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# Doing anthropology in sound

## ABSTRACT

Sound has come to have a particular resonance in many disciplines over the past decade. Social theorists, historians, literary researchers, folklorists, and scholars in science and technology studies and visual, performative, and cultural studies provide a range of substantively rich accounts and epistemologically provocative models for how researchers can take sound seriously. This conversation explores general outlines of an anthropology of sound. Its main focus, however, is on the issues involved in using sound as a primary medium for ethnographic research. [*sound, epistemology, ethnography, documentation, media representation*]

Sound has come to have a particular resonance in many disciplines over the past decade. Social theorists (Attali 1995), historians (Brady 1999; Carter 1992; Corbin 1998; Hoffer 2003; Johnson 1995; Picker 2003; Rath 2003; Smith 2001), literary researchers (Smith 1999), folklorists (Bendix 2003), and scholars in science and technology studies (Sterne 2003; Thompson 2002) and in visual, performative, and cultural studies (Bull and Back 2003; Chion 2002; Connor 2000; Drobnick 2004; Erlmann 2004; Gouk 1999; Järviluoma and Wagstaff 2002; Kahn 1999; Kruth and Stobart 2000; Morris 1998; van Leeuwen 1999; Wishart 1996) provide a range of substantively rich accounts and epistemologically provocative models for how researchers can take sound seriously. In this conversation we explore not only what an anthropology of sound might be like but also what doing ethnography through sound—listening, recording, editing, and representation—might entail and promise.<sup>1</sup>

**Don Brenneis:** Why don't you start out by talking about the chronology of taking up sound recording in your anthropological work?

**Steve Feld:** I was inspired to think about recording sound as anthropological work at pretty much the same moment that I was inspired to pursue anthropology. That was in the late sixties when, as an undergraduate, I studied with Colin Turnbull. He gave me the three LPs he made in central Africa in the fifties and early sixties (Turnbull 1957, 1958, 1961a). It was in the process of thinking about the relationship between his recordings and his writings that I realized how important sound and sound recording was, particularly if you did research with people who live in intensely rich aural environments. That was the beginning of my fascination with rain forests, with rain-forest aesthetics and ecology, and the sensitivities to sound, the auditory acuity that is central to everyday lived experience in rain forests. And that was the origin of my desire to do ethnographic work in and through the medium of sound.

**DB:** Was there a great deal of the acoustic surround evident on Turnbull's LPs?

**SF:** Not a whole lot, and that is something we talked about. Colin knew I was working on film soundtracks and was studying electronic music. That was another accident: Herb Deutsch, Bob Moog's coinventor of the Moog synthesizer, also taught at Hofstra, in the music department at that time (Deutsch 1976). Herb was the other person who was encouraging me to go into sound work, teaching me composition with techniques of musique concrète, tape editing, electro-acoustic synthesis. So, at the same moment, I was learning in a lab with a prototype Moog synthesizer and learning from Colin how to hear and transcribe Mbuti music. I suppose that is how I came to imagine a life working in sound both as a musician–composer–engineer and as an anthropologist, a life where I could maintain a creative and analytic relationship to both the materiality and sociality of sound.

**DB:** And so you worked for several years with Turnbull doing the transcriptions, and then . . . ?

**SF:** . . . I worked with him during my last two years of college. Then Colin suggested that I either go to Chicago to study with Victor Turner or go to Indiana to study with Alan Merriam. I visited both and chose Indiana because of the Archives of Traditional Music and the strong African music, arts, and humanities program with Merriam, Emil Snyder, and Roy Seiber. Plus David Baker's jazz program and the presence of Iannis Xenakis teaching electronic music in the music school.

**DB:** One of the goals in this discussion is to think about new forms or complementary styles of ethnographic documentation. It's been a long time since I read Turnbull's work, but I recall a really strong sense of what places felt like and sounded like. How effectively did that complementarity work out on the LPs?

**SF:** Well, Colin was a very evocative writer. I was deeply moved, as I think many undergraduates had been, by *The Forest People* (Turnbull 1961b), which of course included very sonic descriptions. In those days we were less critical of romanticism in accounts like that, but I quickly went on to read his more sociological papers (Turnbull 1960a, 1960b) and *Wayward Servants* (Turnbull 1965), his dissertation. The connection between sound and place was critical in all that work, which again took me into new ways to listen to his recordings.

