



Unheard Voices: interviews with deafened people

Tim Barlow
Interviewed by Pam Blackman

British Library ref. C1345/05

IMPORTANT

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Interview Summary Sheet

Ref no: C1345/05

Collection title: Unheard Voices: interviews with deafened people

Interviewee's surname: Barlow

Title:

**Interviewee's
forename:** Tim

Sex: Male

Occupation: Actor

**Date and place of
birth:** 1936, Blackpool

Date(s) of recording: 25th October 2008

Location of interview: Hearing Link head office, Eastbourne

Name of interviewer: Pam Blackman

**Speech to Text
reporter:** Deirdra Jordan

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Total Duration: 1 hr. 17 min.

Additional material:

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**Interviewer's
comments:**

[Track 1]

This is Pam Blackman. I'm interviewing Tim Barlow on Sunday, 26th October 2008 for the Unheard Voices Project in Eastbourne, East Sussex. Can I ask you, Tim, to start off with to give your full name, your date of birth and just your occupation, and maybe your father's or mother's occupation, just as a header? As a background?

A header. So, I'm Tim Barlow, and date of birth, did you want?

Yes.

Goodness me. That's too much information! No, it's not at all. Birth is 18th January 1936, and my father was a solicitor. He died when I was five, so I don't remember a lot about him. He was a solicitor and my mother brought me up as a single parent, so she really wasn't able to go out to work until I got much older and then she was a secretary in a funeral parlour and then I went to school until 18 and then went in the Army for 15 years, which is when I got deafened. Then I became an actor in 1969, so for nearly 40 year I've been an actor.

Okay. When you joined the Army, was that conscription or was that your career move?

That was my career. I went straight from school to Sandhurst.

Where were you brought up? Just a little bit of background, I think. You have given me some about your earlier life, but which part of the country you were brought up in?

I was born and bred and brought up entirely in Blackpool, so I can really -- looking back, probably the reason why I suddenly decided I wanted to be an actor I was brought up with show business all the time, but I went in the Army because it wasn't long after the War. There was one conscription, but I wanted to be a regular. So born and bred in Blackpool.

I don't know whether you'd like to talk immediately about your hearing loss, which occurred in the Army and, you know, the events around that and your memories around that, which you know, obviously, you had had a career in the Army for 15 years. By all means talking

about that as well, but leading up to the hearing loss that occurred, which I believe was a shooting?

Yes, that's right. So of course when I joined the Army, aged 18, I could hear perfectly. Otherwise, I wouldn't have got in in the first place. So I spent 18 months at Sandhurst in the officers' training place and because I was an inventory officer I went on a small arms course with rifles and grenades, and they just brought out a new rifle with a high pitched crack, a high muzzle velocity, and the bullet comes out very fast. They've all got them now, but this was the first one and they were experimenting with it and I went on the range and my ears were ringing afterwards and next day, when the ringing died away, I couldn't hear what people were saying. By that time I was aged 20 and then it deteriorated.

So now, 50 years later, without a hearing aid or cochlear implant I'm totally deaf and wouldn't hear a bomb go off.

[04:05]

Okay. How did the Army respond at the time? Were you the only person affected by this, which was experimentation, really?

Right, yes. Not many people were affected, but one other officer in my regiment was affected and went deaf, too. It was only slightly at first and just couldn't quite make out what people were saying unless it was very quiet and they were speaking slowly. So there were two of us. That was the question, wasn't it? Anybody else?

How did the Army respond? What sort of support did they give you? Did you actually report it to them?

Oh, yes. I just mentioned it and they tested me and found I couldn't quite hear properly, but I was able to do the job, and in fact immediately after it we went out to Malaya during the emergency in 1958, so we were on antiterrorist work and we worked one or two incidents because in the terrorist -- it was working in the jungle, so you had to be very quiet and listen carefully, which was one thing I couldn't do. So there were some very hairy moments, but somehow I managed to get away with it and everything worked. So as long as it worked, the Army were happy. I did go through the Army medical system and to a hospital, but

there was nothing they could do about the deafness. So, as long as I was able to do the job, I was left to it.

I wonder if that would be the same now, because you said it was a struggle to hear and to do your job, in fact, but they let you get on with it, didn't they?

Yes. Now, of course -- do you mean with my hearing as it is now?

No, if a similar thing happened now?

To other people?

Yes. It seems very lackadaisical, to let you carry on doing the job.

They'd obviously do something about it if they found I wasn't able to do the job, but I was and everything worked, you know.

What is the diagnosis, actually? Was it just that you had lost some of your hearing?

Yes. Acoustic trauma.

Acoustic trauma.

When they tested my hearing, it wasn't sharp enough, but then in those days they tested it by a whisper at so many feet and not mechanically and I couldn't hear it.

You remained in the Army?

Yeah.

[06:55]

Were you already interested in acting at that time?

Erm, yes, but only as an amateur you know. Used to do pantomimes in the Army and they were huge fun because the military band would play, and what pantomimes professionally can have a 50 piece brass band? So they were enormous fun and, as time went on, well, actually what happened was in 1969, I'd been in the Army quite a while, 15 years. I'd come back to England from Borneo -- wrong. 1967, I came back to England and I'd been in Borneo three years and the 60s happened.

You arrived –

I arrived in mini skirts and long hair and flower power. I couldn't believe it and the whole atmosphere I couldn't believe and I went to the theatre and started to soak up the atmosphere and thought: this is what I'd like to be doing.

At the time, you were only on leave?

Yes, that's right.

Did this unsettle you and make you think: there's another life out there?

