



Laurie Taylor

He's one of the greatest names in BBC TV sound yet he combines his skills with a 'plumber's' mentality. ROB JAMES talks to him about sitcoms and music, desk layout, and making mistakes.

LAURIE TAYLOR IS STILL WORKING. The weekends are getting longer and he has more time to devote to exciting projects such as a digitally controlled flash-steam plant. But TV sound is still benefiting from the 'Taylor touch'. The Royal Television Society recognised his talent and dedication in November last year with the presentation of a Lifetime Achievement Award.

Laurie has been recording since he was 11 and, despite the attractions of the local chemical and steel works in his home town in North Wales, the BBC was a natural choice. Recruited in 1962 at a time of expansion, due to ITV and the start of BBC2, Laurie's rise was little short of meteoric. By 1970 he was a sound supervisor.

How did you make it so fast?

The main reason was the tremendous increase in pop music. Lots of established mixers didn't want to be in the same control room with the long-haired people, and that probably included me. So at that board [job interview] they decided they wanted somebody different. For two years I did Late Night Line-up, Colour Me Pop and Disco 2 and then the first The Old Grey Whistle Test. It was really eclectic. From London Opera to Rory Gallagher, Pink Floyd and umpteen bands that didn't make it. Lots of bands and the most incredible facilities, eight proper channels and a subgroup of four, no EQ and a 25dB or 45dB toggle for gain. You had to analyse a band when they came in and stick pads in the wall. Really, really primitive. In 1972 I started doing Top of The Pops which was live. I mean 'live', live with an orchestra.

I remember your laid-back attitude.

There's something about live, apart from the abject terror, because there are no retakes and you go home at the end! But it was a more forgiving time because nobody knew quite what they were doing really. Some things were just death defying leaps in the dark.

You certainly stood out in the BBC — long curly hair, shaggy coats and a handbag. What did the hierarchy make of this yeti in a sea of tweed-jacketed conformity?

The sound supervisor who trained me had been reprimanded for wearing a polo-neck jumper on a Saturday! I had two 'special interviews' to do with the length of my hair because it was felt it might offend production people. For the second I brought my wife along, who was working in West End theatre. It completely nonplussed the BBC establishment and it was just dropped, forgotten.

What led you to sitcom?

We were divided into groups by programme type. I was originally in a drama group so I did things like The Onedin Line. The fact that I did ToTP was an anomaly. Eventually I moved to Light Entertainment where it was expected that you would do both music and Situation Comedy.

I was a very young sound supervisor and made lots of mistakes. I remember, Me Mammy, the first sitcom I did, and the director Sidney Lotterby saying, 'Excellent lighting, good camerawork and Laurie, I'll speak to you about the sound afterwards.' I was not really mechanically competent. Sidney felt I hadn't featured

the audience enough so the next week I really hung onto the audience. After that one he said, 'Well, what about the music I paid £800 for?' About then I began to realise it was a bit more complicated than I thought.

More than equalisation, more than compression you succeed by doing good programmes. My career really started with The Goodies. It succeeded and once that happens more people ask for you and it builds on itself. I was let loose on standard shows like, The Good Life, the Generation Game, Hi-De-Hi, Don't Wait Up, etc. Then Paul Jackson and Geoff Posner burst on the scene with an exciting new concept, The Young Ones.

Any truth in the rumour 'Neil' was partly based on you?

I don't know if it's true, but when I read Neil's character description, 'long-haired vegetarian, appalling cooking and even worse guitar playing', I thought, that's me. A lot of credit goes to my gram op, Ian Tomlin, who played effects in live. The cricket bat, hitting people, was a lip ribbon in the control room banged on the side of the tape machine.

What's different about sitcom?

You can't let go of the beast. There is no gap, speech mixing is syllabic, going between two booms on the same set you can't hold them both up for any appreciable time or you get a phase or flanging effect and you have to be aware of every shadow the boom is casting. Music is much more preparatory, you have a large number of channels coming up to you and you have to meticulously check that all the bits are working and levels are roughly as you expect.