If you're wondering where all that came from, I can say that one of the things that really impressed me

about Colin was how music was always part of his everyday life. He had a harpsichord in his office at the American Museum of Natural History and enjoyed playing classical music at lunch. But he could go from the harpsichord to sitting for several hours listening to African music. And one year, as a New Year's present, Colin gave me a copy of the Beatles' "Let It Be" and said, "This is the greatest song I've heard in years." Obviously, it is that kind of active social listening, every day, that develops a deep awareness of the presence and significance of sound. And I think this is what informs the feeling for sound and place that is so clear in his writings and recordings.

**DB:** *The Forest People* was obviously a success, but the recordings were, too, as I remember. Did that make an impression on you, that recordings, LPs, could be a serious and popular medium of ethnographic representation, like books?

**SF:** Yes, recordings always seemed to me an important alternative as a form of ethnographic practice, and I'm sure the popularity of Colin's recordings informed that. Colin, as you might know—there's a bit of this in Richard Grinker's (2000) biography—loved to write and had a remarkably fluid ability as a writer. He could write a manuscript like *The Forest People* in a month and barely do any editing. Things would just pour out of him. During the whole time I was in New Guinea in the midseventies, once a month I would receive a letter from Colin that was between four and seven single-spaced typewritten pages long and full of utterly incredible prose. He left a huge paper trail. Colin's generosity with young people, the quality of friendship and encouragement that he offered, was really extraordinary. Unfortunately, little of that comes through in Grinker's book. But, anyway, his recordings certainly excited in me the idea that an ethnography should include what it is that people hear every day, what I came to call "acoustemology," one's sonic way of knowing and being in the world (Feld 1996). Implicitly, his recordings ask what it means to live and feel as a person in this place. Voiced in a more contemporary way, his recordings signal that the concept of "habitus" must include a history of listening.

**DB:** So, Indiana, graduate school, did Merriam provide a strikingly different model of being a musical anthropologist?

**SF:** Immensely different. Alan was a very rigorous, rigid, highly disciplined, and disciplining kind of teacher and scholar. He couldn't have been a more different kind of person than Colin. And he presented a very different kind of academic model, much more the obsessive bibliographer and discographer—a model of modernist control and mastery of the

material; the megareview of the literature ruled in his classes. He was not a sixties kind of guy. The last thing in the world I can imagine is Alan sitting at the piano pounding out “Let It Be” with his students and friends singing along.

But I read *The Anthropology of Music* (Merriam 1964) very carefully and still think it is an incredibly important book in the intellectual genealogy of this work. The very first paper I wrote for him in 1972 was a response to that book; I called it “The Anthropology of Sound.” It opened with two rhetorical sentences: “What about an anthropology of sound? What about ethnographies that are tape recordings?” Based on everything from my musique concrète interests to my jazz experience to Colin’s writings and recordings in the rain forest, I tried to critique the limitations, sonic and cultural, imposed by the notion of “music.” And made a number of what I suppose now read like very sixties proposals for how one could make an edited tape recording, or continuous 20-minute side of an LP, that was a sonic experience of being in a place, including, but not limited to, “music.” That was my first graduate student paper in “ethnomusicology.” I guess I have been experimenting with different versions of that idea ever since.

**DB:** Did anything else at Indiana shape your attitude about sound?

**SF:** The same semester that I wrote that paper I had a course with Carl Voegelin, an introduction to linguistic anthropology, and I really hit it off with him. He was a world-class eccentric. The first time I walked into his office he asked me, “Do you dream in black and white or color?” I said, “Mostly black and white.” And he said, “Me too, we have a lot in common!” We had “those” kinds of conversations, if you know what I mean.

Anyway, Carl encouraged me to write a paper on the relationship between language and music. It became the basis for my first publication, on linguistic models of music (Feld 1974). It was Carl who made me think about how an anthropology of sound would have to grapple with poetics, with the space between language and music. He got me into reading all the paralinguistic literature, the prosody literature, and thinking about the gradient dimensions of language and music in the larger environment of sound and meaning. He turned me on to Boas, Sapir, and Jakobson, to their essays on sound systems, phonetic symbolism, iconicity as well as their thoughts on music (Boas 1940; Jakobson 1987; Sapir 1949).

**DB:** And this was a pretty heterodox position in the linguistic period of the early seventies?

**SF:** Definitely! Chomsky’s *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965) was the bible in our straight linguistics courses.