I thought: come on, I'd much rather be doing this. I was 31 then, but the big decision if I stayed in the Army another four years I'd have got a pension for life, so if I got out at the time then I'd lose it and my hearing was worse and I had a family with two children and I had to make a big decision and take a gamble or not.

What did you decide to do?

It's funny because I went to interviews at the Bristol Old Vic theatre school, a very good school, and they offered me a place. So the decision had to be made and I know exactly the date, 26th July 1969, and this is the night the decision had to be made, a Sunday, because on the Monday morning the Old Vic wanted the decision. Would I leave the Army and come or not? I began to think that night it'd be more sensible to stay in the Army and take a pension, but it was the night men first landed on the moon and I couldn't go to bed and sleep because I was so worried about the decision and I was watching the moon landing broadcast throughout the world all night and I suddenly heard -- I was very tired -- this American

voice say, "There is nothing man cannot achieve", and I thought: why, this is a message!
So that's when -- the actual time when I made a decision to leave.

Right. Have you ever regretted that?

Not for one minute. I was slightly worried the first time at the Bristol Old Vic because I was an ex-Army officer in his 30s and all the other students were kids of 17, 18, 19, with, you know, sort of long hair and jeans and things like this, and they thought I was some weirdo right wing spy. So, to start with, it was a bit difficult, but once that had happened and once I started acting, after I left drama school it was what I should be doing and never regretted it for a moment.

Okay. Meanwhile, had your hearing loss actually got worse? Was this an issue? Was it an issue with the Bristol Vic, for example, or was it something you thought about before going into acting?

Well, yes, it was, but at that time I didn't have a hearing aid at that time. Or, rather, all that was available on the National Health was a body-worn hearing aid with a wire. So there was no way I could do this as an actor on stage, so I didn't bother having one, and it was very difficult because I couldn't hear the voice teacher very well. So I went for private lessons with a wonderful lady at the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford and she helped me a lot and I had to learn how to use the voice by feeling it physically, by feeling hums on the lips when the voice is forward and by the consonants, being -- I had to learn to feel them physically, so a lot of voice lessons and this is how I learnt. The cues were a bit difficult. I had to lip read cues. So at drama school it was a bit tricky to begin with.

[12:12]

Lip reading is quite a long course. It's quite difficult to learn?

Yes, but I knew what people were saying because I read the script, so I knew what they were saying.

So you taught yourself to lip read?

That's right.

Okay. In 1980, which might be a bit of a leap and we can always go back, I noticed that you that's when you first learned about LINK.

That's right.

[12:50]

I just wondered if you had any memories of that time? I don't know how active you were with LINK and what kind of difference it made to your life, if any? I don't know if you could tell me a little about that?

Yes. Goodness me. In 1980, my hearing went off totally and I could no longer hear on the telephone. I couldn't hear what people were saying and I thought I was very -- I became very depressed and thought this is it. I'm not going to work. I can't hear anything now. I was really, really very low spirited and full of despair, and I got a copy of a magazine from the RNID, the magazine they had -- the magazine before the One in Seven, and there was a little tiny advert for LINK. So I rang them up and my wife at the time I spoke into the phone and she told me what they were saying and the person who answered the phone was Rosemary McCall, who started LINK, and she could see the situation straightaway. They didn't have a course running and she said, "Can you come down here this weekend immediately?" I said, "Yes, sure". So I came down on the Friday night and Rosemary was here by herself, here at LINK. The whole thing was a one-woman band then.

Right.

I remember it was raining and she said, "Welcome to the sun trap of the south", which is what we call Eastbourne. I had to ask her to repeat the thing about four times before I got it and started laughing, but she was just wonderful with me and she conducted -- she assessed my -- do you want me to talk a bit about the time I was here?

Absolutely.

She worked with me over the weekend and assessed my lip reading skills and she said, "You're very good at telling stories. Why don't you do a one person show of your own?" you know, which I went on to do. But she was really extraordinary. By the end of the weekend, all depression and despair had gone and I was ready to get cracking. She quite literally turned my life round in that weekend, you know. Also, what she did on the Sunday, she cooked a roast chicken lunch and invited people in and she encouraged me to start telling anecdotes and stories, which of course I don't need a lot of encouragement you know, and of course suddenly I was having a wonderful time telling all these stories. When I left LINK that weekend, everything changed totally.

And did you-

I was very lucky. I shall never forget.

Did you remain upbeat, after that?

I did. In fact, I was lucky because I went to hospital and they found one of my ears, the right ear, could take a very powerful hearing aid, and then started to hear a bit. I had had one before in the left ear and it was the left ear that went off totally, but the hospital found if I had one in the right ear it was slightly better and I could hear slightly more, so I could hear enough to get back to work and I started doing the one man show, that Rosemary McCall recommended.

Did you remain involved with LINK from that time, as well as working? Were you a volunteer with them?

They didn't have the Outreach volunteer system in those days.

Right.

I did. We kept in touch personally and she came to see me in the theatre.

Right.

And she used to send me occasional letters, always full of funny jokes and stories about people, so we kept in touch. I didn't do anything specifically in volunteer work because they didn't have a volunteer setup in those days, but I kept in touch with her.

[17:10]

Right. I mean, in the meantime, how did you find the NHS support for your condition? You mentioned the hospital.

Yes.

Was that –

Well, there wasn't a lot they could do about the deafness itself. Nerve deafness. Bilateral, is it? I forget the exact name of it, but the nerve deafness and the hair cells in the cochlea have gone, so they couldn't do anything medically, but upgrade my hearing aids, which was very helpful. That is all they could do really.

