



# Thanks for Listening

## *Chris Watson by Alan Dunn*

Founder member of Cabaret Voltaire, award-winning wildlife sound recordist with David Attenborough and recording artist for Touch, Chris Watson is an artist with a unique background and sensibility. In 2004 Alan Dunn and Watson worked together on the *Winter's Tale* project at the Foundation for Art & Creative Technology in Liverpool, collaborating with a community of elderly high-rise tenants. Recording their immediate and surrounding locale at all hours of the day, two new soundscapes were

created for the scenes the residents could see from their windows but could not hear. These two pieces were re-fed into each living room free of charge via the internal CCTV system.

The project brought together Watson's interest in creating portraits of habitats using sound alongside his generous sharing of professional skills towards new ways of listening to our world. Having travelled extensively since first working for *The Tube* on Channel 4, Watson has recorded in some of the most remote and

challenging parts of this planet. Dunn invited him to select three photographs from his travel collection to reflect upon the planet's silence, remoteness, the nature of time, perspective, chaos, complexity and human nature.

CW: It was really interesting when you asked me to select three photographs because even though I chose three remote locations across the world, there is a clear connection in habitats. Although I am a sound recordist, when I go to any

of these places, the geographic South Pole, the Pacific Ocean or the Kalahari Desert in the North West Cape of South Africa, the first thing I do is to look. Through my visual sense and then my auditory sense I start to absorb what I consider to be the essence or spirit of these places. I am very much visually guided and the one thing these places all have in common is the distant horizon. Even though the three habitats are radically different and far apart, when you scan them you can see far into the distance and, with the lack of

noise pollution, you can also hear across great distances. Each location has remained relatively unchanged and standing at the South Pole I realised that what I was hearing was exactly the same type of sounds that Roald Amundsen heard when he arrived a century ago. In fact there has probably been no change in several thousand years and I am really interested in that idea of a kind of perspective. All three places exhibit that potential of reaching into the past with a microphone.

AD: This notion of distance changes everything because we are not used to hearing that far.

CW: Yes, it is a real challenge for any technology to represent it, because all technology does in a sense is to confine something to a widescreen image or a stereo sound. In those habitats it is literally very hard to take it all in, but that is what I find exciting and challenging about those places, coupled with the lack of human interference. There is actually very little wildlife sounds at these places. There are literally none at the South Pole and relatively few in the Kalahari Desert when that picture was taken. It was about 4 in the afternoon, 40° Centigrade, gathering clouds of an evening storm and that golden hour colour on the grass, but 85% of the wildlife there is nocturnal, living in the dark, so you hear very little. The photo of the surface of the Pacific Ocean was taken from a Boeing 737 about 1,000km off the coast of Ecuador as we started our descent to the Galápagos Islands. In a place like that on the surface there is very little sound but when you go below the surface you enter another world in which sound travels five times faster. The ocean is the most sound-rich habitat in the planet.

AD: These three photographs are without humans and it must be quite an existential experience for you to work alone in locations, without other animals, seeing further than most humans are used to and putting microphones literally where no human has ever listened before.

CW: I find it really challenging, particularly at the South Pole. You realise that as you scan the far horizon there comes a vanishing point where the ice and sky merge because of the ice and the clear blue sky. I also realised at the South Pole that every way you turn and everywhere you look is north. Standing at the Pole, every time zone on

*“The other thing I realised from talking to scientists at the South Pole is that there is only one sunrise and one sunset a year”*

our planet converges. Beyond the left hand side of that board is the Americas with one time zone and to the right of it is Russia with another time zone and it does make you wonder about time, or lack of it, in a very particular way. Perhaps there is no time there at all?

AD: For those time zones are a man-made construct to deal with day and night?

CW: They are, but the other thing I realised from talking to scientists at the South Pole is that there is only one sunrise and one sunset a year. The sun will rise for the first time in late September, breaking the horizon, and it won't set again until about March.

AD: Stretching a day into a year?

CW: Yes, a kind of day in a life. While I was working there I stayed at a Russian base where they used Russian time and the American base used American time. But there is no new timescale that I am aware of specifically for the Pole, just some commonality. But whatever they use, it's arbitrary, because all the sun does is circle around the Pole.

AD: These photographs are hence documents?

