



PERTH INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

# Aural sex and the sounds of violence

*Chris Watson has captured the extraordinary soundtrack of the South American jungles, writes Victoria Laurie*

**T**HE sound, as much as the sight, of flames racing across the landscape still haunts survivors of Victoria's bushfires. The eerie silence, then a deep, terrifying roar. "It was like hearing two 747s coming up the valley," commented one shell-shocked survivor.

Sound recordist Chris Watson has chased grassfires across the African savannah, and recorded the explosive "crack" of popping seed pods that all but shatters ear drums when captured at close range.

One of the world's best sound recordists, Watson often works with the BBC's Natural History Unit to capture events aurally, from the deep groan of a melting glacier in Iceland to the last breath of a dying animal.

Pictures become redundant, he says. "You close your eyes and you're there; it actually changes you," says Watson, whose sound installation *Whispering in the Leaves* features in Perth International Arts Festival's visual art program.

He is responsible for many of the soundtracks in David Attenborough's award-winning TV nature series, including *The Blue Planet*, *Life in the Undergrowth*, *The Life of Mammals*, *Life in Cold Blood* and *The Life of Birds* (for which Watson won a BAFTA award for best factual recording.)

*Whispering in the Leaves* is an atmospheric recreation of the sounds that Watson captured in South American forests. Eight speakers have been installed in jungle-like vegetation growing inside Perth's Planetarium Pyramid, a neglected glass-sided landmark located near the Swan River.

"There's sex, violence and death in the soundtrack; they occur constantly in that environment," he says gleefully. "It's not just a smiley landscape; it's visceral."

Watson is a cheerful, lanky Englishman with few pretensions. He grew up in Sheffield, dabbling seriously in electronic music as a

member of Cabaret Voltaire, an influential British band that pioneered experimental sound in the 1970s, made several albums and toured Europe, Japan and America.

Then he left the band and studied sound engineering. "Ultimately, I became more interested in the sounds out in the bush than the ones we were making in the studio. I couldn't improve on what I was hearing outside."

Sound artist is a title that jars slightly with him. "I'm a sound recordist, that's what I do," says Watson, sitting in noisy Perth airport, where he observes that the metal roof sphere above us is acting as a giant amplifier. "I don't call myself a sound artist, although I suppose that's what I also am," he says.

For BBC TV's Natural History unit, Watson has threaded tiny neck microphones on to a zebra carcass to record the sound of shredding and snarling as hyenas tear off its flesh. He's captured the hair-raising snarls of feuding male lions in BBC TV's *Big Cat Diary* by slowly extending carbon fibre boom mikes several metres long under the big cats' noses.

Even the Hollywood film *The Constant Gardener*, starring Ralph Fiennes, has wildlife sequences recorded by Watson; "I love creating breathing spaces in films like that."

The spirit of a place is lodged in its acoustics, he believes, and it can be recreated with high-quality digital recording. "I realised you could engage people just through sound and stimulate their imaginations. It doesn't have to be New Age soporific; it can be dynamic," he says.

"In the pyramid, we have four speakers on the ground and four in the canopy. It's as close as you can get to being in the jungle.

"It's also very inclusive and immersive. It acts upon you and you can literally walk among the spirit of a place."

Watson made a breakthrough in documen-



**'You close your eyes and you're there':**  
 Sound recordist and Attenborough documentary veteran Chris Watson

tary sound with *The Life of Birds* in 1998. He teamed up with TV documentary producer Peter Bassett, who concurred with Watson that natural sounds could be more effective than a music soundtrack.

"In one episode, *Songs and Signals*, we used no music other than the wildlife sounds we'd recorded," he says. "It was the first time we'd ever tried this, and that program won a BAFTA for best factual sound. A lot of people don't realise there's not a note of man-made music in it. It is wall-to-wall sounds of the environment, and it has this beautiful rhythm in the bird sounds."

He uses time compression in his sound installations. "Sunrise in the tropics lasts for almost 90 minutes, from almost silent pre-dawn to the aftermath of the dawn chorus. That's too long for people to listen, so we use a film technique of compressing time so the dawn chorus lasts about 14 minutes. It's a bit like composing, I suppose."

Watson is increasingly sought out as a sound artist, when he's not working as freelance sound recordist in obscure parts of the world. (He's also a visiting professor at

Leeds College of Music.) Last year, he was invited to Norway to commemorate the centenary of the birth of composer Edvard Grieg, whose folk songs were inspired by the sound of birds, water falls, rain and the ocean.

Watson recorded the sounds of Norway's spring thaw, from melting ice to the squawk of baby birds. "Then I set up an elliptical speaker system in an empty building. We had benches in it and no light apart from one single beam that went from blue to orange during the 20-minute piece. People really liked it."

*Oceanus Pacificus* was another installation using "the sound of the largest habitat on earth: the Pacific Ocean". Says Watson: "It was a very small space so we put a large cushion in the room, and only two people could sit on the floor." The strains of the ocean's smallest pistol shrimps and larger killer whales washed over the listeners, "a kind of 'return to the womb' sensation".

Digital technology has liberated his work, he says; it enables perfect reproductions of natural sound. But he still uses old-fashioned Nagra reel-to-reel tape recorders for some

assignments: "Sometimes I need very robust, reliable equipment. You can't take computers and laptops into a rainforest or up a glacier."

Watson wonders why film and TV program makers overlay environmental sound with fake noises or lush orchestration. "People actually want less music and to engage more with the sounds of places. But so many producers seem to think everyone has the same short attention span as they do. So you're bombarded; it's like being pumped with steroids to put big orchestral scores on a soundtrack.

"I spent weeks being seasick on a bloody boat for a TV series on the Galapagos Islands, and so much of the sound I recorded is missing. (It was replaced with music.) In fact, I designed the sound on the National Geographic website version, which has no music. I said, 'Why didn't you do that with the series?'"

"We hear everything but we rarely take the chance to listen. They're two different things," observes Watson, over the din of airport announcements and conveyor belt rumble.

"It's like us doing this interview. We can hear sounds to the side, behind us. It's surround sound in essence and we can distinguish each sound. Often we take for granted how perceptive and intelligent our brains are, because we live our lives getting aural cues around us. Unfortunately, we're swamped by noise pollution and so we spend most of our lives shutting out this remarkable ability in order to focus.

"I'm fascinated by the theory of a Scottish scientist who says that, although we live alongside birds, they are literally living their lives at a different rate. So our lives move literally at a different speed. What's fascinating is that if you slow birdsong down, it becomes whale song. If you speed whale song up, it becomes birdsong."

Whether sound installation, sonic art or just plain sound recording, says Watson, "there's no point doing it unless you engage people. Just go and enjoy it, whatever it's called. Just think of it as a piece of music."

*Whispering in the Leaves* is at the Planetarium Pyramid, the Esplanade, Perth. Free entry.