As long as you were able to work, that was the main --

I carried on working. At Christmas -- I've got a cochlear implant now, but at Christmas I hadn't, and I played the BFG in Roald Dahl for a children's programme. So I've been working all the time.

Has it affected how you prepare for a role?

Has it affected?

Your hearing loss? I wondered how has it impacted on the kind of parts you can take? You know, Have you had to compromise?

I think so, really. Purely because casting directors or theatre or film directors, obviously, are slightly doubtful: this bloke is coming in and he can't hear and we've got five people up for the part and four waiting for it and the chap can't hear ... So obviously it's a bit dodgy, but looking back I don't know how it happened, but I kept working all the time. A certain

amount of people and directors were happy with me, you know, and didn't mind repeating things and I've never, ever in 40 years missed a cue and there's always something you can do. I was once in a television film and we were -- it's about mediums, and we were all sitting around a table and the medium was sitting in another part of the studio giving the cues and there was no way I could hear and I couldn't lip read and she wasn't visible, so the actor sitting next to me squeezed my thigh every time it was my turn to speak. (laughter) So there's always something you can do, as far as cues are concerned. There are problems, and there's no problem you can't find a way around. I used to lip read monitor screens sometimes on the television and the theatre normally has a month's rehearsal time, so I've got plenty of time to work out what they're saying and notice what people are doing physically. So sometimes I can come in on the cue when they do something physically. It has worked out.

Are you aware of other actors who also work through with hearing loss?

Yes, yes.

I wondered how unusual it was?

Yeah, I'm very lucky. Actors are very generous and everyone has been really helpful. If they've found there's a cue that they say that I don't hear, they say, "okay, I'll tell you what. When I finish speaking I'll do that and do something physical". Everyone I've worked with, all the actors are very generous this way, I'm very lucky.

[20:52]

It doesn't sound as if you have experienced discrimination in your workplace?

No. Obviously there are directors. Right. So auditions. I failed a lot of auditions, so it may well be that I didn't get the part because I'm deaf, but you never know why you haven't got the part. Once I've got the part, there's never been any discrimination. The opposite. What do I need? How can I help?

I mean, outside of work, you know, have you -- I mean, I noticed on the questionnaire, when you were asked for situations and experiences that had resulted -- you know, that came out of your hearing loss, you said "too numerous to list".

[21:51]

I wondered if you wanted to tell me about any particular experiences, not in the workplace, but, you know, in day to day life with your relationships, your friendships? How do you think your life has been affected by your hearing loss in terms of, for example, relationships, friendships, with people?

Right. I've been very lucky with wives -- three, I'm afraid -- and they've been very helpful. They've been very good, very good, and I've had no problem there whatsoever, and my friends have been very good, too. It's just, erm, people you walk into shops and they mumble and you say -- I always say, "I'm very sorry, I'm deaf" -- not sorry because I'm a deaf, but I'm sure you're going to have to make some effort, but unless they actually know deaf people and work with them before they can't understand, so they mumble back. Mostly what I've done is get people to write things down. It's much quicker and saves time. At the ticket office for the Underground or railway, I say, "How much is this?" and they don't put it up immediately on the .. they start mumbling and I say 'can you write it down, or put it up'?

I guess an induction loop doesn't help you, does it?

What?

An induction loop, does that help?

It didn't used to, no.

It's too severe. Right.

No. So that was it, mainly, but you get funny things happening, like I once went to buy some flowers on Victoria station and I got the flowers and asked the bloke how much it was

and he was very busy and he was selling a lot of flowers, so he snapped something and I said, "Could you say that again?" and he got very cross because I was taking too long and I said, "Look, I can't tell what you're saying, I'm deaf", so he was embarrassed and insisted I took the flowers without payment! There's all sorts of things that happen when you don't hear what people are saying, but what I found is when I first of all went deaf I didn't want people to know and I pretended I could hear and that was hopeless, but once I realised I just had to explain and got used to saying it and was really upfront about it, then there wasn't too much problem. I found if I spoke to people in the way I wanted them to speak to me, clearly, face to face, then they twigged and they got it. But it took a while for me to do that and be upfront about being deaf.

[24:51]

For your children, they always knew you as deaf?

Yes, they did. I was always deaf.

So it was part of who you are, I guess?

That's right.

Were there any issues around that, or just practical ones?

They were very naughty and used to come up behind me and whistle so I thought it was my hearing aid. My daughter spoke very clearly but quite quickly, but my son is very quietly spoken and communication as he grew up was a bit superficial, really. We couldn't sit down and have long conversations. It's quite difficult for children to cope with adults who can't hear. They understand Dad can't hear but find it difficult not to turn their heads and move about, so it was a little difficult.

Has that got better, as they...?

Oh, yes. Now I have a cochlear implant, the other day we sat down and chatted and his two year old son said his first words and I heard them and the difference is fantastic, but when

they were growing up and I just had a hearing aid and my daughter was very clear, but my son did speak very quietly and it did take a bit of getting used to.

[26:12]

Perhaps this would be a good time to speak about your cochlear implant, which is very recent, the operation.

Yes, two months ago.

If you could talk a little more about how you got to the point of having the operation and how it has been since then?

