

## Martyn Ware: Electronically Ours



Martyn Ware, a man of many talents: English musician, composer, producer, and podcaster, is a founding member of the synth-pop groups Human League and Heaven 17, famous for their minimal Korg & Roland synth sound that produced numerous pop hits including “Being Boiled” and the oft-banned “(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang.”

Ware has produced countless recordings including Tina Turner's 1983 comeback “Let's Stay Together” and now has a successful career as a podcaster with his very popular “Electronically Yours with Martyn Ware.”

I met Martyn in New York, in 2001 when when we discussed our mutual interests in 3-D sound and began collaborating on 3-D shows like the Kitchen's “New Sounds New York.” And Martyn's “Future of Sound” at BAFTA in London. And finally, Martyn's autobiography “Electronically Yours Vol 1 – My Autobiography” appears in late August as a hardback, ebook and audiobook.

**Charlie Morrow:** We're recording. I'm delighted to hear you. There's a project I'm working on that's called *Immerse*. I think I mentioned it over Mexican food. And it's a book and podcast and an online compendium. And it ties in pretty much everything I'm doing. And what it is, is that I'm interviewing my collaborators and I'm asking everybody the same thing, two questions. One is what are you doing with immersive sound and immersive experience? And the other is: Kind of how did you get there? What was your timeline? Either start when you were a kid and what you were doing and how it led up to what you're doing now or what you're doing now and going backwards to when you were a kid ... Those are the two questions.

**Martyn Ware:** Okay, what was the first one again?

**Charlie Morrow:** The first one is: What are you doing with immersive audio? What sort of projects are you doing? Because clearly it's something you've been doing for years. What's the shape of it now?

**Martyn Ware:** Well, with Illustrious Company that I formed in 2000 with Vince Clark; we've been doing nearly 20 years worth of this stuff now, using 3D Audioscape, for which we co-designed the software. Over that time, we've done nearly 70 different major projects in 3-dimensional sound all around the world for a variety of applications ranging from highly commercial, like retail, trade shows, to sell stuff basically, through to much more commissioned, public artworks in the public domain, major urban installations on bridges, some stuff in airports, a lot of stuff for museums and exhibitions. Museums and exhibitions are really the bread and butter of Illustrious's work, creating immersive 3-dimensional sound installations, but often in collaboration with other technologies.

So, we often work with moving pictures, with static picture, with interaction, using picture sonification to generate 3-dimensional soundscapes. We are adaptive to basically anything that people want to throw at us. We also do a range of stuff that ranges from just providing compositional content and a variety of immersives.

So we don't have to use 3D Audioscape. We are flexible, we have done quite a lot of stuff in 5.1, 7.1, 9.1, and we've done stuff for IMAX. But really, the important thing is to be adaptable to whatever kind of environment and situation as you would probably understand. Every job that we do tends to be bespoke and the challenges and benefits for all of them are different. So, for instance, some of the largest projects we've done have been in a kind of cuboid sound array, some of them have been in circular sound array, all the various sizes and heights that we've done ... The one that we did on the Millennium Bridge was 300 meters long by 10 meters wide. So it's an entirely different challenge. We've done stuff Tate Turbine Hall in the Tate Modern in London, which is a different kind of challenge because it's gigantic, but also is highly reverberant.

So we have to adjust the content to that. So, really we've become kind of in the same as what Morrow Sound has become, world experts in, parsing and that's P-A-R-S-I-N-G between the intentions of the client or the artist and letting them know and and handholding them to let them know what they can achieve with immersive sound and what specific things it's very good at, particularly in terms of emotional engagement and what kind of things work and what things are less effective. Because that kind of expertise is quite valuable, I think and it's going to become more valuable in the future. And I know, I'm not blowing smoke up your ass, Charlie, but you are one of my greatest mentors in this field. I always admired the work that you've done. And I've always thought that we were on the same wavelength and we're probably the only two people in this world who were on a similar wavelength because we both sit on that intersection between commerce and art. And that's quite a rare thing. There's quite a lot of people doing experimental work in 3D sound around the world and normally in a kind of academic or electroacoustic environment, which I have total respect for, and there's also quite a lot of people doing stuff in the commercial environment, which obviously is a kind of more attractive because we all need to eat. But, I like to think that the sort of steps that I do and probably this stuff you do is, it's not for the 50-50 split of artistic sensibility and talent and commercial imperatives. And that kind of balance is quite a nuanced thing to try and achieve, and also at the same time to convince clients that you can do what they envisage.