CW: They are snapshots that I find too two-dimensional, records of visits. That sign in the

photograph for example is on its own and behind it you can just see the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station run by the United States Science Foundation. The actual South Pole is a ceremonial point within walking distance of the canteen, but I noticed this wooden board on its own, perhaps 200 yards in the distance. I walked up to it and it actually marks the exact geographic South Pole. I was there on my own and it was quite a moving experience, particularly when you read what's on it.

AD: You were at the three locations recording, with different technical challenges and different briefs?

CW: I was at the South Pole with David Attenborough for a BBC documentary series called *Frozen Planet*, in the Kalahari Desert working on a feature film and the Galápagos Islands was for a National Geographic series. These jobs get me to places and I then take the opportunity to explore them in ways that are outwith the remit of my original reason for being there. I make lots of recordings, photographs and notes and when I return I start to create pieces that find that sense of spirit of place. It is a personal interpretation of it from my experiences of spending a lot of time in these places.

AD: When you do a portrait of someone you try to get the essential features and you are creating portraits of this planet's largest human-free expanses. Does that lead you to insights about the overall picture?

CW: The painting analogy is really good as that is how I imagine my work, a personal representation with sound. Spending time in places such as these makes me realise that these are not what we often call quite derogatorily barren wildernesses or hostile environments. What I have begun to realise and what I am thinking more about trying to articulate in my work is how complex they are. They are not chaotic at all. They are complex systems, complex eco systems, and to that extent they are fragile. Working with scientists in particular I am interested in how they try to articulate that complexity and how you start to unearth the beauty of these places.

AD: The word complexity suggests a form of mathematical pattern that permanently underpins

things?

CW: It is not permanent. Part of the complexity is that it is changing constantly, affected by the weather or geology or even by our influence. However, I am sure there is a mathematical structure to it. I did a residency at the Wired Lab in Australia which was set up by Dr Alan Lamb to explore the acoustic properties of the long fencing wires stretched across the country. While I was there I talked at length about this very subject with David Burraston, a mathematician who has studied the complexity of the wires. They are simple when compared to many other habitats but he is unearthing some incredibly interesting information and forming some new ideas about the complexity of these sounds in wires. He is actually looking to describe it which I feel is almost beyond my function as an artist, being able to annotate or explain complexity. I can grasp it without fully understanding it but I did start thinking about how I may start to articulate the complexity of the sounds in these three locations for example. Or, how knowledge may affect how I record in such places.

AD: Are you suggesting there is no such thing as chaos?

CW: I think there probably is but I could not describe it. I feel it is too easy to look at the surface of the sea and say 'it is chaotic'. It is not and neither is air movement nor falling snow. It is an easy romantic notion to say 'chaotic' but for me it just means that it is outside my knowledge, I just can't understand it.

AD: How may a better understanding of complexity start to alter the way you record places?

CW: When you start to investigate these places, you could probably stand and hold a microphone and get three recordings that I could say were from any one of those three places, because they are so quiet. And this is where notions of perspective play such an important role. In these far distant horizons I am also interested in listening literally under the surface and under the skin. What became interesting with the Pole was to put hydrophones and geophones under the sea ice and start to draw out sounds from there, which were astonishing. I am interested in finding the real essence and spirit of that place and that

is also by putting microphones in unusual places, at new perspectives to start to reveal other complexities. In the Kalahari I put microphones down holes where animals or insects live and I have recently been doing a great deal of underwater recordings. Armed with a fairly basic knowledge of the biology of places, I start to investigate habitats from new perspectives.

AD: That is what is interesting for me, the pioneering and burrowing that you do, going beyond the surface and away from the visual. Do you see that as a next phase in your work?

CW: Absolutely, and also the idea of spatialising places as technology is now catching up with our ideas. I have an ambisonic recording system that enables me to record in any of those places and then spatialise it into a three-dimensional audio environment. And this is genuine three-dimensions using third order ambisonics to spatialise a place so for the first time you can recreate a space which has planar (horizontal) sound, which is how we see, but also with height and depth, which is how we hear. It is still a very complex system. I work with Tony Myatt at the University of York to create the hardware for it and that really culminated recently in *The Morning Line* project at TBA21 that is currently exhibited in Vienna. *The Morning Line* is a sculpture by Matthew Ritchie that has a 40-speaker system within it to allow the public to really hear the sounds of any recorded place. The presentation is crucial. In the past, sound has been very poorly presented but galleries in particular have caught up and the public now 'get it', the very direct emotional response to good quality well presented sound.

