

Heart of SOUND

Memories of loved ones come in a variety of guises. For former broadcaster Claire Peyton Jones, it is always the human voice that leaves the most lasting impression. Fiona Adams hears her story

In homes up and down the country, great and small alike, the rooms are filled with the remembrance of things past: images of loved ones and ancestors adorning the walls and furniture, defiantly holding back the years.

Once, before the advent of photography, miniatures and painterly portraiture would have been the chosen currency of preservation; perhaps even the odd lock of hair. Today, in the digital age, memories are just a click away: people, places and moments frozen for ever in time.

Yet each of us has one priceless asset that strikes an even more resonant chord, elevating memory to an intense and evocative plane: our voice.

Claire Peyton Jones, former broadcaster at the BBC, spent her early career learning the techniques of interview at the hands of master producer Piers Plowright. Since then, she has developed this passion for the unadulterated telling of stories into a successful business recording people's memories and anecdotes.

"Piers's preferred style of interview was always to cut out the presenter. He wanted the material to talk and he trained me with that in mind," she explains.

"I suppose he saw the interviewer as merely the facilitator. Rather than listening to a conversation, the most intimate feeling on radio is the sense that you're being talked to."

Claire, who spent her formative years in Esher and Richmond, began her company *Portraits in Sound* three years ago, but it was after hours at the BBC that she made her first forays into private recording.

"I started back in the 1980s, doing sound portraits for my family. I finished work at 6pm and had a studio all to myself, so I thought: 'Right, I'll interview my granny and my uncle, and have some fun.'

"Of course, I had to beg my granny, as she didn't think she had anything to say. But I was interested. I'd interviewed so many people and found that, if you let them talk, so much comes out; things you'd never otherwise have known.

"Granny was a colourful character, fond of golf, bridge and her gin and mixed. It was magical being able to play the CD of her later to my children, who weren't even thought of when she died. They were all captivated by her voice, which says so much more than the stories she tells, revealing her humour and warmth. This was the genesis of my idea: to do the same thing for other families."

Where a painted portrait draws attention to a subject's appearance, Claire's portraits reflect her love affair with the human voice, focusing heavily on the subject's experiences and bringing them into the present. Inevitably, many of the interviewees have seen quite a lot of life.

"One of my clients was 90, but she didn't want anyone to look at her as an old woman because she had once been attractive with lots of lovers! That can be quite hard to picture, but the voice gets beyond all that. You hear someone talking about when they were young and attractive, and you can really imagine it."

People come to Claire because they want a permanent record of family history, or to preserve memories and anecdotes as a gift for children and grandchildren. Some of them, in fact, have quite a story to tell.

"One lady commissioned me to interview her, and while I was there her niece turned up. On the way out, the niece said: 'I do hope you got the story about Churchill!' I said: 'Nope, but I'm going straight back in to get it now!'

"Actually, there was a whole lot more to come out. The niece was one of seven cousins, but none of them had ever had the courage to ask their aunt about her love life, or why she'd never married. For me these were perfectly innocuous questions and she answered them."

Most clients give Claire free rein and, though initially nervous, soon loosen up and enjoy their time in the spotlight.

"I usually say: 'Tell me everything you want included.' Some people are very awkward for the first five minutes – one woman thought it would be like a grilling on the *Today* programme! But if you just start at the beginning, things tend to come out naturally."

Claire, it is apparent, takes seriously her role as a keeper of secrets.

"I do think people find it cathartic. I feel a bit like a priest in a confessional. That's certainly how I behave. If somebody were to tell me something to get it off their chest, and it clearly wasn't appropriate to put it in their portrait, it would never go any further.

"I often find it humbling. It's very easy to judge people when you only know a little about them; to come to conclusions. But with a portrait in sound you see them in broader perspective: their sense of humour, their experience, their difficulties. I always end up admiring the clients and come away thinking that I've learnt from them."

■ Portraitsinsound.com



Claire Peyton Jones

