

Working with Sound: Natalie Kestecher

***Natalie Kestecher** blends documentary, performance and fiction to create unusual stories for the ABC, BBC and other public broadcasters around the world. She has won numerous international awards for her work, including the Prix Marulić in Croatia, the Third Coast International Audio Festival in Chicago and several New York Festival medals. Most recently at the ABC, she presented [PocketDocs](#).*

She took a moment to chat to us about collaboration, recording while travelling, and what it's like to truly inhabit the muse.

What piece of audio has had the most profound effect on you – as a listener, as an audio maker or both?

'[From Scratch](#)', by [Sherre DeLys](#), is the first thing that comes to mind. It's such a strange, melancholic, raw and unadorned feature, and yet it's so rich. It's all about the power of sound and archival records and I think it's about loss, too. And the passing of time. I remember feeling incredibly sad when I first heard it, and I couldn't explain why that was. It was the very first piece I thought of when I considered the question about a piece of audio that had a profound effect on me; I still find it very beautiful.

And I'll never forget being in one of [Gary Bryson's](#) 'writing for radio' classes in the early 1990s, when he put on this incredibly beautiful piece of music and just got us to sit and listen. The piece was '[Dido's Lament](#)' from Henry Purcell's opera, *Dido and Aeneas*. Just recently, I wrote to Gary and told him how I've never forgotten that class – and that it still struck me as both beautiful and strange that he had done that. I mean, you don't go to a writing class expecting to just sit and listen to music, but it was so moving.

He was a little surprised by my memory, pointing out that it wasn't just music he'd played, but a complete feature by Paul Carter called '[Remember Me](#)'. I don't remember a single thing about the feature other than the music and the feelings it evoked in me. Years later, I used it in a feature of my own about the history of the fear of being [buried alive](#).

Where did the idea for 'Becoming Barbara' come from?

I recently wrote and produced [a radio story](#) about Barbara Cartland, a dead romance writer, inhabiting my personage.

The idea came from a writing workshop I did with the wonderful Walter Mason, who, through a little meditation session, encouraged participants to bring to mind the writer whose life they would most like to emulate.

Now, there are plenty of writers that I love, but there was only one writer whose *life* I thought sounded wonderful. She wrote hundreds of books, always had dogs hanging around and lived till she was nearly 100. And she was very opinionated and quite absurd.

Anyway, being a dog lover and wishing I could finish my first book – let alone write hundreds of them – I thought her life sounded pretty great. So, I left that workshop with this idea that maybe I could let Barbara Cartland inspire me and get me writing

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Natalie Kestecher

more, and it all got a bit out of control and led to the story, 'Becoming Barbara'. It's about the muse getting the better of you, and then it all backfiring.

most visual of mediums with a minimum of equipment?

What was your favourite part of making that story?

I'd have to say that interviewing my mother about bunions and getting her to improvise and share her scant knowledge of bunionectomies was great fun, but working with Russell Stapleton during the mix was the highlight.

If you don't know the story (spoiler alert): a Pekingese dog attack is the true turning point to the drama. I know it sounds silly now, but Russell's recreation of the attack almost had me on the floor laughing. So silly and so great. Oh, and I should say that my mother contributed dog panting sounds. She's a very good actress and often my leading lady.

Natalie Kestecher is an award-winning writer and radio producer. She was the host of ABC RN's PocketDocs, and her satirical...
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PocketDocs
Meeting the Muse

What was the hardest part of producing it?

You know that feeling when you've had an idea and you've pitched it and they say yes – and then you have to turn that idea into a story and you haven't got a clue what to do next? Well, for me that's always the hardest part of the story, and 'Becoming Barbara' was no exception. It was only after reading that Barbara Cartland was totally anti-general anaesthetic that I had a bit of a breakthrough in terms of figuring out the plot.

What's the best thing about working with sound?

Am I allowed to say the best thing about working with sound is working with sound engineers? And how lucky are we to be able to work in the most visual of mediums with a minimum of equipment?

What's the best (or worst) advice you've received about radio?

My late friend and mentor, [Tony Barrell](#), encouraged me to always take a recorder when I travelled. For years I followed that advice and never really felt that I was on holiday, but it is a way of gathering wonderful sound and lots of ideas that may never have occurred to you. Tony's advice also helped me realise how wonderful it is

to travel *without* a recorder and not think of every journey as a potential story. But my advice to you is to take Tony's advice and travel with a recorder. Am I contradicting myself?



The 'queen of romance' herself, Barbara Cartland

What has been your biggest lesson as a producer so far?

There is one lesson, a recurring lesson, and I remind myself of it every time I finish a production. I can get very excited and carried away with an idea before really looking into what it might take to realise that idea, and that can create a lot of stress. Know the feeling?

I've also learnt that I love and need to work with others. Even though I've been lucky enough to work on teams with great executive producers and sound engineers, feature making can still be a pretty solitary practice. Try and find people to brainstorm your ideas with, and collaborate with others when possible.



Natalie Kestecher and Steven Tilley
im 'Computer Haiku', from Me, Ricky and Him

If you could go out to dinner with any audio maker, who would it be – and what would you talk about?

The late Alistair Cooke, whose weekly radio series [Letter from America](#) ran from 1946 to 2004, would make a pretty fascinating dinner companion. Imagine the insights he'd have to offer on the current state of politics in the US!

Dinner with [Joe Frank](#) would be pretty great too, with that incredible imagination and voice of his. I'd be happy to do all the listening.

What are you listening to at the moment?

I've been listening to the tenth series of [Shortcuts](#) on BBC4. I particularly like the final episode, '[The End of the Story](#)'. It features a beautiful piece by [Rikke Houd](#) called 'The Kayakman', which gave me goose bumps on my goose bumps.

I've also just binge-listened to [Missing Richard Simmons](#), I'm ashamed to say. I know a number of my friends and former colleagues considered it irksome and unethical, but I couldn't stop listening.

And I was pretty chuffed to discover Pip Leason's podcast, [It Wasn't My Idea](#). He interned on *PocketDocs* last year and I think he's rather special. I particularly liked episode two, which is about his attempts at modelling nude for an art class.

What's your favourite Australian podcast, and why?

I'd have to say [Earsbot](#) on RN. I appreciate the sheer breadth of styles and topics embraced by its producers, and admire their capacity to continue creating top-notch docs in the face of ongoing funding cuts. Most recently, I've enjoyed '[Oz Gothic](#)' by Gary Bryson and Andrei Shabunov, and '[In the Footsteps of Foley](#)' by Mike Ladd and Tom Henry. '[The Lost Cinema of Tan Hiep](#)' by Sheila Pham and Judy Rapley was also lovely listening.

I think [Mike Williams](#) and [Timothy Nicastrì](#) have produced some very entertaining stories for [The Real Thing](#) – I loved hearing the interview with [Mary Leunig](#) and there's a lot to like about their [African Lion Safari](#) piece – and [This Is About](#) is a good podcast to catch as well. My favourite episode is still '[The Moon and Other Things](#)'.

What's next for you as a producer?

Hopefully, there will be more opportunities to work with other writers and producers. I love collaborating, and some of the best and most fruitful times I had at the ABC were when I did. I'm enjoying my role as a mentor in Audiocraft's Ladies Who Listen programme, and also have a few ideas up my sleeve that I can't yet share.

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