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Nothing But Bones (Rien Que Les Os): A Review

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Abstract

This documentary by the French artist Floy Krouchi in collaboration with Nathalie Battus and Bruno Mourlan from Radio France is a hybrid piece that lies between music and poetic creation. It attempts to make a radiophonic connection between the mythic memory of the indigenous peoples of India and what remains today in certain pieces of music, in (people's) memory, in singing and translation. The project began five years ago (2010) in Southern India where Floy Krouchi was then travelling. There she heard a short piece of music taken from a very ancient tradition that struck her as so strange and at once exhilarating that she decided to come home as soon as she could and spend a month gathering together what is still accessible from this strangely beautiful material that has come down to us across the centuries.

On their tribal lands, the indigenous Irula tribe hold a ceremony that tells the story of their historical conflict with, and near destruction by, the ways of the so-called civilised or modern world. This music drama, played out over 7 days and 7 nights, unfolds like a symbolic tale. To record them is to capture the oral memory of these people who belong still to the Ancient World. The sound leaves an imprint which connects deeply with our collective memory. Based on a tiny fleeting fragment, "Nothing but Bones" revisits the action at the heart of this drama, a fiction turned into history, a narrative shot through with time metaphors. Through the medium of radio our collective memory is stimulated, allowing us to share a little of what the Irula – born in the nurturing forest – had to face when confronted with the greed of the children of King Money. "Nothing but Bones" is a piece of experimental radio which leads those who have ears to hear on a path where the past seems behind a very fragile pane of glass. It is a delicate and deeply moving piece of radio.

Translation by Simon Elmes, gratefully acknowledged.

Keywords

radio documentary, audio feature, Kerala, audio art

Cover Page Footnote

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NOTHING BUT BONES /RIEN QUE LES OS (2015)

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NOTHING BUT BONES (56'40)

Producer: Floy Krouchi, Atelier de Création Radiophonique (France Culture)

Editing and Sound: Nathalie Battus. Mix and Mastering: Bruno Mourlan.

Recorded in Attapadi, Kerala, India and in the studios of Radio France, Paris, France, between March 2014 (India) and November 2014 (Paris)

AUDIO: <http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-l-atelier-de-la-creation-rien-que-les-os-2015-03-05>

The piece includes: (1) Music from the oral repertory of the Irula tribe in Attapadi, including traditional instruments such as: Poora, Delbil, (drums), kokayl (flute) and singing. (2) Bass and electro acoustic composition: Floy Krouchi

Reviewer: Irène Omélianenko

“They came into the forest,

They shot their rifles

And killed a great black monkey.

We let them do it, we didn’t speak a word

We thought, they’ll surely give us a piece of the meat,

But then they roasted the animal, ate it

And we were left with nothing but bones”

1-PLAY

The piece opens with a poem with this strange phrase: “nothing but bones”. Then a voice tells us that somebody, **she**, always knew that she would return. We hear men singing, then a voice plunges us deep into a primeval past when the world was a forest filled with birds. It is the start of a chilling story in which betrayal leads to the death of innocence. This piece is an impossible quest, an enigma without a solution. Floy Krouchi travelled to India to rediscover a half-heard fragment of sound, a partially erased memory, like on an old magnetic tape. She revisits the traces of a philosophical tale that recounts the history of the Irula and perhaps also the history of humanity itself.

2- FAST FORWARD / REWIND

Several threads are woven through the sonic fabric of this piece. The Narration leads to a disruption of the timeframe. The first layer of sound was gathered during a first visit, with an open mind when everything was a given. The listener is, as is the programme-maker (author), rapt and lending his or her full attention: you scrutinise the forest and believe you can hear the sound of ancient times when animals ruled: bears, wild pigs and tigers. You listen to a song and it’s as if the memory of some primordial knowledge has been aroused within you.

The second layer of sound was gathered during a second recording trip. It takes the form of an investigation. Nathalie Battus and Floy Krouchi run through woods and listen to Mother Forest. The listener accompanies them as they look for the man and his blind brother whose voice they had recorded five years previously. What guides us is the memory of a sound, and with it we immerse ourselves in a fictional investigation.

The third layer of sound is the narration. The narrator’s voice is a virtual one, borrowed from the internet. This voice is the ghost of the artist’s. This virtual voice represents our own era and disrupts, rather like the experience of listening to an audio-guide in a museum. Where is the author? You feel that, just as these first men are disappearing, our humanity is on the same decline.

3- ERASE

After one month of recording, almost all useful documentary elements have been erased, by author choice when writing the piece. She has retained the sound of water, as if gathered from primeval times, songs by male and female voices, the sounds of bells and clapping, birds, and voices on the verge of extinction. These elements restore a sense of genuine reality - the cinematic power of sound to create mental pictures. It uses our knowledge as listeners to extract a symbolic meaning.