Yes. That is interesting because always in the past I've been against it, but they said, "Why don't you have a cochlear implant?" and I said, "No way", and I was really sceptical about the whole thing, not that I didn't believe it would improve the hearing, but I was worried about the operation. I've had operations and I don't seem to have much success because they have accidents and I pick up infections and the moment I go into hospital things go wrong. Also, I'd heard there was a possibility, although very, very slightly, and increasingly slight as time has gone on, that you might damage the facial nerve. If that happened to me, as an actor, I'd be finished. So I was very much against it, but I was doing a one man show recently about being deaf and there was a question period afterwards and a lady in the audience who had a cochlear implant herself said, "Would you like to be able to hear?" I said, "I'd love to hear my grandchildren and I'd love to hear cues", and she said, "You should think of having a cochlear implant", and this sort of rocked my foundation and my doubts a little bit, and then I got onto an email group for deaf people, run by the National Association of Deafened People, and there were a lot of people on that who had had an implant, and one gentleman had an implant two years ago and he was reporting back and it was obviously very successful and he left the hospital the next day. So I thought: right, I'll have a go at the assessment process. So I started the assessment process. I was still nervous about it, really, but I set off on the process to find out about it.

How long did you have to wait from the initial assessment? I believe there's a waiting list, isn't there, for the operation?

That's right. Yes, there is.

Doesn't it depend on where you live in the country?

I believe so, yes. I think the waiting lists have been cut quite a lot now. I had mine at St Thomas' hospital in London and I hear they've cut them. Obviously, I'm a low priority compared to children, and I understand that, but I was quite happy because I didn't want to be rushed into it. So the waiting period for about 18 months and during that time there were x-rays and CI scans and all the rest of it, and I was quite happy to wait the 18 months between the first assessment and actually having it.

Did you still have doubts, even just before the operation? Were you still not sure if it was the right thing?

I really did, right up to it. What happened, I'd been in a film with an actress about Beethoven going deaf and I play a character with superhearing who teaches everyone to listen to the symphony. So this was a positive discrimination in the casting and we showed another film in London and a lot of deaf people came to the film and an actress friend of mine is very well known and successful and I said to her, "Look, this gentleman here has a cochlear implant I'm thinking of having. What do you think?"

I thought she might say, "Goodness me. It's so obvious it can be dodgy thing", but she didn't and she said, "That's wonderful. That's marvellous". So that was it. That was the moment I decided: right, I'm going to have a go at this.

Okay. And --

Just before I was due to have it and finally decided to go ahead, you know.

[30:44]

How has it been for you?

Well, it's been just wonderful because they switched on. I had the operation and, erm, there was no trouble with it at all. I left the next morning and carried my bags out of the hospital. I had a slight headache for two nights for two days, but only slight, and paracetamol sorted that out and it went altogether and that was fine, and three weeks later they put the processor on and they said -- I didn't hear anything, and they pressed a button and indicated my wife was there for her to speak and she said, "Can you hear me, what I'm saying now?" I was so shocked. It was the first time I'd heard her voice and we'd been together for 20 years and I could hear her accent. Before it was just a muffled sound, so I said, "You've got a really nice voice", and everyone said, "It's just as well. You have been married to her 20 years!"

So --

So it's been a great success and getting better all the time.

It's still early days, isn't it?

[31:57]

Yes. Funnily enough, just before I had it, they auditioned me at the Royal Exchange theatre in Manchester to be in a play and it's theatre in the round and I've been for auditions there a lot because I come from that part of the world and they've always said, "Sorry", at the last minute, "We can't have you, you're deaf and there'll be cues coming behind".

They have said what was the reason?

That's right. They were very upfront about it, which was fine, but this time I said to the lady, "Love, You'll have to trust me. Next week I'm having an operation, and although I can't hear you now ..." and I couldn't hear what she was saying in the audition, I said, "I'll be able to hear you when we start rehearsals", and she must have trusted me, bless her, and, sure enough, when I turned up I could hear, but I couldn't in the audition, and it really has made an immense difference. Also, at that time, before I had the cochlear implant, I couldn't actually hear sound coming out of people's mouths, so unless I was looking and lip reading, it was getting increasingly difficult having physical things to happen because I

couldn't hear, but now I can hear. So when I did the play in Manchester, I was actually playing a deaf character, which is very hard to do if you can't hear because you have to time it perfectly. So when someone whispers, I say, "Can you do that again?" But now I can do it with the cochlear implant.

Life should be so much easier.

Oh, yes. It's much easier now. I'm hearing your voice and only occasionally having to glance at the screen.

That's amazing. So no plans to retire?

Absolutely none whatsoever. Never, never, never, never.

My hero is Albert Tatlock on Coronation Street and he was in his 80s. I never want to give up.

Shall we have a slight pause?

[End of Track 1]

[Track 2]

I understand I think your operation was actually filmed?

Broadcast for radio.

I wonder if you can tell us about that? Tell me a little bit about that and how it came about? How the idea came about in the first place?

Yes. What happened is I'd been doing a one man theatre show about leaving the Army and being deaf and deciding to be an actor and all the worries and problems that came up and how things work, how they didn't and this went quite well and the director of the theatre show, who was in fact a staff director at the National Theatre in London, had a friend who was a radio producer for BBC documentaries, so he suggested the radio producer that it could be interesting following someone on the process towards getting a cochlear implant, and starting straightaway by recording my one man show about being deaf. So the radio producer put the project up to the BBC and the BBC agreed. So he started off by recording my show, which lasted about one hour and ten minutes at Battersea Arts Centre in London, and then for the next 18 months during the assessment period he attended at assessment interviews and talked to me about how I felt about it. So he's been following me for 18 months and then the final assessment where the head of the cochlea implant department at the hospital made his decision, because I didn't know if they'd give me one, and he had to decide whether my hearing was of a nature that the implant was likely to be successful. So I was very nervous what would happen, and the BBC man walked in and thrust a microphone in front of the surgeon, and I thought: what's going to happen? And the surgeon tapped me on the knee and said, "We want to help you to hear", and I said, "Thank you very much. That's very nice. Thank you very much", and he said they were going to give me a cochlear implant, so that was wonderful. Then the BBC said could they record during the operation? So I said, well, I don't mind as long as they make absolutely sure they don't bring any dirty equipment in, but the hospital said yes and the BBC man said it was absolutely astonishing watching the operation. I said, "Was it like ER?" and did they talk about their love lives? And he said it was just another day in the office and people coming in and bringing in things to sign and it was very easy, and the BBC man said he was very

impressed with the surgeon who talked him through the operation and explained what he was doing, because it was radio, of course.

