

Field Recording

by Jack Perkins

What is field recording ?

Field recording is using portable recorders to gather material outside the confines of the studio or the restrictions of the landline or cell phone. At the back of the farm, on the city street or on board the fishing boat; we talk to people in their own surroundings, capturing the activity and 'feel' of everyday life - their feelings, attitudes, prejudices, stories and experience – first-hand and unfiltered – up close and personal.

Field recording and its place at Radio New Zealand

Radio New Zealand serves up a wide variety of spoken fare ranging from news and current affairs to the imaginative feature. But a good proportion of the daily output is provided by day-part presenters using the studio, landlines and cell phones to deliver a variety of interview-based programmes, many of them 'live'. While maximising immediacy, personality and interesting content, studio radio of this nature cannot easily generate a feeling of 'place'. In the listener's mind the studio is 'no place' – neutral. The studio presenter can talk about a venue or event but is not on the spot. Landlines and cell phones can link us with the other side of the world but are unable to provide soundscapes that can come anywhere near those of field recorded programmes.

Using a variety of field recording techniques, producers (mainly based in Radio New Zealand's Spoken Features department) attempt to build programmes which have a sense of 'place' and are often rich in ambient sound. This 'in situ' form of radio, invested with high technical and production values, strives for a realism which can activate the mind's eye of listeners, allowing them to picture a scene or event and feel part of it. In the process, listeners are often given access to people, places and events which they would otherwise never experience.

The evolution of portable recording techniques has helped to decentralise and democratise radio. In a very real sense, the portable recorder takes radio to the people and imbues their voices and stories with an authenticity and veracity undiluted by transcription or reportage.

So field recorded programmes could be described as supplying the sauce and garnishing which complements the meat and three veg of Radio New Zealand. A wider view,

surveying radio around the country, finds that field recorded programmes are largely the preserve of Radio New Zealand and are, therefore, a valuable hallmark of public service radio.

The gear and what it can do

With your recorder shoulder-slung, or in your jacket pocket if it's small enough, and two hand-held mics (one suffices but two have advantages I'll discuss later), you are a portable recording unit capable of tackling most assignments.

Your arms are microphone booms allowing quick and easy manipulation of the mics to cover anything from the simple one-on-one static interview to a group of people moving around and talking to you and each other, set against heavy background noise.

Capture and Explore

The everyday world is a dynamic place, full of people going about their business, enjoying themselves, getting frustrated and angry, joining together for some common enterprise.

Ideally, the field recordist's job is not to interfere or interrupt these activities but rather to capture and explore them. I say 'ideally' because it may be necessary to direct your talent to secure better radio, e.g., getting the steam locomotive driver to blow the whistle at times when he wouldn't normally or persuading the parking warden to start up a conversation with an infringing motorist. As a general rule, when the general public spy a microphone they often think they should drop what they are doing and steel themselves to be interviewed. This may be ok for the news reporter seeking the informational sound-bite but it's not usually what the field recordist is after.

When I was recording a programme marking the refurbishment and reopening of Wellington's St James theatre, I noticed that former stage hands, ushers and the like, invited to celebrate the occasion, were lining up to be interviewed. I told them to ignore me and my mics and to explore and enjoy the new complex and talk amongst themselves. I explained that it was my job to eavesdrop on the occasion and chat to them informally as we explored the new theatre together.

⇐ [Listen: Field recording – St James Theatre*](#)

* Download audio from the Radio New Zealand website at www.radionz.co.nz/specialfeatures/how_to_make_a_radio_documentary/resources

Interviewing Techniques

In the St James Theatre audio, speakers are varying distances from the mics and the background is a bit reverberant and noisy. There's a 'rough and tumble', 'open' feel to the sound which, added to the obvious enjoyment of the guests, lends a sense of place and occasion. It's also an example of 'signposting' rather than interviewing '...Yuri was the resident ghost...' clarifies a reference in their conversation but doesn't ask a question or interfere with a story which arose naturally from the former employees revisiting a place redolent with memories.

This is an example of how environment will often stimulate informants in a way which the simple interview question cannot. Of course, interview is essential but you should practise using your eyes and ears to help form questions which focus the informant's attention on things around them, which in turn may stimulate memory or strong feelings. Look to exploit what you can smell, touch, hear, or even the more intangible feeling of a place:-

'This old shed here - (open squeaky shed door and walk inside -) must hold memories for you...'