Here facts are easy to understand. The Irula have their lands and a sacred mountain. In this place where dead people were buried, sitting up, right against the mountain:

- the natives have lost their lands and have been robbed and abused.
- The forest has been taken and destroyed, and with it the natural habitat and the natives' way of life.

In Kerala, the tribal population is diminishing at the same rate as the forest. At each level corruption has contributed to the process.

This story is a paradigm of our own entropy.

“A stranger came with gold; he entrusted the gold to a chief, but stole it during the night. Each day, the stranger returned and the value of the gold went up. And day after day the tribe disappeared in order to pay off the debt.”

This story was told by a chief and his blind son.

4-PLAY

The broadcast presents no problems of ethnic representation, but the issue of the role of the western artist as broadcaster, as ethnographer, remains. Who is looking at / taking sound from the other, and who holds the power?

In “*Nothing but Bones*” this question is resolved by the use of the artificial voice, thus breaking the normal ambiguity.

This radiophonic piece fulfils, nonetheless the need to go beyond the post colonial era with its taboos and interdictions. It creates a single time-frame.

5-CUT UP

This programme makes fiction out of reality: by the juxtaposition and disposition of sounds - natural and synthetic, vocal and instrumental - it creates a new entity, with a life of its own, and beyond control.

Now arises the question of the true and the false: fictive forest / true forest, of the artist as alchemist, the decoder of his or her time.

The final sound in the piece is, in reality, the very first that was recorded on the trip. Like a serpent biting its tail, the story comes full circle.

CONCLUSION

This programme is deeply fascinating: Floy Krouchi's composition is like a piece of radio alchemy.

[In this magical process of programme-making, as in classical alchemy (the so-called 'Magnum Opus'), there are four stages, designated by colour]

Black (*melanosis* in Greek, *nigredo* in Latin), under the sign of Saturn. This is the first gathering trip during which the essential components of the work were recorded. This also includes a second journey to accumulate further recordings.

White (*leukosis, albedo*), under the sign of the Moon. The artist separates out the various elements, teases out the narrative threads. This also is the moment at which erasure takes place.

Yellow (*xanthosis, citrinitas*), under the sign of Venus. The artist brings the audio elements together and creates a single time-frame.

Red (*iosis, rubedo*), under the sign of the Sun. The work is a place apart where each listener has access to a primordial universe.

This programme makes us reflect on radio production and composition, on sonic and radiophonic creativity, as a sort of magical act. Radio taken, as here, to its apogee is a creative locus that enshrines the observation by the writer and broadcaster Jean Tardieu: "the development of a workshop for radio innovation reaffirms, through the creation of new works, the vitality of radio as an expressive medium and the primacy of unquenchable innovation in art"¹

Without grand gestures and through great delicacy of touch, Floy Krouchi takes us on a sonic adventure of considerable power.

¹ *Tardieu Jean: 24 April 1968 - Cahiers d'histoire de la radiodiffusion n°62 (Oct-Dec 1999), p153

Irène Omélianenko

Irène Omélianenko has been a producer at Radio France since 1982 and program adviser since 2011. She has been a jury member for the *Prix Italia, Prix Europa, Creadoc, Prix Phunurgia Nova* and *Muse en circuit*. Her background is in philosophy and psychology.

Broadcast highlights :

- **1982-1983** : Radio France Creuse.
- **1983-1985** : Nuits Magnétiques Bon Plaisir
- **1985-1997** : crée avec Jean Couturier Clair de Nuit
- Les enfants d'Izieu 2002 ; La France des Justes 2003 ; Dans l'hiver des bergers de la Crau 2004 ; Les Dockers 2005.
- **2003** : L'affaire Vincendon et Henry nominé Prix Ondas.
- **2004** : « Coup de chapeau » du Festival longueur d'ondes pour l'ensemble de son œuvre . La valse des sans papiers .
- **2005** : Un hôpital psychiatrique français sous l'Occupation
- **2006** : « Pavillon 38 ». nominé Prix Europa.
- **2006** : productrice coordonnatrice « Sur les docks ».
- **2007** : Le corps soumis : dans le donjon de Maîtresse Cindy , médaille de bronze New York Festivals, nominé Prix Europa.
- **2009** : Création d'Addor Association pour le développement du documentaire radio
- **2010** commission sonore de la SCAM
- association Mixage Fou
- Depuis **2011** conseiller de programmes au documentaire et à la création radiophonique France Culture
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<http://fiction.franceculture.fr/blog-doc-u-le-blog-d-irene-omelianenko>



Photo: Radio France, Christophe Arramowitz