Yes.

The listeners have to be informed what's going on and the surgeon talked and the sound of the drill, which is pretty amazing, and all this, and then all this they recorded me in the hospital, before the operation and what I felt was going to happen, and things like that, and then they attended the switch on, the switch.

Attended the?

The switch on of the apparatus three weeks after the operation. The operation puts the wire into the work and then you leave it three weeks to heal and three weeks later they put the processor on the ear, connected to the computer and switch it on, and the BBC attended.

Was that when your wife was there?

That's right. Normally, the man presses the computer button and says, "Can you hear anything?" But he motioned for my wife to speak, because she was attending. So I was amazed when I heard her clear as a bell. Always she has to attract my attention and make sure I can lip read and the voices are muffled, but I heard her clearly and her accent and I said, "You've got a really nice voice".

What part of the country does she come from?

Brought up in London. Her father is from Ireland and her mother from London. So she's got Irish blood and a bit of the devil, but brought up in London.

I guess you knew that. You had imagined her voice, but it was never the same?

No, no. I couldn't imagine it, really. I just, you know, I didn't know what -- I didn't really imagine people's voices. The only thing I can remember having heard, there was some comedians when I could hear, so if they show old clips, I know, even though I can't hear

them now, I could imagine. But, with her voice, I couldn't really imagine what it was like, so it was astonishing and a very successful operation.

[05:37]

What other things particularly have been particularly life changing? I suppose, you know, through having the operation, you talked about your grandchild?

That's right. As I said, my son was very quietly spoken, and very shortly after the implant I spent the weekend with him and I could hear him and I said, "You've got a very posh voice. You must have gone to a very good school!" His son is aged two and just started to speak, and he came up to me, and he don't know anything about deafness, and pointed to a flower and looked and said, "Blue", and then to a leaf and said, "Green", and I heard it, and it really was astonishing. The difference is incredible, being able to hear people's voices and hear their accents. You have follow up appointments in the hospital to retune the processor, and at one somebody was sitting in on it and I was listening to her accent and trying to work out where she came from. I said, "Let me guess. It's not rural American. No, no". I said, "It doesn't sound Australian", and she told me it was New Zealand. Do you know what I mean? The subtlety of the accent I can now hear.

I don't know whether it's because you are an actor, but accents I can see is something you find very interesting. The voice is something you are interested in?

Yes, that's right.

To have been so many years not hearing voices, it must be ...

It's been difficult. Voices and accents is what I always used to like. The BBC man said on microphone, the later appointment -- the hearing therapist -- he said it's amazingly successful because normally with the implant people hear the sound, but it takes time to getting to hear being bothered to listen, but he said I leapt straight to hearing without going to --

That's very interesting.

The BBC man said, "Why has that happened?" Why is this operation so successful?" and the hearing therapist said he thought it was because I'm an actor and I was always had to strive to hear and deaf people often don't and lip read or get people to write things down but when I'm working I can't do that, he said he'd had musicians thee who had been very successful.

Because they have been striving to use --

Striving to use what hearing they have. We all do.

The operation was very successful with everyone. I've never met anyone it wasn't, but some people take longer for the brain to work out and now they can hear the sound.

Has it given with your son, for example, who has always been quietly spoken, do you think it will give your relationship a chance to develop further?

I think so because we were both -- we were just so thrilled that, you know, poor boy. He hasn't been well able to say a great deal to me and it has to be simple and straightforward, but now he can talk about anything and to me it was wonderful to chat easily and happily. So it will make a lot of difference, but now our relationship will go on and totally different. We've always got on well together, now it will be much easier, you know.

[09:57]

I don't know if you would like to talk a little bit more about your involvement with LINK, and in fact have you been involved with other organisations as a volunteer?

Not apart from LINK, no, but in 1980 -- in fact, I had another low period when I got a bit depressed because I had cancer and I went to the hospital and I had an operation and things went wrong. So it was a -- quite a difficult period, and I felt -- I got very low spirited.

When was this?

Pardon?

What year was this?

1980. Wrong. 2000. 1999, sorry. 1999. Out of the blue, LINK asked if anybody -- people they knew on their mailing list would like to be a volunteer. So I thought, well, I'd like to be -- very much to be a volunteer, and see if I can help, but I thought: at the moment, I can't help myself I'm so low in spirits, but I promised myself, being low in spirits, and I always say yes to every proposition and it's too easy to turn things down and I said yes and we did a one-week course for volunteers and the depression went and I think, if you're focused on other people and not yourself and your problems, the depression goes. I think depression is a lot to do with being inward looking and thinking "me and my problems ...", you know. So I was supposed to be doing this course to help other people, but it helped me enormously and then from then on LINK passed people on to me to go and visit who've had problems and I've really enjoyed, you know.

[12:03]

Right. Apart from work, I just wondered about, you, your hobbies and interests and whether they have actually been shaped again by your hearing loss. Just talk a little bit about, you know, other interests that you have.

Yes. I used to listen to the radio a lot, so that's out.

But now, you'll be able...

Now I can plug in head phones and put them over the processor and I can hear the radio until they start talking a bit quickly, but even now it's getting better.

