

THE ART OF SOUND

Having won his first BAFTA TV Craft award, Audio Production alumnus Kim Tae Hak shares what life is like behind the scenes.

"At the end of the day, it's not my film, it's the director's," says Westminster alumnus Kim Tae Hak (Audio Production MA, 2009). "All I'm trying to do is bring that to life; make it more dramatic, maximise the emotions."

For some time now, documentary film has begun taking on a life of its own. In a world where fact is solidly weirder than fiction, big and small screen documentaries are growing steadily more creative, more cinematic and—thanks to modern-day streaming services—far more accessible. Documentaries are becoming...larger than life.

You may recall two particularly memorable recent titles—*Three Identical Strangers* (2018) telling the tale of triplets separated at birth; true crime docuseries *Don't F*ck with Cats* (2019), directed by Mark Lewis, chronicling how online sleuths' caught an internet killer.

At the heart of these dark, evocative narratives are the soundtracks—taking viewers through the feelings, shocks and murmurs of the storytelling. Both of these soundscapes were created by Kim and his team at acclaimed post-production supplier, Molinare.

And when it comes to the cinematic bent of the modern documentary, Kim promises there is much more to come.

"Believe me—demand from clients is getting bigger and bigger," he says. "Since I started in this industry, over the last 12 years, the budget is going up and clients are demanding more and more. We all want to make this just as cinematic as *The Crown*."

During his time in Molinare's documentary arm, Kim has worked on several critically acclaimed projects. But it was his role as Sound Effects Editor on the 2021 documentary, *1971: The Year That Music Changed*

Everything, which has just won him his first BAFTA.

"This was teamwork by the way," Kim says. "I mean, it's not just me. It was a team who won the BAFTA"

Winning the award was a complete shock to all of them, he says—in fact the experience of winning had its own cinematic quality.

"It's like a film frame that passes through really quickly," Kim recalls.

"So, I've got these photographic memories—we got our names announced, we won it, we went onto the platform and made a brief speech and then went backstage and collected the award, got the press photos, and then after that, I think about half an hour later, 'Oh, this is real, you know.'"

The Apple TV docuseries, *1971*, catalogues a seminal year in musical history—including the likes of The Rolling Stones, Joni Mitchell and Elton John—alongside



the tumultuous period of social and geopolitical history feeding and surrounding it.

There was the Vietnam War, the tail-end of hippie counterculture in America colliding with the incoming Nixon administration.

Marvin Gaye's seminal 'What's Going On' track and John Lennon's 'Imagine'—two Moments in 1971's substantial back catalogue—encapsulate the complex, fearful, hopeful mood of the era.

Even as a fan of much of the music featured, Kim says working on the project still taught him a lot about where that music came from and the world in which it landed.

"I didn't know about how they relate and what was the connection between the music and the problems occurring in society at the time."

And in 2020, as Kim and his team worked on the documentary, the world was entering a fresh spate of unfathomable events.

"It was at a time when the nation had completely shut down," Kim recalls. "So, it was quite difficult for all of us, you know, just trying to get into the office."

As they tried to get the project done, they were also learning how to use Zoom and how to work as a team while also social distancing.

Two years on, the team received a coveted NAACP nomination ("we were really happy with the nomination, but then we didn't win it—we didn't think we were going to win"). A few months later, they learned they were nominated for the BAFTA Craft—awhich recognises achievements of behind the scenes talent—and the rest

is history. It is, perhaps, fitting that Kim won the award for his work on this iconic music documentary, as it was really music which brought him to where he is today.

When he was considering university courses, he was initially unsure of what path he should take.

"But I always liked music," he says. "I came from a music background and so it was quite a natural choice for me to do music technology—I didn't want to do something classical."

When he left South Korea to study BSc, Music and Sound Technology at the University of Portsmouth, it would still be some time before Kim considered a career in TV and film post-production.

After graduating, he moved to London to study the University of

Westminster's Audio Production MA in 2008.

"At the time, the Audio Production course was quite famous in London, when I was doing research," Kim says. "I lived in Portsmouth for nearly four years, so it was really time for me to move on to London and just to see what was going on."

During the course, Kim appreciated both the cutting-edge technology available and the experience of Westminster's staff.

"I remember that Mike, who was one of our lecturers, was signed up with Sony Productions as a musician already," he says. "So, it was great, you know – one of our lecturers was signed up as an artist with Sony," he laughs.

Some of Kim's best memories of the course are – perhaps understandably – the hours he spent down in the studios, making use of the "industry-level" facilities.

"We just used to stay day and night working hard, but at the same time just enjoying practising," he recalls. "And then we just – you know – nipped out for a drink at the student union bar or the pub around there, or went to gigs together. Just an amazing experience really."

He particularly enjoyed his final project on the course, which – presciently – entailed creating a soundtrack to a short film.

"That was quite memorable for me – a huge challenge at the time."

When he finally set his sights on film and TV post-production, the next challenge was chasing down opportunities, in this largely opaque field.

"I have to say it's not the same as now, 14 years ago."

At a time when LinkedIn was a niche past-time for a handful of IT recruitment



consultants, Kim chose instead to draw up a list of post-production companies and hand-deliver his CV to them.

"I actually knocked at the door of each post-production facility."

A few months later, he had two responses – one was from Molinare. From work experience, he progressed to runner and then to Sound Designer in 2010 – within months of completing his MA. He was then named Dubbing Mixer in 2021.

As an Asian man, Kim is acutely aware of the diversity issue in the industry as a whole.

"This is an industry filled with white British men usually. There have been a lot more female producers, directors, recording engineers, sound mixers and sound engineers – and also from all different ethnic backgrounds. So, there's been a lot of improvement as opposed to 20, 30 years ago. It's got a lot better. I think there still needs to be more."

Despite the stellar trajectory his own career has taken, Kim still admits to

having his own moments of self-doubt.

"Don't get me wrong," he says.

"When I don't get opportunities, when I don't get a project that I expected to, when I don't get an opportunity and it goes to my colleague – I sometimes think, 'Did I not get that opportunity because of where I come from?'"

"I was lucky enough to have my line manager," Kim adds. "He picked me up when I was a runner. He trained me... he was basically only looking at talent."

When asked what advice he has for new graduates, he hammers it down to three crucial components: be patient, take every opportunity that comes along and – above all – be proactive.

"After my graduation, I went out there, I handed out my resume so that's how I got the call," he says. "I don't mean that students need to go to company receptions for that. However, use all those platforms – social media, LinkedIn. Go to the forums, events – and then build the relationships and drop an email – that's how you get it started."