**DB:** One of the things that blew me away when I read Merriam’s book was that it really was an anthropology of music in terms of there being all these crucial, ineradicable, powerful relationships between what in other terms might be thought of more simply as musical and extramusical, between what you could hear and what you couldn’t. And what you didn’t. I read it because I had a fairly heterodox past in terms of being interested in paralinguistic, interactional prosody, and the heuristic virtues of hearing talk in “musical” terms (Brenneis 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1990a, 1990b, 1995; Brenneis and Lein 1977; Lein and Brenneis 1978; see also March 2002). I found it a great intellectual liberation.

**SF:** I, too, found it liberating, but in all honesty I don’t think Merriam was terribly interested in liberation or aware of a lot of questions about sonic representation. He was not interested in experimental music at all. I tried to talk to him about Cowell (1930) and Cage (1961), about experimental projects in sonic anthropology that could parallel what Rothenberg and Tedlock (1970–80) were doing in the early days of ethnopoetics with *Alcheringa*. His response was, “That’s flaky.” He wanted it all to be about documentation, all about empirical science. The LP recordings he made were really boring and had a sense of tedious obligation, rather than adventure and dialogue. He was very suspicious of Colin’s work, and he sideswiped me with comments about how I was trying to do a “Carlos Castaneda thing” with my idea of an anthropology of sound. His constant reference to “sciencing” about music was an archreactionary stance toward both hardcore humanism and any kind of more resistant, alternative poetic or aesthetic practice . . .

**DB:** . . . a kind of productive encyclopedism. So how did you move from central Africa to the rain forests of New Guinea? Was that in conversation with Merriam?

**SF:** No. I fully intended to go to central Africa. And that is what Merriam wanted. He sent me to Paris for a semester in 1974 to talk with Simha Arom and Gilbert Rouget and listen to their recordings (Arom 1966, 1978; Rouget 1946) and think about a place in Francophone central Africa where I might work. But in France the musical materials and ideas that impressed me most were Hugo Zemp’s research with the ‘Are’Are panpipe music in Malaita, Solomon Islands (de Coppet and Zemp 1978; Zemp 1971, 1994, 1995). And his Melanesian work, which opened so many new ways of thinking about music for me, also resonated. Because in New Mexico, in 1972, I had

met Bambi and Buck Schieffelin at an NSF visual anthropology institute. I saw their films of Bosavi in Papua New Guinea and heard some of the field recordings. At the end of the summer they gave me the tapes and asked me to prepare them for archiving at the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana. So I had already spent a semester listening to that material, almost entirely ceremonial recordings. And the first time I heard somebody cry in response to a *gisalo* song, in the Bosavi ceremonials Buck wrote about (Schieffelin 1976), I thought, wow, here is something that is as acoustically amazing as anything I've heard from Africa. And I think it was about then that I said, "If you ever go back there . . ."

**DB:** Bambi had not done her own research yet?

**SF:** No. Bambi was a graduate student at Columbia at that time. We all went to the Linguistic Society of America Linguistics Institute in Ann Arbor in summer 1973 and continued talking about a collaboration, which I imagined as something I would do briefly on my way to Africa. When they returned to New Guinea for her research, 1975–77, I joined them. And the first day I was there, within two hours of arriving in the village, we heard sung weeping. Somebody had died. They said, "Get your tape recorder." I didn't understand the language. I didn't know *anything!* So here I am, wham! with big Nagra [tape recorder] and headphones and microphone sitting among all these people who were weeping. I just sort of closed my eyes and listened and realized that I could easily spend a year trying to figure out the first sounds I was hearing. So much was going on with the sound and social patterning, in the relationship between emotion and sonic form and structure and organization. And, then, there was the question of funerals, the connections with sociality, the importance in Melanesia of the way words and objects stand in for persons. All of that just slammed me in the head within a couple of hours of being in Bosavi. So, why go to Africa?

**DB:** So you stayed and recorded—what else besides the weeping?

**SF:** The missionaries had trashed much of the ceremonial life, so I didn't concentrate on that, save working with Buck on the spirit medium séances, which also involved *gisalo* songs. Otherwise I recorded everything from storytelling and speech to everyday sounds in the forest, especially with people working, and of course birds, and all the other ambient sounds that Bosavi people sing with, to, and about.

**DB:** And the recordings were all done in situ—something which is quite palpable and really got to me when I first listened to the LPs.

**SF:** Yes, that's a critical point. I never sat people down in front of the recorder, or staged events for recordings, or asked women to take the babies off of their breasts and things like that. A lot of the songs of women singing were with kids nursing or while they were making food or doing things with their families. And there are lots of recordings with men and women working in their gardens or walking on trails. I wanted the recordings to convey an intimate sense of everyday life in the forest.

