What is a Radio Documentary?

A radio documentary is a movie made with sound.
It is a mind movie.
It is a journey, told in pictures.

A radio documentary is not:
- A magazine feature, if a magazine feature could talk
- An extended newscast
- A talk-tape, minus the irritating host who horns in on your piece
- An in-depth exploration of an important or worthy issue
- A novel
- Information

A radio documentary is a story. A story that just has to be told.

Like all good stories it will shed light on some aspect of what it is to be human. In that way, it may link to the news agenda, or to the issues agenda. And that may be the reason for doing it. But it must be, first and foremost, a story.

This applies to Ideas, as much as it does to other programs. There must be something about this idea, this thinker, this moment in time, that begs to be discussed. There has to be a reason why it matters. To real people. Now.

In short, for something to be a documentary, there must be something at stake. A mystery to be revealed. Something to be discovered. A surprise. A gap between what I expect going in, and what I feel or know coming out.

What makes something a story that just has to be told?

Scenario one: I arrive home. I tell my husband, “Honey, I rode the streetcar home tonight. I got off at my usual stop. I walked the block home.”

Not a story that has to be told.

Scenario two. I arrive home. I tell my husband, “Honey, there was this woman on the streetcar tonight. She didn’t look poor. She didn’t look crazy. But she walked up the aisle, and she stopped at every seat. And if the person in that seat was staring at their phone, or their Ipod or their whatever, she would lean over to that person and say, “Please turn that off. It is bothering me.” Very methodically. Very mechanically. Person, after person. “Please turn that off. It is bothering me.”

What makes that a story that has to be told?
- It has a setting: the streetcar.
- It has a character: this woman, who is doing something surprising. 
- It has action.
- It has tension. How are people reacting? What am I going to do when she gets to me?
- It has a mystery at its core: who is she? Why is she doing this?
And it gives you pause. It makes you think. Who is crazier? This polite, strange woman who is demanding we turn these things off, or all of us attached to these devices? And, in that, there is something that reflects on who we are as humans. Now.

**IN EVERY PITCH YOU MAKE** there has to be potential to say yes to the following five questions:

1. Will I *go* anywhere? — which can include intellectual journeys, quests borne out of pure curiosity
2. Will I *meet* anyone?
3. Will I *feel* anything?
4. Will I *learn* anything?
5. Will there be any *surprises*?

To repeat: *the exploration of an issue - no matter how worthy - is NOT a documentary UNLESS there is the potential to say yes to each one of those questions.*

**How do you this? With pictures, made entirely of sound.**

A documentary is a story that just has to be told, an idea that just has to be explored, entirely, through sound. The sound of the human voice. The sound of inhalations of breath. Pauses. Silences. Music. The sounds of places, activities. The words chosen. The words spoken. The words that remain unspoken. It is all about sound.

Steve Wadhams has many Wadhams’isms. One of them: radio is the most visual of media. Radio is all about pictures. So pictures, made of sound.

**Experiment:**

Close your eyes. Now, imagine you hear the sound of a train whistle in the distance. You hear it again, closer. The rumble of wheels. The squeal of brakes.

You already have a movie going. You are in a place, a train station. Perhaps in your imagination this is a train station in Winnipeg. Maybe in wartime London. Perhaps Moscow - shades of Anna Karenina. You have a setting.

And now you hear another set of sounds. You hear the sound of someone breathing. Does it sound like a man? A woman? A child? Are there sobs between the breaths? You can tell they are running by their breath. You hear their footfall, faster and faster. The sound of heels, perhaps, or of stomping boots. And then the footfall stops.

Now you have a character. Perhaps, if it is female, in your mind she starts to look like Nicole Kidman in a fur muff and funny hat. Maybe the character seems to be a man, wearing sneakers ... you can tell by the squeaking sound of the footfall. Maybe you think he is elderly ... you tell by the straining in his breathing.

And you wonder, why is he running? Why did he stop? Who is he coming to meet? Why? And you have the start of a plot. The start of a mystery.

In five sounds you have the beginning of your movie ... a train whistle, wheels, brakes, someone breathing, their footfall.

You have what every documentary needs: setting, character, and a mystery to be revealed. There is, implicitly, something now at stake. And you, as the listener, are implicated, involved in the act of creation. You are hooked.

In making this movie with sound, your microphone is your camera. And your partner in creation is the listener. And it is because of that partnership, that involvement of the listener in the act of creation, that radio documentaries are so powerful.