down with cerebral malaria on the last trip I did? For all those years we did all those things and the last I went down —, the last was in 2000. Suddenly after all those years of travelling I suddenly came back and malaria hit me.

Int: Where had you been?

DB: Out in Borneo again. After all those years. I was still taking all the stuff and I thought right at the last fence I collapsed with malaria.

Int: Was that horrible to have?

DB: Yes, it was pretty nasty, in hospital for a week.

Int: Because cerebral malaria can do you in, can't it?

DB: Yes, and I've known a couple of people it's killed, and when they said you've got —, I thought wow - that's not nice. I'd survived all this up 'til then. Haven't been back since.

Int: Yes, I know I wonder about it. I've got a possible trip to Papua New Guinea coming up. I've avoided all those horrible bits.

DB: I was taking all the pills and everything. I don't think it was Larium.

DKB: So you were brought up in South Wales. What was your family's —?

DB: It wasn't rural but I mean it was a village rather than a town. So I suppose all kids there have a much better idea, much closer contact with wildlife, don't they than in the city.

Int: Just going back on the question of the longest, what was the longest period you spent abroad?

DB: Three and a half months, that was the first long trip I did and then that went on from January to May I think. Then we often used to do 10 week trips and go off for 10 weeks. Then as air transport improved you could actually get to places quite quickly and it tended to drop to about six weeks as the average. Very rarely did longer ones, about six weeks towards the end because travel was so much easier wasn't it? Didn't have to spend three days getting somewhere.

END

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