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MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



The way of the recordist

There comes a time when a sound recordist switches from producing new work to preserving what's already been recorded and documented. I've spent the last 30 years of my career going from one project to another — moving from radio to theatre to writing — and always turning to the next big thing without much reflection on my career path. That's the life of an independent artist and freelance writer. Now, however, I'm focusing my creativity on going through my archive and revisiting what I've already done.

The recent shift to my past work prompted me to enlist the help of Indiegogo, a crowdfunding website. The project? Turning my 25-year-old radio documentary, *Mei Mei, A Daughter's Song*, into a 30-minute film. *Mei Mei* tells the story of my mom's hard life in Taiwan during World War II and how it affected our relationship and led to many cultural differences. The purpose of the crowdfunding effort was to preserve the *Mei Mei* radio piece by transforming it into another medium. Not only would turning it into a film save the original audio documentary, but hopefully it would help introduce it to a new generation.

Another goal of the preservation project is the digitization of the original cassette tapes I recorded in Taiwan — the sounds that went into making the radio documentary.

Fortunately, the funding project was successful and I'm now in the process of setting production meetings, filming actors, and working with animators who will create mythological images for the film. I'm also transferring 25-year-old cassette tapes onto my computer. Digitizing old media means listening to each tape in real time; there is no instant download here.

Hearing some of the tapes has taken me back in time, back to a very young me in Taiwan — a newbie radio producer — trying to record every possible sound. I spent an entire month with my mom, mostly in Taipei, working on the audio.

The reason *Mei Mei* is so precious to me is not because it won awards and was broadcast around the world, but because it represents a time when I had great turmoil in my life — not only with my mom, but with my partner of eight years.

My mom never understood why I wanted to record sounds or create a documentary about her past and our relationship. In fact, she did not want to be interviewed. I've always regretted capturing so few recordings with the sound of her voice. Well, at least that's what I thought.

Her "formal" interview was about 20 minutes.

While replaying the Taiwan tapes, however, I've discovered little snippets — I now refer to them as lost treasures — of her voice on the recordings. In one section, she taught me Chinese and Taiwanese phrases at the same time, only to lose her patience and yell at me. On several recordings, her voice is in the background before she interrupts my taping with "are you done yet?" On another recording, she's speaking in Taiwanese at a temple with a woman we'd just met. Later the woman sang "amituofo," a Buddhist salutation, right into the microphones.

One of the other treasures is an entire hour of recordings of about 20 children with the Rong Shing Children's Chorus, a group I happened upon in Taipei, during their final rehearsal before a big concert. At the time, I didn't know they were a world-renowned choir. Some of the songs on the cassette sound warped, but most of them are sonic gems with clear high voices singing pristine and sweet harmonies. After all these years, one song — the one I mixed at the start of the *Mei Mei* radio documentary — is still very moving when I listen to it alone. So beautiful and optimistic in its hope and innocence, it brings tears to my eyes.

While carefully going through each tape, fearful that the cassettes might be too fragile and break, I vividly remembered the backbreaking labor of lugging around two microphones to create stereo sound while also carrying a metal cassette recorder with a shoulder strap. I see my physically fit and young self listening patiently while holding the strange-looking equipment in a raucous marketplace as crowds of people stare, speak into the microphones, and glide past me. With a bit of sadness, it really hit home that these moments — these people and their voices — are long gone. I captured a time and place in Taiwan that no longer exists — at least not the way I experienced it 25 years ago.

I now regret that I didn't take better care of the tapes. I've already found that a recording of my mom and I discovering a temple high up in the mountains is missing. The tape isn't with the rest of the collection. After all these years and several relocations, I think it is most likely lost. The others I've been able to save, at least for now. I'll eventually post them online at <www.MeiMeiProject.com>, a website that is currently under construction, along with scenes from the film and the original audio documentary. My hope is that anyone can listen to the sounds I'm preserving and perhaps use some of them for a new production one day. That is the way of the recordist — at least this one.