'The stench of diesel and the din here in the workshop is overpowering, so how do you cope working here 8 hours a day?'

'Stroking this reptile is like stroking sandpaper, why is its skin so rough?'

'I'm getting a mixture of vibes from the hikoi, but what mood do you sense?'

A mixture of question, brief description and instruction, can work well with informants who have a special knowledge and familiarity with events, conditions, or landscape:-

'You've known this place intimately for many years,- so paint me a picture of the devastation and what it means to you...'

'To me these are just burnt, drought-scarred paddocks but it's home and livelihood to you – so what do you see out there?'

'I see a patch of ordinary looking native bush but what do you see with your ecologist's eye?'

Here's a segment from a colour piece recorded at a hikoi which gathered in Wellington to protest against the government's foreshore and seabed legislation. The issues raised by the

legislation were not the focus of the piece, it was concerned more with mood and feeling. Wellington's blustery weather contributed to this.

≡ [Listen: Field recording – Hikoi](#)

Opportunities for Sound

Journeys

By now it should be obvious that the ability to record while on the move is a key advantage of field recording.

Always be on the lookout for ways of taking your listeners on physical journeys. Journeys are a form of story. They unfold, often accompanied by sound, and listeners love stories, even in cameo. Getting an informant to show you around their home or workplace, for example, will allow your curious eye to form questions and prompt responses which will introduce new material which may not have emerged during a sit-down interview in the lounge or office. It's also a natural way of moving your programme on through a series of related topics, accompanied by varying sound ambience.

I accompanied former Mayor of Henderson, Assid Corban, along the main street, in his open van, during Henderson's 150th birthday celebrations: here's what happened.

≡ [Listen: Field recording – Henderson's 150th birthday celebrations](#)

Opportunism

Field recording is also about seizing the moment. The best laid plans will be upset by the unexpected; the hurly-burly nature of the real world will see to that. But plans cast aside can reveal opportunity. I had made arrangements to chat to Assid Corban at the beginning of the celebrations but as soon as he told me that he was driving his van in the procession I saw the potential of getting alongside him – the result was a bonus and highlight in the programme.

Taking advantage of the unexpected is also one of the most personally satisfying aspects of field recording because it can result in the unique moment - it catches fleeting gold on the wing, so to speak, – once missed, unlikely to be recaptured.

Moving from Place to Place

Using bridging pieces to move from place to place

A line or two of script is the obvious way of moving around in the field but it can also be intrusive and mundane:- *'The dust and heat at the cattle yards soon whips up a thirst among Bill and his friends and they decide to walk up to the pub.'*

It gets the job done but it's more natural and smoother if you can suggest that Bill says, in his own words, something like.... *'Don't know about you blokes but I'm as dry as a wooden God. Anyone for a beer?... Yeah, yeah, too right...'*

It's surprising how willing and able informants are to perform a few words for the mic and sound natural. But after all, they are in a comfortable, familiar environment and they're not being asked to perform Shakespeare – just to be themselves.

Using sound to move from place to place

I'll continue with the cattle yard / pub example. A simple and very effective way of moving from yard to pub is to fade out on the sound of cattle bellowing and fade up on clinking glasses and perhaps a customer ordering a beer. Of course, this only works when the venues have readily identifiable sound (particularly the second venue).

It also highlights one of the most important commandments in the field recordist's bible:- always record a minute or two of ambient sound in any venue. Not only is this necessary for fades but it's also useful for running under studio script. And a technical operator will give you a nod of approval if he has plenty of ambient sound to help with editing and production of the final programme.

Using doors and entranceways to change ambient sound

Taking your mics through an entrance or doorway can take listeners from, say, a busy street into a quiet interior (opening and shutting the door also helps). Here's an example:-

⊞ [Listen: Field recording – Aro Street Medical Centre](#)

Using sound to illustrate contrast or difference

Using sound to present opposing or contrasting conditions, situations, or ideas can provide ear-catching radio. The opportunities in the field are not always obvious and you have to train your eye and ear to be on the look out for possibilities.

Here are two examples: one from the Hutt river, the other from Beijing.