**DB:** So this was the basis for the material on the two original LPs that accompanied *Sound and Sentiment* (Feld 1990b)?

**SF:** Yes. One of them was for the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, the very first LP in their new series, called *Music of the Kaluli* (Feld 1982). Then I did a more analytical LP for Barenreiter Musicaphon in the "Music of Oceania" series, *Kaluli Weeping and Song* (Feld 1985). That one had the pieces that are transcribed and translated in *Sound and Sentiment*.

**DB:** And that's another dimension of this broader thinking about sonic documentation, the pedagogical side of it. Because I'd been teaching *Sound and Sentiment* before I had the recordings and realized later that it made such a difference for the students to be able to hear them. Going back to your initial question, "Well, what about sound?" You convey the sound right well in the prose, but the recordings are immediate and repeatable. And when students can hear the weeping and song and birds and forest, it makes such a rich impression, particularly when you lead off with the first track, the one with people working in the forest.

**SF:** Yes, on that first track of the *Music of the Kaluli* LP you hear this structured kind of whooping in between speech and song that people do when they're cutting trees. Simultaneously and in sequence you get the layering of speaking voices, the birds and ambience, the overlapping of axes, trees falling, and the whooping, whistling, yodeling, and singing different snatches of song—12 minutes of *lift-up-over sounding*, the local term for all the ways sounds alternate, interlock, and overlap (Feld 1988). Having that as the first track on the first LP was a way of saying yet again, "What about sound?" and "What about ethnography in and through sound?" And "What about ethnography as tape editing?"

**DB:** It's not only their relationship to the forest but to each other.

**SF:** Yes, the whole first side of the LP was about sociality in sound, acoustic copresence and interaction—the

relationship between people, the forest, voice, and sound. It was not technically as good as what I was able to do for the *Voices of the Rainforest* CD (Feld 1991) years later, but the idea was the same, to have the sound raise the question about the indexicality of voice and place, to provoke you to hear sound making as place making. And when you hear the way birds overlap in the forest and you hear the way voices overlap in the forest, all of a sudden you can grasp something at a sensuous level that is considerably more abstract and difficult to convey in a written ethnography.

**DB:** The recordings are of a remarkably high quality. Were you recording at this stage with a Nagra and similarly high-end professional microphones?

**SF:** Yes. I bought one of the first stereo Nagras in the United States in December 1973. And I was using AKG studio microphones. There was also a low-tech component to the way I worked. I would make cassette copies on the spot and use those for playback, for giving copies to Kaluli people, and for transcriptions and discussions of the texts. I used extensive playback of the recordings as soon as I made them and over long periods of time as a key methodology. I felt that not just being with people in sound but listening and talking about the recordings was an important way to gain a sense of how to be an ethnographic listener.

**DB:** When you were putting the albums together you were clearly making editorial choices of what material to include, but how much tape editing were you actually doing as a production technique?

**SF:** Editing first consisted of selection and sequence of pieces, and contextualization by text and image. As for tape editing, the only piece that I put on either of those LPs that actually violated the temporal continuity of the recorded moment was that first track, of “welcome to the forest.” Those 12 minutes come from a few hours of tape that I had recorded on that particular afternoon; I think there are about ten edits in that piece to compress the time.

**DB:** And condense and intensify the relationship of people to the time and space in the forest. Was that the track that got picked up by the radio?

**SF:** Yes. It was played on National Public Radio, and it was from there that an NPR producer got in touch with me to propose a program. At that time I was reading a lot of Murray Schafer’s work about soundscapes (Schafer 1977a, 1977b, 1978a, 1978b, 1986, 1993). And I realized that people weren’t going to listen to these LPs—except a few academics and

composers—and I thought it could be interesting to try soundscape radio as an ethnographic medium. And so I got a grant from NPR’s satellite program development fund and went back to Papua New Guinea in the summer of 1982, then produced a program for them, called *Voices in the Forest*, a 30-minute soundscape of 24 hours of sounds, a day in the forest with Kaluli people.

**DB:** And that was edited using multitrack recording and musique concrète compositional techniques?

**SF:** Yes, using tape editing as a compositional technique with a multitrack recorder, layering and overlapping different recordings from the 24-hour cycle. I was also inspired in the editing by lessons from my film teacher, Jean Rouch, especially his concept of “ethnographic film in the first person” (Rouch 2003). I was trying to do a kind of poetic fusion of film soundtrack and ethnographic recording. I think that the fact that I had been a film sound recordist and that I was used to walking with the tape recorder was part of this. Like Rouch with his camera, the tape recorder was always something that I wore. I just went where people went. And the editing involved techniques that heightened and marked that sense of intimacy and spontaneity and contact between recordist and recorded, between listener and sounds.