Sitcom is a long continuous, arduous discussion with my good lighting friends and the designer. Fundamentally the booms interfere with both the lighting and the camerawork and whatever any director might say to you, they're only really interested in vision at the time they're recording and sound by the time they come to the dub. My best ever phrase to a director was to the redoubtable Alan Boyd who was shouting at me, as most LE directors do from time to time. I said, 'Alan, if you shout loud enough I'll do what you say instead of what you want.'

Go to any meeting and people will tell you what you should have done, which usually consists of using radio mikes. People have tried it, but it really isn't the answer to sitcom. The only answer I know is fairly directional hypercardioid microphones and competent boom operators.

I've settled on one mic for the last 18 years which is the AKG C451 with a CK63 capsule. Lately that's become the 480 with the CK63. The more directional microphones like the 815 are not suitable. If a microphone looks too directional, people tend to think it's too directional. I don't know if many directors appreciate that most common directional microphones are as wide as a wide-angle lens and then a bit shady around the edges.

Were you involved in the great 'stereo' debate?

I was very early in experimenting with MS pick-up and straightforward AB and it led me down a single road. As soon as I put a stereo microphone on a boom I can hear all the things I've spent all my life excluding. I do not want the ambience of the studio, the audience coming in the back of the microphones, spurious positioning. I tried panning as well, to the point where one of my friends called me the 'Master of the whip panned syllable'.

The thing I love in stereo is ambience. A nice



reverb or appropriate room sound are magic. But for me, speech is irretrievably mono.

There is a phenomenon, which I've never found a word for, which originally happened with monks. Their job was to copy the word of the Lord. Eventually they got into doing pretty pictures on the first letter and eventually illumination got to be the key of what they were doing. I think any body of professional people tends to derive their own goals and objectives and stereo has been a bit like that.

Do you work to a formula?

My theory about over elaborate routings is almost the reverse of driving. When you learn to drive people say, 'always imagine the other person is an idiot.' I think when you're mixing you should be fairly convinced that you're the idiot. Unless it's easy to understand, you can bet your life that in the heat of the moment, you won't understand it.

I have very set standards so there are things I can believe in. I normalise the desk so that all the outgoing feeds are peaking sort of programme level. Then I pad or apply gain to the device itself. For example the PA amps we have need a 20dB pad because they achieve their designed output with a 100mV input and I'm feeding them about 2V. Then I know, if I'm peaking on the PPM, I'm providing an adequate level of PA. When I say adequate, the most I can get is 75-80dB. I also know that when the artists see the whites of the audiences' eyes they'll speak 10dB louder. So if the PA level is alright in rehearsal I know it will be well alright on the night.

I love a traditional work surface because I have to grab so quickly to adjust an EQ. I've used assignable desks right from their inception and I still make the standard error of reaching out for the assign panel without pre-selecting it. I know it sounds stupid but this material really is very quick indeed. When you've got a personal mic on somebody on a game show and they turn their head, the amount of HF is enormous and you need to get at those equalisers very, very quickly.

I'm very cautious with my use of dynamics because I've gone down almost every hole you can go down. Almost every time you use a dynamic, you make your spill situation worse. You have to bear in mind that a dynamic is only doing something while



its needle is working. If it's stuck, with a very long time-constant, you might as well put in a pad or move the fader back. I only use limiting at about 5 1/2 because limiters react faster than I do.

A lot of what I do is masking one thing with another. The art is what you can hide under the carpet. People often ask if I put DDLs in the audience feed. Bearing in mind I'm always trying to suppress material that I don't want, anything that separates the received sound from the original is detrimental if

it makes the spilled sound more apparent. A recent problem's arisen with using plasma screens above the audience. Unfortunately they are delayed by a, slightly variable, frame and a half or two and there is pressure to delay the sound to match.