I didn't use to go to the theatre until Stage Text started operating, so you can get surtitles or subtitles. It was no good going to the theatre because I couldn't hear a word they were saying, but now I can go, but I still need subtitles a bit. I can switch the T switch on my processor and the voices are quite loud, but I can't make out what they're saying, but I'm told by the hospital it will get better.

So that's something, again, that now you can --

That's right.

I mean, for me, I think music would be what I would miss. I just wonder, has that been an important part of your --

It was before I had it, because in 1980 when I was saying my hearing suddenly went off altogether, the most awful moment was having to take my record collection, and in those days -- I could no longer hear it and all my beloved records, Mozart piano and the whole lot, having to take them down to a car boot sale. That was very depressing, but now I've gone back to listening to music, but I find and orchestral music or a band there are too many instruments and I can't work it out. A single piano or person singing is okay. But it's getting better because in the last job they had a final night party and karaoke and normally I wouldn't want anything to do with it, but I was able to join in. So bit by bit I'm starting to hear music again.

Do you think it will make you -- although you don't sound as if you are unsociable -- but will it make you more sociable that you can chat to people?

I hope so because I've turned down social opportunities or going out to places. It's just too much and sometimes it's too much effort. Generally, I'm happy going out, but now I can hear more easily, there's no problem at all. It's very new yet, so I'm hoping that I'll be much more sociable. Actors are very easy to be with because they make themselves -- they're very clearly spoken and will attract your attention, so I'm quite lucky that way.

Yes. It's interesting because, yes, in a way someone with hearing loss to go into the acting profession seems, you know, a silly idea.

It is a silly idea

But --

I wouldn't recommend it to anybody.

[15:39]

You have given lots of examples of how, you know, once you do it, you use the strategies.

That's right. I'm a great believer now if you really want to do something and somebody tells you it's impossible, which they told me, you just do it and you find there are ways around it if you really, really want to do it. But acting is not a thing you go into casually because it's very hard and you spend most of your life at job interviews. If you get a job, it only lasts two or three days and then you're on the dole again.

I suppose, once you are known to the world of theatre and film, and once your name is known and they know from experience that --

Oh, yes, and then you get a CV and they look at it and you walk in, "Hello, this bloke's deaf, but look at his CV, he must be able to manage". As you say, I'm not a famous actor, but a lot of people in the profession know I can manage.

[16:50]

I'm interested that the Army would let you go presumably without a full pension, even though this hearing loss, you know, started because of being in the Army. Do you not feel resentful about that?

The difficulty was I would have got a pension if I'd stayed in, but I got out and then applied for a pension for being deaf and they gave me a £350 handout, so that was -- I was very -- I wasn't going to take this, so I started appealing. That was in 1969, when I left, and it took seven years and eventually got to the Court of Appeal and I got a very tiny, tiny pension. So then I appealed again and this time got the help of an eminent ENT specialist in Harley Street. The board who decide your pension knew him and so this carried more weight. So eventually I got the -- this laid down what you get. Obviously, I'd rather hear, but eventually I got the pension, but it took a time to fight for it.

I mean, is there anything --

It's not the Army, but the DSS that's responsible for looking after you once you've got out.

Is there anything you'd like to talk about that we haven't covered? You know, any aspects of your life, you know, that you feel that's a bit of a gap? I suppose, I don't know, has it affected your travels? Your ability to travel, for instance, your hearing loss?

No, no. Not really. If I go up against people I can't understand, I just get them to write things down. Also, if I go to Italy and say the Italian for deaf, they just start miming and it's much easier than England.

[19:13]

I've mentioned about BBC radio, haven't I, and following this?

Sure.

And they're broadcasting it on Radio 4 at 8.00 pm on 27th November, Thursday.

I know, but I think you said.

They'll be putting out a transcript and a CD.

Great. So it's not part of a series, but a one-off, is it?

I think it's a series called "My Story", because the title of the programme that I'm in is called "My Story: Earful From Silence To Sound". So "Earful" was the name of my one man show about being deaf. I'm slightly concerned about it being called "Silence To Sound" because people tend to think that deafness is silence, but it's not. You've got tinnitus and all sorts. It's far from being silent, and in fact, now I've got a cochlear implant, it's much quieter.

It's much quieter now?

I don't have tinnitus so much anymore. Not loudly, just at the moment it's quiet-- just a slight, very faint and no loud noises that I used to have before. So "From Silence To

Sound", the BBC called it-- I thought I'm not going to try and persuade them to change the title. It would be more interesting if I said on the programme I specifically say, this is a common misconception that deaf people live in a world of silence.

Can you repeat what your one man show was called?

Ear Full E-A-R F-U-L-L, so it's misspelt to catch attention.

[21:04]

What are your plans for the future?

Sorry?

What are your plans for the future?

Go and chat to my son; hear my grandson say more things; and, erm, interviews with my agent and see what they're going to get up to. What I'd really like to do now is work in the radio because this is one thing I've never done and the last thing on earth they were going to hire someone deaf to do radio drama, but now it might be very interesting, so I'm going to see if I can get some radio auditions and I'm hoping -- maybe this radio programme will attract attention. I don't know, but I'd love to do radio because with my cochlear implant it wouldn't matter about it being visible, obviously, if you're doing radio.

This is a concern, is it, for you?

Yes. I don't know how this is going to work out. This last thing I did in Manchester, it's a Chekov play, so a turn of the century Russian play, so no way it could be seen on stage, but they found a wig in the wig department that actually fitted, but my own beard when I grew it didn't match the wig so they had to have a beard made for £1,000.

Blimey!

If a wig had to be made, it would be £2,000, so this is going to be an issue.