**Charlie Morrow:** Well, thank you for painting that large picture. I'm curious when you say immersive 3-D sound how would you describe it? What words do you use?

**Martyn Ware:** Right. The reason why it's 3- D sound that appealed to me in the first place – and its ambisonic sound I suppose I'm talking about – I'm quite flexible about it; but ambisonic sound is my favorite version of it, is that it is that somehow for me through my practice, has triggered a deeper sense of reality in experience. It's something that I've always sought to achieve from my earliest times as a writer of music; it's to try and paint imagery and a narrative into people's minds using sound and music. And I just find that immersive sound somehow seems to appeal to a deep level of experience, which doesn't need to be filtered through any kind of prior knowledge or taste, or it can appeal equally to all demographics, even animals. And, who knows, maybe plants? It's about a deeper understanding of the intuitive nature that we seem to have forgotten in contemporary humanity about the connection of sound, at a very deep, historical and, shall we say, DNA level? If we believe epigenetics through to our ancestors, we all know, cause I've discussed this before that the sound world was just as important to the visual world to me and Neolithic people and people even before that.

That really promotes a survival point of view and the ritual that, it's emerged that research on this stuff – and I'm sure you have as well – a lot of the rituals in the past were based on sound and the immersion of sound in places like burial chambers and, all kinds of shamanistic and sound activities and rituals. And this is something that seems to have been lost in the midst of of time for a lot of people and poorly understood. But there are still a few people around the world who would like to bring back the sense of wonder and, coming out back to our experience.

And I think sound is an extremely powerful tool to do that. So immersive sound has a lot of subtle depths for me. It's not just "hey, isn't it great" and it's all kind of technology. It's really about the content that enables us to deliver.

**Charlie Morrow:** That's very beautiful. The way you've put it. Wouldn't you say that there's a difference between ... and obviously we're all surrounded by sound and we're all surrounded by air or if we're jumping in water. The environment is both air or water, and sound and light, but something that we're talking about in immersive sound; there's one more click that somehow we've discovered and I'm wondering about that click. What makes that click for you?

**Martyn Ware:** Okay. it's a combination of ... it depends on how deep you want to go on this really. I mean, we're starting to understand it, and it's been scientifically proven that we crave reality on a per microsecond basis, based on our prior experiences and this enables us to reduce the amount of information that is needed to make sense of our world.

Basically, it's reduced our instruction set. This also has its flaws. If you count them as a search in as much as we all know about controlling illusions, and sometimes you see these visual illusions, and even though, you know, they're illusions, it's impossible to cognitively deny them. **The same** is true for sound. So, sound is a very interesting tool. And as much as it often acts as the bridesmaid, not the bride ... very few people come out of a big movie experience and go, wow, the visuals are terrible, but the sound was amazing.

I'd say to many people and even me basically and a few others, most people take the visual world as the prime mover in their experience. And, so for me, the click goes back to the original question: is that very deep inside us is the inner knowledge and the inner authenticity of experience that sound can provide is just, we don't, generally as the general public, we don't really appreciate sound in the way we should. And the effects that it's actually having physically, cognitively, so we need to, it's kind of boiled down to over the last 20 years, whenever I talk about that, it sounds like I'm lecturing people; I don't intend to, it's just what I've learned over that period is a much profound understanding of how immersive sounds 3-dimensional sound has the ability to touch us in much deeper ways than, than a traditional proscenium or much of the presentation of sound.

**Charlie Morrow:** Well, thank you very much for that view. I wondered if you've had an experience in your childhood that made you aware of sound as a living force?

