"You just had to put your big-girl pants on and get on with it."

Production Sound Mixer Judi Lee-Headman, interviewed by Dr. Vanessa Jackson

Judi Lee-Headman is one of only a handful of women at the very top of production sound mixing. She is hugely experienced, award-winning, and works on high-profile US and UK television dramas, like Homeland. Her role involves recording and mixing the sound on set. What makes her even more unusual, is that she is a Black woman from Birmingham. Her extensive production credits include, *The Capture* (BBC, 2019), *The Tunnel* (Sky, 2017-18), *The Bible* (The History Channel, 2013), *Son of God* (2014, feature film), *The Worst Witch* (CBBC, 2016), *Holby City* (BBC, 2002-13), and *Chef!* (BBC, 1993) starring Sir Lenny Henry.

In the early 1980s, you would have found Judi working in a law centre in Birmingham, but, after a change of direction, she secured a job as a researcher for a film production company. Although very good at it, research was not her passion - sound was. The question is: how could a young Black woman enter that profession?

"In those days, women didn't do that stuff. Now there are courses you can go and do, Media courses. There weren't those sorts of technical courses then. I didn't have a clear idea that I could do this job. It was only when I started working as a researcher, and then going out on the shoots with the crew, that I saw a way into it. I started talking with the sound recordist, saying, tell me a bit about what you're doing, and why you're doing it. And he was quite unique, because he took the time to explain, because, at that time, a lot of that stuff was very much men's domain.

The only question a researcher on location would usually ask was: did you want tea, and how many sugars? You didn't really want to ask them what they were doing, and why they were doing it, because that wasn't really your area."

"Once I started talking to him, I realised it was something I was interested in, and I went back to the office and told my manager that this was something I'd really like to do, but there was no support at all, because it was such a ludicrous thing to suggest. "

"I was very good at answering the phone, very good at getting contributors from A to B, so why was I interested in this technical stuff? Well, I was really smitten by it. I loved all the kit. I loved all the gadgets, and Alan, that was the mixer's name, explained all the things, and I thought, I really want to do this. Then it was a matter of trying to find courses that I could go on as a Black woman, in Birmingham, in the 1980s. There was no support towards it, because it wasn't something I was supposed to be doing."

Discrimination

Judi encountered discrimination in trying to pursue her dream of a career in Sound. She was doubly disadvantaged, because of the intersectional factors of both ethnicity and gender. However, that prejudice was never overt, and it was therefore more insidious and difficult to counter. Reasons were pointed out to her why someone, who did not look like her, had been given a particular opportunity. It might have been because they had gone to a particular school; had completed a particular course, or knew certain people. It was never explained as racism or sexism directed towards her. It was frustrating and demoralising, "I'd see someone, who wasn't me, and didn't have these things, sail straight past. It was obvious, but you could never directly name it in that way."

Despite the challenges she faced, Judi was determined to move into Sound. "I did some short courses with Visnews, and then I applied to the National Film School (NFS), and I got a place, but Birmingham Local Education Authority would not fund it. So, I got in touch with the visiting lecturers, and said, "I've got a place here, but I can't afford to stay here". The NFS had grants and bursaries, but the £400 they were offering wasn't going to do it. I was also a mum, I had a young daughter at this time, so I needed childcare, I needed transport to get to Beaconsfield, as I was living in Haringey at that time. So, I asked the lecturers if I could train on the job, and get paid as I trained, as otherwise I'd have to give it up. They were very kind, and agreed to do that. So, I got my training in tandem with those lecturers."

"It was a time that you were certainly made aware of your difference every day. There wasn't a set that I walked on that someone didn't feel the need to let you know.

"You just had to put your big-girl pants on and get on with it, because if you really took it all to heart, you'd just leave, and you'd never set foot on the set again. You had to really focus on the end place that you wanted to get to, and say: "this is where I want to end up, I want to be a recordist, I want to end up mixing shows, so I have got to endure this". The things that happened to me, I make sure don't happen to my assistants, or the people on my watch. The bullying, the sexism, the racism, I've got very little tolerance for it on set. If I'm on set and I see it happening in another department, I will speak to my opposite number and say: "this is happening, stop it."

Early in her professional career, Judi felt there was no point in talking to the recordists she was working with about how badly she was being treated, because they colluded in the sexist and racist behaviour. She had to develop a thicker skin.

When asked about how different attitudes are in the industry today, Judi replied:

"Night and day. I think there is much more awareness now. There are courses, even, that address certain issues, lack of sensitivity to people, and understanding that people are people, and there will be days when things are not going so well in their lives. In the olden days, you did not mention stuff like that, you just cracked on."

Motherhood was another thing. Judi worked for a company for two and half years, when her daughter was very young, before she even told them she had a child. As the only woman in the department, she was worried that this would cause them to doubt her commitment. It meant that childcare was organised like a military campaign. Even now, she sees discrimination against pregnant women. "In some fields, like documentaries, once you start showing, you're off. You might be able to carry the equipment, but Production doesn't want to take the risk. With drama, it might be different, because you're seated a lot, and they wouldn't see the bump."

Diversity in the crew

Frequently, Judi was the only woman, and the only Black member of the crew. Sometimes, there were Black artists in front of the camera, but seldom behind it: "I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of black guys I've seen on set alongside myself, in all the years I've been doing it."

When asked if the diversity of television crews was improving, her answer was depressingly familiar.

