

Arts

Best podcasts of 2019: power, politics and Dolly Parton

As money began to flow into the form, producers trained their eyes on the big stories of our time. And the big names



Dolly Parton was the subject of one of the year's best podcasts. Photo: Ron Galella/Getty © Ron Galella Collection via Getty

Fiona Sturges DECEMBER 29 2019

2019 saw the big bucks arrive in podcasting. Spotify went shopping and hoovered up a clutch of podcast networks, among them Gimlet Media (a snip at \$340m), later landing a development deal with the Obamas. More money in the industry is good news, though we'll have to see what this means for independent producers. Listener figures have continued to rise, as has the volume of new shows. Remarkably, there are now an estimated 800,000 podcasts in existence — some 30 million episodes, for audiophiles who like a challenge.

There's also been a spike in celebrity-hosted interview shows this year, most of which have been bland and unnecessary (guys, if you want to talk to your friends just pick up the phone). Interview shows are best left to the experts, as shown by [The Last Bohemians](#), from the journalist and presenter Kate Hutchinson, which brought thoughtfulness and atmosphere to its profiles of pioneering older women, including the artist Molly Parkin and performer Cosey Fanni Tutti.



George the Poet, host of 'Have You Heard George's Podcast?'. Photo: Amara Eno

True crime has continued to dominate the medium, though the best are the ones without corpses. I loved *The Shrink Next Door* and [Gangster Capitalism](#), two series exposing the dark side of power and privilege. The former told of a New York psychiatrist who inveigled his way into the life of a patient, took over his business and moved into his home; the latter unpicked the multimillion-dollar scandal over admissions to elite US universities as the case was still unfolding. *The Missing Cryptoqueen*, meanwhile, was a brilliant slow-burner about an international cryptocurrency scam and the disappearance of the woman, Dr Ruja Ignatova, who masterminded it.



David Dimbleby profiled Rupert Murdoch in 'The Sun King'

It's also been a vintage year for sweeping historical documentaries. The New York Times' *1619* series began with the docking 400 years ago of the *White Lion*, a ship carrying enslaved Africans, in the then-colony of Virginia, and traced the history of African Americans in the US from that point on. The venerable BBC presenter David Dimbleby made his first foray into podcasting with *The Sun King* — a terrific six-parter about Rupert Murdoch which looked at the media mogul's relationship with money and power. [Dolly Parton's America](#) was a historical documentary of sorts, as the host Jad Abumrad — best known for WNYC's *Radiolab* — expertly placed Parton amid a broader history of music, culture and gender politics.



Sarah Allely recording at Kingfisher Pool in Heathcote National Park. Photo: James Stuart

Among the more exciting developments has been the introduction of sound designers and musicians to narrative series, taking podcasting into the realms of sound art. *Brain on Nature*, from the Sydney-based producer Sarah Allely, elegantly charted her own recovery from a brain injury, taking us deep inside her head through field recordings and ambient sound. Meanwhile the second series of [Have You Heard George's Podcast?](#), the experimental, award-winning series from the London-based spoken-word performer George the Poet, tackled tough topics around race and class, but also fearlessly and playfully merged music, fiction and documentary storytelling. It messed with your head in the best possible way.

Top 10 of 2019

[Have You Heard George's Podcast?](#)

[Dolly Parton's America](#)

[The Shrink Next Door](#)

[The Missing Cryptoqueen](#)

[Spectacular Failures](#)

[The Last Bohemians](#)

[1619](#)

[The Sun King](#)

[Brain on Nature](#)

[Gangster Capitalism](#)

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