What do you reach for first?

Gain control. That's absolutely definite because it's so non-intuitive. If you present a complex mix to a child, they will tell you something is too loud and what you must always do is think in those terms. Never that something is too quiet.

Two sides of my mind do two different things. This is not conscious. My right hand mixes between the booms and my left controls the overall level of that relative to the audience.

How about toys?

Curiously, when matching to studio I find the reverbs called 'plate' match more closely. Because of the multiple sound sources the studio is a much more distributed phenomenon than would be implied by its size. I sometimes use a Lexicon 224 or a Klark Teknik DN780.

By and large, I'm like Rolf Harris doing his large paintings. I'm a cartoonist. So something like the SPX90, which makes it quick and easy to get lots of very approximate things, is of more use to me than definitive reverbs.

The Akai sampler was superb at playing in. It's now been totally replaced by a PC based multiscreen playout device called Spot On, made by Dave Markie. I use it for almost all play-ins, sound effects, with remote triggers for game shows and for shows like lotteries where there are umpteen beds and they change with each ball that falls.

Is there a key to success?

Once I'm doing a job I have to do the absolute best I can do. I expect everyone else with me to do exactly the same. You need a good plumber's mentality. You come in, do the job and, if you've got anything complimentary to say about the house, say it, but you certainly never make any adverse comments about a production, whatever your feelings, ever, ever at all.

People will work with you because they like you, because you are keen on producing the production



they want to produce. It's hard to imagine the isolation that a director feels. They want what you want, someone to help them make this programme.

Who do you like having around you?

In an assistant, I'm looking for support. Paying attention to what I'm doing and, if their job happens to be easier, unobtrusively helping me out. I make mistakes and I welcome an assistant whose judgement I can rely on. If some thread of the programme is occupying you, you can miss something incredibly gross. They've also got to be able to do their own job. Sitcoms are critically dependent on boom ops. I need the people on the floor to evaluate what they can cover, not what they can achieve in a bit of 'derring do', but what they can reliably come up with each time.

How has the process changed?

With independent productions the power is more diverse and I suspect some production associates don't know what I'm there for. I was doing a Never

Mind the Buzzcocks and, during the opening titles, one of the producers came to me and said, 'Laurie, I have a sound problem'. Innocently, my brain switches away from the programme and I start worrying about maybe a radio mic's gone down or maybe there's no sound feed over the audience. 'Yes,' he said, 'How do I get my vinyls onto my MP3 player?'

There's an almost total blurring between multi-camera pick-up and traditional single camera recording. People expect to manipulate the material in a dub in the way that they could with a single camera. This implies a whole lot of complexity. For example, if a sequence is recorded in the studio with ongoing music you may find it later needs to be removed and relaid. It helps if you're aware this may happen and you cheat a little. If you establish the music at the top so people know what they're doing, during the first laugh you can lower it.

In Post a vast change has taken place. I worked with the very early moving fader desks and they are very useful in dubbing. But now I feel that, with the singular exception of ongoing background music, almost all the other detail work can be done better with some form of hard disk editor.

The dub is now usually part of an edit package in an outside facilities house. So when I do Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps I don't dub it. This has changed my attitude in the studio. Before, I wouldn't ask for so many retakes because I knew what I could fix using rehearsal takes and so on.

What about the future?

Technologically, almost everything I ever wanted has arrived. Bearing in mind that when I was a gram op I played sound effects from 78rpm records, it all seems so flexible and fluid now and the ability to manipulate the sound, to grab hold of it, is something I could not have even dreamed of.

I would like to see the next generation of digital sound desks with surfaces closely corresponding to the analogue, knob per function, ones I was used to, but with any advantages that digital might add. The way things are developing I see that should be quite possible.

But the digital dream has dulled a little. You still have to check you've actually got something at the end of a recording...Trust nothing! ■