

Chris Watson: Teesside Sound Walk

Sat 24 March, 11am–3.30pm and Sun 25 March, 1pm–5.30pm. Seal Sands Nature Reserve, Teesside.

This sound walk with Chris Watsonⁱ was held at Seal Sands (Teemouth Nature Reserve) and encouraged participants to listen to this unique post-industrial environment - the sounds of seals and migrating birds and the tidal rhythms of the North Sea.

Industrial Teesside isn't a location you might normally associate with nature. Seal Sands is located between Hartlepool and Middlesbrough, close to a nuclear power station and petro-chemical industries. However, Seal Sands itself is of international importance because it's the only area of inter-tidal mud flat between Lindisfarne to the north and the Humber to the south. Ironically, because it is overlooked by the local industry, there's relatively little human disturbance, so the birds and mammals can flourish at Seal Sands, and indeed, sometimes the industry works in favour of the wildlife in strange ways - some of the raptors, for example, use the industrial chimneys as perches.

During the medieval period the area was important for the salt industry, with salt being extracted from sea water, and today you can see the grassy mounds of ash from the fires used to evaporate sea water to crystallise the salt near the North Gare car park where we (myself and fifteen other participants) met Chris for the start of the walk. This northern side of Seal Sands reserve is essentially a large expanse of sand-dune and mudflat and is a good place to see and hear a variety of birds including Shelduck, Knot and Redshank and we were fortunate to see and hear not only these species, but also Little Egret and the beautiful Avocet.

On the Saturday I attended the Sound Walk, the weather was very misty, with a coastal Hoare or sea fret covering most of the area around Seal Sands. It was great weather for a sound walk! We could hear the sounds of the industry at the mouth of the Tees and the low rumble of ship's engines as they crossed the river mouth – but we couldn't see anything. It was like being on another planet – eerie and disconcerting; our sense of space collapsed and our sense of hearing was significantly sharpened. Sounds took on a greater significance. As we walked towards the coast through the sand dunes, Chris set up his sound recording equipment including a parabolic dish with a microphone set at its centre that enables sound to be focused, pinpointed and amplified – highlighting elements of our sonic environment that normally form the backdrop to our experience of the world; like, for instance, the sound of waves; an energy transformation that has a powerful hold on the mind and the imagination. The Canadian composer, writer and sound environmentalist, R. Murray Schaferⁱⁱ, describes

'... listening to the indolent splashing of wavelets, gauging the gradual crescendo to the heavier treading and onto the organised warfare of the breakers. The mind must be slowed to catch the million transformations of the water, on sand, on shale, against driftwood, against the sea wall. Each drop tinkles at a different pitch; each wave sets a different filtering on an inexhaustible supply of white noise. Some sounds are discreet, others continuous. In the sea, the two fuse in primordial unity. The rhythms

*of the sea are many: infrabiological – for the water changes pitch and timbre faster than the ear’s resolving power to catch its changes; biological – the waves rhyme with the patterns of the heart and lungs and the tides with night and day; and supra biological – the eternal, inextinguishable presence of water’.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Chris said that he has tried to ‘capture’ the sound of waves for broadcast and explained that it was not just a simple case of making one recording on location. This, he said, did not capture the true experience of the sound; and he had to go back again and again, often making as many as nine separate recordings. Returning to the studio, he will overlay these sounds on multiple tracks to re-create the memory of the sound made by the waves.

Chris also encouraged us to listen through headphones to the sounds of a rock pool into which he had ‘dropped’ a small microphone. Sound, apparently, travels through water just over four times faster than through air, and the experience was extraordinary – we heard a weird array of sounds – clicking, scraping, squeaking – made by the various creatures (small shrimps and other crustaceans) that inhabited this underwater world^{iv}. Chris explained that you don’t have to use expensive equipment to listen to sound – for instance the basic element of an entry level microphone, the electret capsule, is a widely used item in consumer electronics and these can be bought cheaply. If you are prepared to do some fairly elementary soldering and mechanical construction work you will be able to come up with something that will give you very good lifelike recordings under good conditions for about £20. DIY wind protection is another area where costs can be lowered. Whilst you won’t be matching the performance of £1000 microphones, you will, nonetheless, be able to listen clearly to a range of sounds we don’t normally experience.^v