**Martyn Ware:** AH, good question who had a big record collection. VERY good question! Yeah, apart from obviously growing up with too-much older sisters. We didn't have any books, but we had records. Quite funny isn't it. And so I suppose that had a big influence on me plus I grew up in Sheffield, which is an industrial town. A bit like Pittsburgh in the US, I suppose. And it's very kind of a quite big industrial centers around Europe. I grew up surrounded by – I never really understood it at the time – cause I thought everywhere sounded like Sheffield. I grew up in the center of Sheffield and walking around you could hear engineering-toolmaking shops, for instance, where a lot of grinding sounds were going on, that was the predominant sound that you'd hear as you walked around central Sheffield back in the day, in the back streets, anyway. But not only that, on a summer's evening, when it was hot – it's very hot; its like 36 degrees in London at the moment – so, on those kinds of days, we would have no air conditioning, have the windows open and at night you would hear the heartbeat of the drop forges coming from the huge steelworks. Sheffield is built on seven valleys. So for people to understand the way that sound proliferates, particularly infrasound and very low frequencies that kind of resonates proliferates down the valleys. We were at the end of one of the valleys, DIRECTLY at the other end from a giant drop forge so that you would get the sound of POOF POOF POOF going through the nights, these were night shifts and it's something I really grew to love. It was almost like a heartbeat of the city. And now, of course, we kind of romanticize about it, but that was perfectly normal at the time. And so that definitely had an influence on me. The other thing that I think had a major influence on me was television, obviously, and the proliferation of science fiction programs on TV, especially American science fiction in the 60s. It was kind of soundtracks we were hearing when I was very young, even things like *Forbidden Planet*, which I still love to this day. This is what led us into the future. I guess I was living in a four-room house with an outside toilet, no bathroom. This was seriously poor.

And the idea that there was an opportunity of men landing on the moon. Yeah. That had a great deal of appeal. Until I sought out the sound of futuristic kinds of synthesizers that were coming to prominence at the time in pop records was something that was very appealing. It kind of all wrapped into this kind of

nominal idea of the future, which was being wrapped up in the year 2000 or somethin; it sounded incredibly, futuristic to me. So, it always a little bit of that, always had a musical ear, can pick up an instrument and kind of play a tune on it when I heard it again. That's something I took for granted when I was young, but now realize it was quite unusual, and fortunately my children who have inherited the same talent.

**Charlie Morrow:** Well, that was quite beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. I appreciate the whole recording and definitely you've given me a real treasure here to work with for the series.

**Martyn Ware:** I mean I can remember the sound clearly – very subtle and beautiful and probably went below the range of human hearing.

**Charlie Morrow:** Did you feel it in your body, I mean as well as through your ears? Did sound enter you through through all the pores on your eyeballs?

**Martyn Ware:** I think so. Yeah, I don't recollect that feeling, but I suspected definitely. So it was virtually infrasound. I mean, it's like now I can identify the frequencies; it would have been 60 Hertz and below, but it was really a kind of movement of air. I mean also as you know, on still hot summer nights, I think sound travels more easily. Yeah, I've always been a fan of the sound of sounds being blown around by the wind as well. I've done several compositions based around the kind of change of sound. And also, oh yeah, it's our experience as well, as you mentioned is listening to shortwave stations when I was young, was a big influence. I love that sound, I love that sound fading in and out. I loved the sound of medium wave at the time. I used to listen to Radio Luxembourg, which was the best pop station, the only pop station in the mid-60s, before Radio One and BBC Radio. And that was being transmitted from a pirate radio station in the North Sea – no, Luxembourg. There was another one that came from the North Sea. Anyway, Luxembourg, anyway, especially the nature of how it was transmitted that used to fade in and out as well. And I've got very fond memories of listening to the traditional signal, trying not to let your parents know that you're listening to the radio under a blanket listening to the big old transistor radio, under the blanket, listening to my favorite Motown songs, fading in and out, in the most beautiful – and also "Good Vibrations." And, you know, the Four Tops had a certain influence on me. If it had been clean I'm sure it wouldn't've had the same influence.

**Charlie Morrow:** That's fantastic. Thank you, I appreciate you sharing all that. It's very very vivid and I think it's just marvelous. Thank you for that.

**Martyn Ware:** Yeah, it'd be great to do some work with you soon. Yeah, if we could find a way to incorporate the Morrow Sound element into how we present what we do, that would be interesting. I've got to think a little more about it. But the way I'm conceptualizing this at the moment is that we're kind of content producers and you guys would be playing the hardware and the playback mechanism for the content.

**Charlie Morrow:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we're content people as well, but in this case, if we had a gig together where you were the content people and we were the tech part, that's where you're trying to look at that kind of business, because that would really give us a bridge between your skills and our skills.

**Martyn Ware:** I'll text you, OK?

**Charlie Morrow:** OK. Talk to you later.