AD: You often refer to the 'beautiful sounds' of animals or places, but do you think there is a relationship between the more complex sounds and what we find 'pleasing' to listen to?

CW: The commonality of these places is the lack of man-made noise and I often make that judgement not to use any man-made noises in any given location. I represent a place as I would like to experience that place. It is not like a photograph in that sense. It is a composition that is very simple, not complex, although I am becoming interested in how I may start to articulate the inherent complexity of the sounds.

There is always a narrative element, which

is time. Time is not always regular and I often stretch it for example. The *Vatnajökull* piece on *Weather Report* was a representation of 10,000 years in 18 minutes. I am quite happy to play around with time and this is what many of my compositions are based on. I create a timeline and create simple scores that are based on lapsed time, the seasons or animal behaviour.

I am looking at the moment into doing a piece with a raven roost in Wales in which the sounds happen over about 20 minutes and I am trying to expand it to closer to 60 minutes. It is a way of getting into the rhythm and behaviour and the pattern of the animal. I think this is part of the complexity, this idea of temporal resolution. At the Pole I can hear a hundred years ago. In the Kalahari, insects live their lives much faster than us. We can hear birds and see them and try to describe them but the fact is that, as organisms, we are all living our lives at different speeds. We can hear birds sing but we cannot capture that information with the same resolution as the bird is doing at that moment. The classic example of that is a wren singing. That wren can produce 64 notes in an 8-second song phase. We hear that as a trill. If you slow it down 4 times you can see and hear the individual notes. The scientists at the University of St Andrews with whom I am working suggest that another wren can resolve those notes at that speed, which is beyond our temporal resolution. Another wren can separate out all those individual notes and extract information about its sexual status, its position within its habitat and whether or not it has a mate. The raven is similar and for me slowing down is one very simplistic way of working with it. It allows us to start to hear it.

AD: And that is akin to early photographers examining motion?

CW: Curiously enough I have a project with the British Film Institute who have given Mike Harding at Touch some animated films from the early 20th Century by two French film makers and I have one to create a soundtrack for. It is the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly and some of it is slow-motion film, some of it is actual animation and at some stages they even built an actual artificial caterpillar to understand its behaviour and to represent the behaviour. They made a new time resolution as perhaps because the real thing was too slow! It's interesting to see the techniques they used to film

that, methods you have to put in place to start to perceive complexity.

AD: Which leads us to a final question of why do you think it has to be so complex? If the wind system and the waves and ravens and wrens are so elaborate and in flux, why do you think we, as part of it, struggle to understand it?

CW: Firstly, I think all these time systems are interconnected. They must be because that is how things work and evolve. Secondly, we are only here for a very small span and are simply not able to understand it. Things are evolving all around us but we do not have the capacity to notice it, or to comprehend the temporal resolution on a daily basis.

Why things appear to be so complex is of course a difficult question to answer. It is like trying to understand the universe. We can understand what we can and we all do our own little bit, but maybe all that does is add to the complexity of it rather than resolve it. And in order to try and find answers at each stage of our development, we do simplify things, it is in our nature. That is, we try to find out what it is, we give it a name, we classify it and then move on.

I do not think we can contain it because in 10,000 years this cafe won't be here and we find it impossible to imagine what will be here. But there can be no 'answer' as it is always evolving and never stops. Even crocodiles are continuing to evolve but we cannot perceive it from our position. We can look back at evolution and recognise it but not observe it up close. So, new perspectives, differing time systems and temporal resolutions do play a part. It is hard to understand temporal resolution when you visit those places but perhaps it is possible to absorb it, to record it from certain perspectives, albeit a simplified portrait.

*Chris Watson's new CD El Tren Fantasma (The Ghost Train) is released by Touch. See [www.chriswatson.net](http://www.chriswatson.net) and [www.touchmusic.org.uk](http://www.touchmusic.org.uk)*

*Audio tracks selected by Chris Watson for Stimulus Respond at [www.alandunn67.co.uk/stimulusaudio.html](http://www.alandunn67.co.uk/stimulusaudio.html)*

*go degrees South  
Pacific Ocean  
The Kalahari Desert*