Having a wig on, does that affect how you can hear?

No.

No.

No. Also, I can put a cap on, which is much thicker because the microphone and the cochlear implant is level with the ear, with the opening of the ear. So the wig fastens above the ear and the hair hangs down and don't cover the sound at all.

[23:14]

I just wondered, I suppose you're going to say you have told your story before, you don't feel --

In the one man show, yeah.

-- is that -- I just wonder how therapeutic it is, or perhaps, because you have had your one man show, that has been an opportunity to express --

Yes, that's right.

-- issues?

You're absolutely right. It's not just art. It's great therapy. To stand in front of a whole audience and tell your story is very therapeutic.

It was Rosemary's suggestion, and I guess she was partly thinking...

It was because I love telling stories and she said, "Why don't you do a show of your own where you don't have to listen to cues?" and she was spot on. She really changed my life that weekend.

When you did have your first one man show, was it quite, you know, was it in the 80s?

It was. It wasn't immediately because I was here that weekend, but the first one man show was 88. I had constantly been thinking about it because you can't walk on stage and tell stories like I'm telling you because that's not what the theatre is about. They have to see it happening. So eventually I found out how to -- I met a group, a theatre group, a mime group. So working with them I discovered how you can make things actually happen in front of the audience. Not talking about it having happened in the past, but about it happening now for them to watch and become involved with.

It was wonderful to do and, as you say, very therapeutic indeed. I think this is a lot of the trouble deaf people have and causes problems. It's that things are so bottled up and people don't understand. So I'm lucky to do it in front of audiences, but it took a while because, when I was first deaf and went round pretending that I wasn't.

[25:37]

I think you are right and I think, if you like, you have been fortunate, in that I think a lot of deaf people have the discrimination of being considered stupid, don't they?

Yes, that can happen. Yeah, absolutely.

I've heard people talk about --

They shout at you and become impatient.

Yes.

That has happened to me, often in the ENT department where you would expect them to know better.

Really?

They become very impatient. One specialist in one hospital said, "How can you act if you can't even hear me?" I got so annoyed. I said, "Because actors, when they talk to me, look

me straight in the face, speak clearly and make sure I can understand". We were at each other's throats!

That's really unacceptable.

Definitely.

So unprofessional.

He's an ENT specialist and people can become very impatient, you know, if they're not understood. In fact, the medical profession I've found when -- I feel bad now saying anything derogatory because they've been wonderful, of course, but they can get impatient with people who don't hear them and sometimes they seem to take it as an affront, you know. They're saying something and somebody doesn't hear them and they become slightly offended by it, you know. But this isn't everyone in the medical profession. Just one or two people.

Obviously, your recent experience of the cochlear --

It's been fantastic. Very good.

It's interesting they agreed to have it filmed, the operation.

Broadcast, not filmed.

Broadcast, sorry.

Yes. It was touch and go because, to start with, the publicity department weren't at all sure. So the BBC had to write to the specialist and say, "This is not going to be a knocking programme. We're not coming to cause trouble. We literally want just an information documentary because there are a lot of deaf people who don't know anything about cochlear implants", and the hospital were happy about this once they were reassured that someone was coming literally to record it as it is. They kept all the facilities for it to happen. Even

they were surprised when the surgeon said yes, they would record during the operation, but they did.

I guess the programme could have continued without that section, but --

Without?

Without the broadcasting the operation, if necessary. It wouldn't have -- the programme could have gone ahead?

No, but it is obviously very dramatic, you know. It's a central part of it.

Right.

The main part, really.

Do you have anything you would like to talk about? This is an opportunity to go down in posterity. Is there any other aspect of your life that you would like to tell me about?

In connection with deafness?

Pardon?

In connection with deafness?

Not necessarily, no, no.

I don't want to give you too much information.

[Laughs] Offhand, I can't think of anything.

I wanted to give you the opportunity, really, because otherwise we could finish the interview, I think.

Offhand, I can't think of anything. No doubt, when I get home or later on during lunch, I'll think I should have told them that.

I probably will as well, but, okay. So we'll close the interview here, I think. Thank you, Tim, very much.

[End of track 2]

[Track 3]

I could mention about having palantype support.

Okay.

One thing that has made a great deal of difference, in fact several things have, actually. When I first started acting in the 70s, there was no support of any sort. So when I joined the Shakespeare company in '76, the director gave a three-hour talk to the whole company, a big company, about the style the play was going to be done in and I just couldn't hear a word he was saying, you know, and I'd only just started acting, so I was very nervous and I didn't dare explain that I couldn't hear. So I sat there, pretending that I could, and watched what everyone was doing to find out what was going on. So it was all very dodgy. But eventually the first thing that happened was the fax machine came out. People would ring up. On one occasion I was due to do a film called *The Eagle Has Landed* with Michael Caine and they rang up to give me script changes and I couldn't hear and I was worried I'd lose the job, so I had to pretend I could hear and I said, "Right, got that", and I hadn't the faintest idea of what he said. So, when I turned up on set, I said, "I'm terribly sorry, I left the script changes behind", and he said, "Don't worry, we'll give them to you now". So I was bluffing all the time and it was very dodgy, but the first thing that made a lot of difference was the fax machine came out, so I wasn't entirely reliant on the telephone, and then emailing, wonderful, but the biggest difference was in '95 when the Government brought out -- not the Disability Discrimination Act, but Access to Work, which means that anyone disabled would get whatever support was necessary to make them compete with non-disabled people on the same level. So for me this meant palantype or speech to text reporters, and we've got one now and they meant when I went into rehearsal for the first time in '95 and the government introduced the scheme and suddenly a palantypist operator and I'll say where the operator puts up what a person is saying in realtime, done phonetically, and so what the person says comes up in realtime and suddenly I can hear everything in rehearsal. In performance, it doesn't matter because I know what everyone is saying and where it's coming from, but in rehearsals from then onwards, so I've been very lucky. So, as my hearing deteriorated, technology has improved.

