

# Pack 108, Item 10

Type: Broadcaster-how-to guide

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**BH2 – How to effectively use wild sound in your radio program**

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***What is wild sound?***

In broadcasting, wild sound is any natural or human sound that is recorded in a particular location and incorporated into a program. It can refer to sounds that are recorded in the background of a main recording such as an interview, or to sounds that are recorded separately and later mixed into a program. Wild sound can also be called *ambient sound*.

Just as television use pictures, sounds in all forms—wild and controlled or planned—are the building blocks of radio productions.

You can record wild sound separately or mix it in with the interview after, to recreate the setting.

***How can using wild sound help me serve my listeners better?***

* Wild sound helps listeners get a better picture of where action is taking place.
* Wild sound helps establish tone or mood.
* Wild sound adds a sense of realism or authenticity to the production by showing the listener that the broadcaster was at the scene of action rather than reporting from the studio.

***How can using wild sound help me produce better programs?***

* Wild sound helps the broadcaster to produce programs that sound real and authentic.
* Wild sound helps a storyteller tell stories more clearly, effectively, and dramatically.
* Wild sound aids imagination. Unlike television, radio does not produce visual images. The listener has to use imagination.

***How do I get started?*** (Learn more about these and other points in the *Details* section below.)

1. Plan, research, and imagine what kind of wild sound can help tell a story best.
2. Carry the right equipment with you.
3. Understand the two types of wild sound and how to work with them.
4. Understand the limitations of wild sound. Avoid distracting sounds.
5. Be conscious of levels when recording or mixing wild sound.
6. Develop a passion for good sound.

***Details***

**1. Plan, research, and imagine what kind of wild sound can help tell a story**

Recorded wild sound can be useful when you want to create a particular effect, which sometimes occurs at the beginning and at the end of an item. For example, if you are doing a story on honey production, you could record the buzzing of bees before you do your interviews and commentary. For a program on flooding, you could record the sound of thunder and heavy rain.

Broadcasters should not abruptly cut wild sound as soon as an interview ends. Instead, you might fade up the background sound, hold for a couple of seconds, then fade out. This can save time when you edit your interviews. But wild sound is only helpful at the end of an interview if the sound is clearly identifiable and relevant to the topic of the interview.

When you create a plan for your program—a shot list, run sheet, or storyboard—include notes on the sounds you will need, including wild sounds.

After recording wild sound in the field, play it back to check that you have all the sounds you need.

After you collect wild sounds, label and archive them. You never know when they might come in handy.

**2. Carry the right equipment with you**

Having basic knowledge of the types of microphones and the correct way of using basic recording tools will help you effectively record wild sounds.

In order to record wild sound at the right level, you need to know what direction the wild sound is coming from and the type of recorder and microphone to use.

*Microphones*

Microphones do not hear the way the human ear hears. Essentially, they hear with one ear rather than two. They are also unable to filter out background noise the way the human ear and brain do.

Here is an old trick to help your ears hear the way your microphone hears. This trick will help you choose good locations for interviews.

* Listen with one ear, not two. Put your finger in one ear and listen to other people speaking and to the sound around them. This will reduce your brain’s capacity to filter out noise. You will hear echoes and noises you had not noticed before. The microphone will capture them all. It is essential that you hear only the sound that you want, for example, the person you are interviewing, when listening with a single ear. Otherwise, the microphone will record sounds you don’t expect.
* When using headphones during a recording, cover one ear with your headphones and leave the other uncovered. This allows you to hear what you are capturing on tape, but keep you connected to the person you are interviewing and allows you to hear the sounds in your immediate environment.

*Types of microphones*

The two basic types of microphones are *unidirectional* and *omnidirectional* microphones. Omnidirectional mics record sound from every direction, while unidirectional mics pick up sound from only one direction.

For field interviews, unidirectional microphones are usually best because they let you focus on your guest’s voice and ensure that distracting sounds (noise) are behind you—where the mic is least sensitive to them.

It’s best to use an omnidirectional mic when you want to record more than one voice at the same time—for example, a small group discussion.

In a windy environment, ensure that the wind is not blowing directly into the microphone. Or find a place that is sheltered from the wind. If you want to give the impression of a windy day, you could, for example, record the sound of trees blowing in the wind, or clothes flapping on a clothesline. This is different from the muffled sound of wind blowing through the microphone.

*Positioning the microphone*

No matter what type of microphone you use, the general rule is: Hold the microphone about one hand’s width away from the guest. A hand’s width is the distance between an outstretched thumb and smallest finger. Hold the microphone just below the mouth and out of the eye-line between you and your guest. This will help avoid explosive popping sounds, and help ensure that the microphone is not a distraction to the guest.

If you are using an omnidirectional mic and there is loud, general background noise that you can’t avoid, get closer to the sound you want to record. If, for example, you are recording an interview, you might hold the mic about a fist away from the guest to reduce the effect of the background noise.

If you are using a unidirectional mic and there is loud background noise coming from a specific direction:

* Position your guest to face the source of unwanted sound. Then the most sensitive part of the microphone will face the guest, and the least sensitive will face the source of the noise.
* You can also move the mic closer to the guest, but directional mics tend to increase bass tones when they are too close, which doesn’t sound natural. If you place the mic close to the guest, look for a switch to reduce or eliminate the bass on a directional mic.