"Still the same. But in terms of the atmosphere on set, it is infinitely better than it was. People are much more …I want to say grown up … now. Every now and then, there will be a technician from those days who will come on set, with the attitudes that they had from those days, and the crew around them will be absolutely horrified. They can't believe that people talk like that and have those attitudes. And I just let them get on with it. They can see with their own eyes how this person views the crew, the world, the make-up of the crew. They can decide for themselves whether they think this is an acceptable way to speak to people, or an unacceptable way. I don't need to spell out what's not right about this."

"Now, the crew is much more balanced between sexes. It is getting better [multiculturally]; people are making conscious decisions. Where I think they need to adjust is the view that [non-white] technicians don't exist, so a lot of emphasis goes on training people, bringing in trainees, assistants. I know of many people, with twenty-five or thirty years of experience, who are sitting at home because they are not known about. The view is that these people do not exist, so we need to train them to be in the industry. That's not true. We are here. We have that experience. Give us an opportunity to show you. I've been incredibly lucky, but I know amazing camera people, amazing directors, who are incredibly talented, and they are channelled into training initiatives and they refuse, as they've got the experience of lighting for twenty years, or directing for twenty-five years."

"I get tired of this diversity thing, because each decade we get rebranded. At the moment it's BAME, before that it was 'ethnic minority'. There are all these acronyms set up to let the person who is hiring you know that you're not white. I feel really uneasy about it."

"Another thing that is around now is unconscious bias. So, people will approach you on issues of race and sex, but they won't approach you for anything else, because, by definition of who you are, you can't comment on those aspects."

"I don't want new clients to wait until they have something that they think will suit me [e.g. something to do with race]. When I've had meetings with people who haven't worked with me before, they realise I know what I'm talking about. If, in the interview, which is a two-way process, I feel my opinion will be valued and listened to, I can work with you."

On occasions, crew members think that Judi has been given a job in order to tick a diversity box - as a case of affirmative action, rather than because of her expertise. Fortunately, this does not happen so much now, because they check her experience out on the IMDB website, and see her long list of credits.

Sponsorship

Due to the short-term contract / freelance nature of sound recordists' work, being put forward for jobs by someone who knows you and your work is crucial. Appointments are often made via word-of-mouth recommendation, rather than through a formal application. People, especially those from Black, Asian or working-class backgrounds, often lack networks in positions of power, and therefore frequently miss out on opportunities which would have suited them.

"There are times when you know that you were extremely well qualified for a position, but because you do not have those connections, you do not have that sponsorship. Some people would rather give it to the person who was their assistant, even though that person hasn't got the equivalent experience. They will support that person, so that they get that experience. They may be ten or fifteen years behind me in terms of credits, but they are ahead of me, because they are sponsored by their mixer, and my progress has been a

lot slower because I've had to do those things on my own, without that sponsorship."

The informal nature of employment in film and television production is problematic, especially given the attempts of broadcasters in diversifying the make-up of the crew. The way that sponsorship currently works exacerbates the disadvantages facing people of colour who are pursuing careers in media industries. Judi has had to develop her own networks, through proving herself to those in positions of power, so that they hire her on their next show.

"I've been very lucky, and what I feel particularly proud of is working with producers, and they've called me for the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing. I was unhappy at one stage with the sponsorship, because I know my peers. There are very few women at this level - male recordists know me, and know of me, and they could have stepped in and recommended me, and they never did."

Ratio of men to women

Sound recording and mixing is still predominantly the domain of white men. There are very few women in senior roles.

"At my level, there's me, and maybe three other women coming up. There's ninety-seven men and three women, if that, and those women behind me have probably got ten years less experience than me."

Judi has observed a slowly improving picture of female representation across technical television crafts.

"There are many more women now in lighting, sound, camera, set decoration, costume, etc. Now women realise that they don't need to lift heavy boxes and ask for help - previously they sometimes injured themselves. I trained with a personal trainer when I was doing documentaries, because of carrying so much stuff, and it's paid off, because I looked after myself, but mental strength is far more important than lifting something heavy. You need to be resilient, and can't apologise after every little thing."

" . . . So, people will approach you on issues of race and sex, but they won't approach you for anything else, because, by definition of who you are, you can't comment on those aspects."

However, in terms of racial diversity, Judi thinks she is the only Black woman who is production mixing television dramas at present.

The future

Given Judi's senior position, she now has the influence to support those without connections who are trying to enter the industry.

"When I get CVs, I will try to use people who don't necessarily have those networks. Sometimes it's successful, and sometimes it's not. It's quite tough, because routes into the industry are very limited. It's been extraordinarily difficult to get trainees from diverse backgrounds, because they feel intimidated by the industry. It's quite an elitist industry.

I've watched people absorb this imposter syndrome and you see them shrink, and they won't develop that hard shell that you need."

Encouraging and supporting diverse entrants is difficult. The challenges are exacerbated by the freelance culture of the industry, which results in limited training opportunities. Judi feels that this is an area which would benefit from some strategic organisation.

"I think there are various initiatives and groups that run small courses, but we need to tie those groups together a bit more, and get them in touch with people like me. Sometimes, trainees can't see the bigger picture, and they are Instagramming the star next to them. They don't know the set etiquette, and you can't then recommend them to another person."

Understanding the professional culture - what is, and what is not, acceptable - is not always self-evident, especially for young 'digital natives' trying to enter the industry. Training needs to include professionalism, as well as technical skills.

When asked to sum up how the television production industry has changed since the 1980s in relation to the position of, and opportunities for, women and people of colour, Judi says, "there is still some work to be done, but we've come a long way." In part, this success is due to the tenacity of pioneers like Judi. She is not ready to hang up her microphone and mixer any time soon, "I still have some mountains I want to climb."

Representology takeaways

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