From North Gare, we walked south to Greatham Creek where an inquisitive Grey Seal tracked our progress. Many years ago, there were more than 1,000 seals to be found on the sandbanks at Seal Sands, but pollution, dredging and human interference resulted in a dramatic decline in their population and by the 1930’s they were scarce. It was only in the 1960’s that Grey Seals returned, followed in the 1980’s by the rarer Common Seals. When the tide is in, which it was later in the day on our walk, the seals move up Greatham Creek, and out onto the mudbanks. It also turned out that Chris had been up much earlier than we had that day, placing microphones and recording equipment around the scrapes just south of Greatham Creek near Saltholme. Here, we were able to listen to the calls of Shelduck and waders (Curlew and Redshank). Later in the afternoon we were taken across the Reserve by one of the local wardens, walking through the extensive reed beds. The reeds were tall – rising above our heads, creating a strange soundscape^{vi} in which certain many normal world noises (traffic and the sounds of local industry) were deadened and others (wind and rustling) heightened. Once through the reed beds and out in the open again, we saw a Short-eared Owl hunting, quartering the local fields and we caught fleeting glimpses of Twite. The call of this bird is a distinctive "twit", from which it derives its name, and the song contains fast trills and twitters, and (as if often the case when bird watching), Chris heard the birds before he saw them.

Throughout the day, Chris opened up our ears, revealing a richly textured soundscape. He was a generous guide, sharing with us all his enthusiasm for sound and the importance of developing our listening skills. He shared many amusing (and

sometimes scary) anecdotes from his travels abroad as a sound recordist for the BBC. Of course, Chris clearly uses very expensive and up to date recording equipment when working for the BBC. However, on this walk, he had deliberately brought with him a selection of ‘low-tech’ equipment that, he explained, could be purchased and used by anyone keen to increase their awareness of the sonic environment we so often take for granted.

And what was the role played by ‘walking’ in this event (which was advertised as a *Sound Walk*)? Well, walking slowly through the landscape around Seal Sands enabled us to acclimatise our sense of hearing in a way that would not have been possible if we had driven to the location and straight away emerged from our cars. Walking also gave us the opportunity to compare the different types of sonic landscape we experienced within a small area and to explore the sense of sound created in space as we move through it. For instance, sounds heard from, say, four different points creates a kind of moving quadrasonic experience - collapsing memory and direct experience into a living soundscape. However, more prosaically, walking allowed us to reach a point away from the road – a point we might not normally go to - where we then stood or sat and *listened*. I came away from the day realising just how much we preface sight over our other senses (in particular, hearing/sound) – and as a result, just what and how much we are missing out.

ⁱ **Chris Watson** is a musician and sound recordist specialising in natural history. He was a founding member of the musical group Cabaret Voltaire, and his work as a wildlife sound recordist has covered television documentaries and experimental musical collaborations, including work for Sir David Attenborough and the BBC. He has released four solo albums of field recordings: *Outside the Circle of Fire*, *Stepping into the Dark* (which won an Award of Distinction at the 2000 Prix ARS Electronica Festival in Linz, Austria), *Weather Report*, and *El Tren Fantasma*. He has also released a variety of works in collaboration with other artists, including *Alec Finlay*

ⁱⁱ **Raymond Murray Schafer** is a Canadian composer, writer, music educator and environmentalist best known for his *World Soundscape Project*, concern for acoustic ecology, and his book *The Tuning of the World* (1977)

ⁱⁱⁱ Schafer, R. M. (1977) *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester, Destiny

^{iv} A few weeks after this walk (in May 2012), I heard a delightful series of four short programmes on Radio 4 called *Tidal Talk from the Rock Pool* which were billed as ‘humorous salty tales written and introduced by Lynn Truss with sound recorded by Chris Watson, presented live at the More than Words Festival in Bristol’. Recommended!

^v Follow this link for further information; <http://www.wildlife-sound.org/equipment/technote/micdesigns/index.html>

^{vi} The word "soundscape" was coined by R. Murray Schafer to identify sounds that "describe a place, a sonic identity, a sonic memory, but always a sound that is pertinent to a place"