*Windy days require a windscreen.*

* Many microphones come with a foam windscreen. Use it whenever possible. If you don’t have a windscreen, you can make one from a pair of women's stockings or another source of thin fabric. Cut and wrap the fabric around the mic several times. Experiment with the number of layers; too many layers might muffle the sound.

*Headphones and earphones*

These are useful tools for monitoring the quality of sound being recorded, and they help the recorder adjust the recording level to the desired point. When you can clearly hear what you are recording, you don’t need to do as much editing later. Instead, you manage the sound in real time.

**3. Understand the two types of wild sound and how to work with them**

*Foreground sound* is wild sound with content that you want to broadcast at the same volume as the voice in an interview. We often call this kind of sound “actuality.”

*Background sound* is wild sound that creates the backdrop for a location and gives a sense of the environment. It is also called “Nat sound” (natural sound), ambience, or “BG” (for “background.”)

Foreground and background wild sound use different techniques.

*Foreground*:

* Don’t hold the microphone or recorder tightly. It might record the sound of your hand itself as it moves nervously.
* You might be able to mount the microphone or recorder and let it record the foreground sound without you having to touch it.
* Be sure you are close enough to get a good sound level and not overload the recorder with sounds you don’t want.
* Protect the microphone from the wind. Use your body as a windscreen if necessary.
* Record enough foreground sound to ensure that you have good content to put on air. This might be just a few seconds for a rooster crowing, but many minutes for a speech.

*Background*:

* Record distinctive and interesting sounds. An air-conditioner or a noisy generator do not add much to your story.
* Keep your recorder at a distance so it can capture the full ambience without one part of the background overwhelming the scene.
* Avoid wind by shielding the microphone or recorder with your body.
* Record enough background sound so that you can repeat it underneath a voice track without sounding repetitive. A couple of minutes should be sufficient.

**4. Understand the limitations of wild sound. Avoid distracting sounds.**

Wild sound is a double-edged sword: it can increase or decrease the quality of your program.

If your recorded wild sound is too loud, it can detract from your show by drowning out the person who is speaking.

Don’t exaggerate; find the right balance. For example, if you want to record some farm sounds to show that the interview takes place on a farm, don’t record 500 chickens noisily squawking. This will distract the listeners from the more important part of the recording.

Be careful about mixing wild sound and sound effects. For example, if you are recording a field interview with background wild sound—for example, chickens and cows—it is probably not a good idea to use added sound effects. This would actually detract from the listener’s sense that you are recording in a real place.

Generally speaking, documentaries use wild sounds rather than sound effects. The same is true with field interviews. On the other hand, dramas typically use sound effects, not wild sound.

Don’t be afraid of silence—and remember that absolute silence does not exist. Even in a very quiet place, take time to record the room tone. “Room tone” is the silence recorded at a particular location. All locations have a distinct type of “silence.” To ensure that you don’t notice the gaps in the audio track corresponding to the places where you edited, you can either a) include a separate sound track of the room tone that is the same length as the entire clip, or b) insert the room tone where you have made edits. Room tone is always more “lively” than the silence of your editing software.

It’s dishonest to record wild sound in one location and use it for a report that is set in a different location. For example, if I record the sound of cars in one village, but give listeners the impression that the sound happened in another village, I’m misleading my listeners. The purpose of using wild sound is to represent reality and not give false information.

**5. Be conscious of levels when recording or mixing wild sound**

There is no magic formula to determine how much wild sound you need to record and mix into a radio program.

The best advice is to do everything in moderation. You don’t need wild sound for every piece of audio in your program. Use it only when it adds to your work.

Wild sound should not be too loud to drown out other sounds or so quiet that listeners cannot identify what it is. Also, other sounds, for example the voice of the presenter, should not drown out wild sound. If they do, listeners may not recognize the sound and it becomes useless noise or an annoying distraction. Headphones are very useful for getting the levels right.

If you need to describe the action that accompanies a wild sound, it’s important to describe it correctly. For example, the sound of weeding with a cutlass is different from weeding with a hoe. So make sure to use the right words to describe what is happening. Remember, listeners—and especially farmers—are quite perceptive when it comes to rural sounds; they will notice anything that is wrong.

**6. Develop a passion for good sound**

As a broadcaster, it’s important that whatever you produce is good quality. What is considered good sound varies a great deal from person to person. It is always important to watch out for distortions and any generated noises that were not present in the original recording. Good sound does not need to sound as if it’s happening live. But it does need to sound real.

If you take the time to learn good recording and editing techniques, it will make a world of difference to the quality of the sound you record—and can even be a lot of fun. When you are passionate about good sound, whatever you produce will pull listeners into your recording without any distractions. It will give them an insight into what was happening during the recording, and raise your radio skills to new heights.

***Where else can I learn about wild sound?***

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***Definitions***

*Background sound:* Wild sound that creates the backdrop for a location and gives a sense of the environment. Also called “Nat sound” (natural sound), ambience, or “BG” (for “background.”)

*Omnidirectional mic:* Omnidirectional mics record sound from every direction.

*Room tone:* The “silence” recorded at a particular location.

*Unidirectional mic:* Unidirectional mics pick up sound from only one direction.

## Acknowledgements

Contributed by: Kumah Drah, Associate Radio Trainer, Farm Radio International in Ghana; Busisiwe Ngcebetsha, Consultant, Community media; Sylvie Harrison, Radio Craft Team Lead, Farm Radio International; and Vijay Cuddeford, Managing editor, Farm Radio International