

Articles

7-2008

A Secret History of Phonography

Christopher DeLaurenti

College of William and Mary, cadelaurenti@wm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/articles>



Part of the [Other Music Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DeLaurenti, Christopher, "A Secret History of Phonography" (2008). *Articles*. 23.

<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/articles/23>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

A Secret History of Phonography

Christopher DeLaurenti

Published in [The Believer, July/August 2008](#), p. 54 then revised and expanded October 2008 and February 2012

Why listen to misery and murder?

On June 21, 1996, Claude Matthews smuggled his microphones into the Center for Animal Care and Control in Manhattan and captured the gallows yelping, baying, and whining of doomed dogs. The resulting album, *DogPoundFoundSound (Bad Radio Dog Massacre)*, might be the most brutal yet profoundly moving recording you will ever find: You hear peals of yapping and barking, then a strange sudden pause; a tiny, crouched snippet of contented “oohs” flow from a distant radio. A heavy door rolls open. A dog howls again, begging for freedom (or at least attention) and the chorus of barking resumes. *DogPoundFoundSound...* also marks an obscure, though crucial milestone in the history of field recording.

Field recordings began with Thomas Edison. In 1877, after several attempts by other inventors, Edison perfected the phonograph, a portmanteau of the Greek words for “sound” or “voice” and “writer.” Emile Berliner patented the turntable gramophone in 1887, and soon thereafter ethnographers traveled the world recording the music and language of “primitive” peoples. The resulting cylinders and disks multiplied quickly enough for sound archives to emerge in Vienna (1899), Berlin (1900), and elsewhere to systematically collect, catalogue, and preserve field recordings. These collections, most notably the renowned Berlin Phonogrammarchiv, house thousands of recordings, all sonic spectres of vanished cultures and destroyed habitats.

But what is a field recording? Most of us listen to studio recordings; aided by engineers, a producer, and assistants, musicians record songs, symphonies, and everything in between within a controlled, generally predictable context. In the studio, the engineer mikes an amp; the guitarist may or may not play, she or he may mess up, play beautifully, or leave the room. But the building will still stand, electrical power will flow, and the door can be shut against interruptions and the outside world.

By contrast, field recordings transpire under uncontrolled, experimental, and often haphazard conditions. Even today, the gear can be balky and suddenly succumb to excess wind, rain, and temperature. Surrounding noise can pose problems, masking and distorting the desired sound. Gear can fail and die without warning—or a handy replacement. You can never bring too many batteries. “In the field” often means that the recordist is a long way from home, comfort, certainty.

50 years after Edison’s invention, the gear sounded better, but became bulky: When John Lomax set out across the American South in the summer of 1933, he and his son Alan hauled a 315 pound acetate disk recorder to record many musicians, notably the great folk singer Lead Belly. Around the same time, the scholars at Cornell’s Laboratory of Ornithology weren’t so lucky; their optical film recording equipment and cumbersome parabolic dish microphones weighed enough to require a heavy-duty truck.

As technology improved, the size and cost of portable recording equipment shrank while the “field” expanded. In the 1940s, Tony Schwartz took his portable wire recorder into the streets of New York City. Albums such as *New York 19*, *The New York Taxi Driver*, and *1,2,3, and a Zing Zing Zing* capture street musicians (including the legendary Moondog), children’s jump-rope songs, and everyday speech.

In subsequent decades, recordists such as Bernie Krause, Dan Gibson, Lang Elliott, and many others ventured into wilderness to capture and preserve environmental sound. The World Soundscape Project, founded by R. Murray Schafer in the late 1960s, inaugurated the systematic recording and scientific measurement of noisy urban environments.

Schafer introduced the term “soundscape”—our sonic environment how we hear it physiologically, socially, and culturally—along with “acoustic ecology”—defined in the *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology* as “...the study of the effects of the acoustic environment, or soundscape, on the physical responses or behavioral characteristics of those living within it.” But Schafer went further, declaring in the book *Tuning of the World* that the soundscape—our soundscape—is a musical composition which we listeners should apprehend and accept responsibility for its form.

In the decades that followed, several of Schafer’s students such as Barry Truax and Hildegard Westerkamp as well as others influenced by Schafer’s concepts including Michael Rösenberg and Darren Copeland created “soundscape compositions” based on field recordings; works such as *Riverrun* and *Beneath the Forest Floor* use

electroacoustic means (overdubbing, digital chorusing and delay, pitch transposition, granular synthesis, etc.) to convey and amplify the “sense of place” embodied by the original recordings.

Traditional composers used field recordings in their work, too. Long before the advent of *musique concrète* in the late 1940s, Italian composer Ottorino Respighi requested a specific gramophone recording (issued by the Concert Record Gramophone Company, catalogue number R6105) of a nightingale in the final panel of his 1924 symphonic triptych, *The Pines of Rome*. Decades later, Karlheinz Stockhausen blanched field recordings from the southern Sahara, Bali, Japan, and the Amazon basin into fizzing vocodered voices, sine waves, and thrumming electromagnetic fields in his superb *Telemusik* (1966).

Until the 1990s, a single objective ideal prevailed, one that kept the field recordist invisible and enshrined accuracy, fidelity, and realism. Inaudible edits shored up a seamless sonic reality. Flaws such as wind rumble, excessive tape hiss, pops, microphone handling noise, and other unwanted byproducts of recording were considered tokens of incompetence, lackluster equipment, or routine bad luck.

Then several trends converged: the aural acceptance of absolutely quiet music fashioned out of digitally flattened sound (such as Bernhard Günter’s *Un peu de neige salé*) influenced by the music of Morton Feldman and late-period Luigi Nono (especially the 1980 string quartet *Fragmente-stille, an Diotima*); the appearance of the “glitch,” unprecedented spiky transients made possible by the computer-based editing and re-ordering of microloops, sonic grains, and other computer-based manipulation; the steady reissue onto compact disc of ethnographic recordings from around the world on labels like Ocora and JVC; released on compact disc in 1996, Westerkamp’s *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989) reminded a generation of composers that it was possible to include their own recorded voices in their field-recording based pieces; and most importantly, the advent of inexpensive, portable recording gear: the MiniDisc recorder.

Introduced by Sony in 1992, the MiniDisc not only peeled away a discouraging layer of hiss heard on portable cassette recorders but made it easy for anyone to index, retrieve, and frame any sound within earshot or microphone range.

In recent years, a protean group of sound artists have reclaimed the term “phonography” with its Edison-era connotations of venturing out into the world and

making field recordings in unusual locations from unexpected, and at times poetic, perspectives: Albums such as the Quiet American's *Plumbing and Irrigation of South Asia*, Peter Cusack's recordings made in wintry Siberia, *Baikal Ice*, and the resonating wind silos of northern *breathing towers* teem with musical, ear-bewitching sounds. Some phonographers bluntly rebel against the commercial values of accuracy, fidelity, and seamless realism. Phonographers may allow, and when appropriate, affirm the presence of the recordist and the recording gear, warts and all. Phonography does not always conform to established, commercially-driven ideas of "quality," technique, or "fidelity."

DogPoundFoundSound (BadRadioDogMassacre justifies the rebellion of phonography: Occasional disruptions, the blatant shift of microphones, and anomalous pops compel us to peer closer into the shrouded sound while reminding us that we are separate from what we hear—and thus free to act. The spectral howls and morose yelps of innocent, imprisoned animals live in our hearts, telling us that there is justice yet to be done.