⊞ [Listen: Field recording – Hutt River News Report](#)

⊞ [Listen: Field recording – China Radio International Beijing](#)

Seeing a Scene Through the Reporter's Eyes

The subjective approach

This approach goes a step or two further than the largely factual eye-witness account of the news reporter. But this more subjective report can very effectively capture the variety, colour and 'feel' of a place, while at the same time allowing the reporter editorial control and the ability to physically navigate around a venue for specific purposes.

I used Wellington's Cuba street to open a programme about archaeological excavations at the top of the street. I go back in time as I walk up the busy street:-

⌄ [Listen: Field recording – Cuba Street Digs](#)

Common Pitfalls

Overused openings

It's easy to allow cliché to slip into field recorded script like the Aro Street Medical Centre or ad-lib pieces. Opening phrases such as *'I'm standing...'* or *'In front of me...'* are overused. It's a simple matter to replace them with a sentence that both identifies where you are and gets you launched into the body of the piece in an ear-catching way:- *'This is not the glitzy end of Willis street...'.or perhaps 'We've left the glitz and glamour of city-end Willis street behind...'*

Don't slavishly stay on mic

If the script or ad-lib piece requires you to look at something to your left or right, don't be afraid to turn your head and go slightly off mic: this signals head movement to the listener and adds to the realism. The same applies if you bend or stretch to reach for something. Take care using this technique in high background noise though; if you go too far off mic you'll be drowned out by the noise.

You should apply the same technique to informants: when the farmer bends down to lift another fence post, allow him to go off mic. This, and the effort in his voice as he lifts the post will add to the realism.

Recording With Two Microphones

Recording devices have two microphone inputs for stereo or twin channel recording which allows us to work in the field with a microphone in each hand. The arms, in effect, become microphone booms.

Why do it?

The purpose of two mic recording in the field is not to create a stereo recording but rather to ensure adequate coverage of a group of informants who may be moving around, talking to each other and to you - half a dozen children at play, for example.

Single mic problems

In circumstances involving several informants, a single mic will tend to give rather 'hit-and-miss' coverage: the audio will contain rather ugly half-captured exchanges as your mic attempts to 'searchlight' the elusive talkers. Some material will be missed altogether or be so off mic as to render it unusable. The single mic's job is made even more difficult if there is sufficient background noise to demand closer mic'ing.

Gathering the children together in a tight circle around the mic would be one solution but this will rob the scene of spontaneity and converts children at play into a static group.

Two mics also have their use with static groups where conversation is free flowing: a group of old mates around a large kitchen table, for example.

Be not afraid

Some field recording novices tend to avoid two mics; they consign the technique to the 'too hard basket' and claim that one mic is all they need. Long experience using both one and two mics and training others in their use, makes me certain that the single mic, while handling many situations adequately, will always be inferior to two mics. A single mic sets a limit on what is possible in the field.

Microphone noise or microphonics

The annoying rumble and knocking sounds which can intrude into field recording is commonly thought to be caused by the microphone leads moving and making contact with objects and clothing as you manipulate the mics (be it one or two). While movement of mic leads can contribute, in a small degree, to microphonics, the real culprit is hand and finger movement on the microphone barrel. If you have to change your grip, practise doing so without rubbing or tapping the barrel. During recording, it's essential to keep your hand and fingers still, even though your arms may be manipulating the mics considerably. This does not mean you should clutch the mics tightly, which is tiring: a firm but comfortable grip is all that's needed.

Practise

Two mics requires practise; manipulating them accurately will feel awkward at first. But with perseverance, it's a technique which will reward the user with the confidence to handle just about any type of field recording.

Techy stuff

There have been suggestions from some technical people that two mics would cause phasing and signal cancellation. While I don't have a technical 'under-the-hood' knowledge, I can say that no such problems have emerged since the technique first evolved over 30 years ago.

Stereo or mono?

And while on technical matters, in most audio editing applications it's very simple – and desirable – to split your stereo recording into two mono streams. This allows any far-right–far-left audio, (caused by recording with mics far apart) to be adjusted or 'panned' nearer to the centre of the sound stage. Two mono streams also allow volume adjustment on each channel separately, which can help to compensate for any minor mistakes in mic position made in the course of field recording.

The future?

Radio New Zealand broadcasts in mono, so twin mono production of programmes is appropriate. But, of course, the two mic technique, with judicious field recording and 'panning' of streams back in the studio, can give high quality stereo audio, should the future need arise.