[Laughs]

*Did you have to apply to get the speech to text reporter to be present in the rehearsals?
Was it something you had to organise, as an individual?*

No, not really because it isn't me that should be applying, but obviously the theatre. I don't know what days I'm required for rehearsal, so I always explain to the theatre and they all accept that they put in the application and fill in all the details and I sign it. So they do it all. It's the most wonderful system because, when I was with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford recently, I was there and the rehearsal period was two months -- a long time -- and it was a palantypist who was happy to do the two months, so she came out and they gave her a house and paid for her to do this and to travel home at weekends and when the company went Washington, the government paid for her in a hotel. So it's a wonderful scheme.

That's a very positive development.

Incredibly positive. I can now literally operate on an equal level with people who are hearing.

Yes.

Directors love it as well because, if they want, they can get a transcript.

Yes. I don't suppose you know, but I wonder if that has enabled more people to become actors with hearing loss or with other disabilities that can be --

I don't know because I haven't come across any except, erm, one girl -- when I was doing my one man show, I asked the audience if they would like to ask any questions and one girl spoke up, one young woman, 21, 22, and she had gone totally deaf suddenly, two months beforehand, and wanted to work in the theatre, and she was very depressed and upset and it had only just happened to her, and she came to see the show, which she could follow because I had palantype for the show, so it's projected for the audience and she could follow it, and hearing my story encouraged her, and I've heard she's had a cochlear implant and is working in the theatre. So she's the only one I've heard about, but I'm not trying, but I spread the word.

I think the radio programme --

The radio programme certainly will, but you can hear acting is tough. If anyone says do I think I could be an actor, I say, "No, unless you want to be". Don't say yes, it's a great job because it's really hard, even if you can hear, but it's nice -- I enjoy telling people the stories and if they really want to do it, despite the fact they're deaf, it's certainly possible if you're determined.

Are you still doing the one man show?

Just if I'm asked to do it.

Right. I just thought I'd love to go now.

The tour is over, but for instance the film I did about Beethoven writing the symphony they said would I do the one man show for the cast and crew? So I say yes, I would, and they had this big room in a hotel and the whole cast and crew came and they -- most of them, and there must have been about 60 or 70 people in the room, and the wonderful thing is part of the film which is in actual fact when Beethoven not only wrote it but he conducted it too when he was deaf and wouldn't hear it, and when it had finished, the audience, who knew he couldn't hear, clap, all waved white handkerchiefs.

So when I do the one man show, at the end of it they all produce white handkerchiefs and I was very moved. Wonderful.

Great.

Very touching. So I can do the show if people ask me to do, it especially because it doesn't need a lot of lighting or special effects. It's a story-telling show where I act it out.

I don't need to talk about the film, do I? It's quite interesting, but by the time for this Oral Project --

Do you mean the film about Beethoven?

Yes.

Do tell us a little bit about that.

It's a wonderful film. It's been -- the script is written by an Italian gentleman, a novelist, a novel called *Silk*, an extraordinary novel, Alexandra Woreko, and I read the novel and it was fantastic and he wanted to do a film about Beethoven and about deafness, but he didn't want it to be handed over to Hollywood or something, so he wrote the script himself and got funding to direct it himself and what it is is they played throughout the film Beethoven's 9th symphony, which he wrote when he couldn't hear, but not as background but the foreground music. So the images on the screen actually supplement the music. You don't see Beethoven, so it's not a biopic. It's all about a gentleman who gives up a -- gives a lecture, 20 lectures, about iconic works of art like Picasso's Guernica and Rodin's Thinker, the sculpture, and saying none of them really capture the human condition, but lecture 21, the name of the film, is about the one piece of art that does capture it, and this is Beethoven's 9th. So it's about him lecturing about it. The lecturer is played by John Hurt and you see lots of open scenes while the music is played and it's a music script and there's a character Beethoven when he wrote it couldn't hear and he didn't want people to hear what he was composing and so he banged the piano and it's an extraordinary story, but when his deafness went off this isn't just a film script, but actual fact, he became black with despair and depression and decided to commit suicide and he wrote a famous suicide note called the [inaud] about his feelings about deafness, and you've never read anything that captures what it's so like to be deaf and it wasn't the music he missed but the fact people no longer understood him because there was no deaf awareness, but they just thought he was mad and he was the life and soul of the party and suddenly he was shunned and they didn't want to talk to him and he went into a black pit of despair and fortunately didn't commit suicide. And after ten years of blackness, he suddenly felt an explosion he described in his heart and soul and head and he read a poem by Goethe called Ode To Joy, which he hadn't had in ten years, and it burst upon him and he sat down to compose a symphony, which is a choral symphony. So he composed this and it's a well known and fantastic symphony and not only did he write it, but he conducted it when he couldn't hear it and the Vienna Opera House --

When is the film?

silence in it, because he couldn't hear, and he has this triumphant music and it expressed how he felt when he couldn't hear, and silences in it to express his deafness.

And my character in the film has superhearing and teaches people to listen to the subtlety in the music and the silences and, through teaching them, teaches the audience about deafness. So it's a fascinating film, but it would be very artistically great, but whether it's the sort of thing people want to see at the local Odeon when they're are used to seeing Arnold Schwarzeneger ...

[End of track 3]