**DB:** The side of your sound work that connects with Buck’s research on ceremonial performance is clear, especially recording the relationship of birds, the spirit voices, to the ceremonial songs. But how does this kind of perspective on recording everyday realities that you’re talking about connect with Bambi’s research on language socialization and everyday domestic life (Feld and Schieffelin 1982; Schieffelin 1990; Schieffelin and Feld 1998; Schieffelin 1976)?

**SF:** I realized when I first heard the women’s weeping that I had to somehow gain entrée into the world of Bosavi women. In the months after I arrived, Bambi took me to a sago camp where she was recording some children’s interactions with their mother, Ulahi, one of the women in her study. The very first time that I heard Ulahi sing I just dropped my jaw completely. That night in my diary I wrote, “the Billie Holiday of Bosavi.” What a voice! And I’ve felt that way ever since. She is featured on the LPs, the radio work, on *Voices of the Rainforest*, and the *Bosavi* box set (Feld 2001a). Really a remarkably musical person, and I would have had no access to her or her world as a male ethnographer were it not for being introduced in Bosavi as Bambi’s younger brother and having Bambi ask her to work with me. So, from the start, my conversation with Bambi’s work on gender and domesticity, on socialization and everyday sound, was as important as my conversation with Buck’s work

on ceremonialism, cosmology, and sound symbolism in the forest.

**DB:** Let's talk more about Murray Schafer, the soundscape, acoustic design, acoustic ecology, all that work in the seventies on the World Soundscape Project that had such an interesting set of parallels to what you developed as an anthropology of sound in the Bosavi work during the 1970s and eighties.

**SF:** Murray Schafer's book *The Tuning of the World* came out in 1977, just when I came back from Papua New Guinea. By the time I started teaching sound and film at the Annenberg School of Communications in 1980, I had read and listened to his World Soundscape Project work and was using it in my teaching. The soundscape and soundscape design concepts were important to me, made a lot of sense in the context of the rain-forest work. Also, Murray's crowd included a lot of composers and radio people, and increasingly I was interested in his idea that soundscape research be presented as musical composition. I became a kind of ethnographer sidekick to that crowd.

**DB:** How was all of this positioned in disciplinary terms?

**SF:** Well, I don't know of any other ethnomusicologists or anthropologists who were as much in direct dialogue with Schafer and his work in the 1970s and 1980s. But by the late 1980s I certainly felt an anthropology of sound kinship with the work of other ethnographers who thought about a larger ecology of music, sound, and voice in compelling ways, particularly Ellen Basso (1985), Charlie Keil (1979), Tony Seeger (1988), Dennis Tedlock (1983), Greg Urban (1991), and Hugo Zemp (1978, 1979). And I felt a strong intellectual kinship with the next generation of rain-forest sonic researchers, too, like Marina Roseman (1991, 1995), Yoichi Yamada (1997), and Manolete Mora (1987, 1997). I was also attracted to the work of ethnographers, like Paul Stoller (1989), who explored sound as part of a more sensuous approach to ethnography.

When I moved to Texas in 1985, with a split position between anthropology and music, I wanted to push the agendas of sound and the senses. I started teaching regular courses on "Sound as a Symbolic System" and "Anthropology of the Senses." A group of very wonderful students took those classes, at the same time that they took classes with Katie Stewart (1995) on cultural poetics, Greg Urban (1991) on semiotics and linguistic anthropology, Joel Sherzer (1983) on speech play and verbal art, and Ward Keeler (1987) on performance (see also Graham 1995; Sherzer and Urban 1986). There was a real institutional

synergy at Texas at that time around expressive culture; it is now represented in some very sophisticated work on sound, poetics, and song by people from that cohort, like Keila Diehl (2002), Ron Emoff (2002), Aaron Fox (2004), Calla Jacobson (1999), Louise Meintjes (2003), David Samuels (2004), Tom Porcello (1998), Tom Solomon (2000), and Hans Weisethaunet (1998). (See also Feld and Fox 1994; Feld et al. 2004.)

**DB:** And it was right about this time that the *Voices of the Rainforest* project started with Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart?

**SF:** Yes. Actually I had met Mickey earlier, in 1983, when he began working on *Drumming at the Edge of Magic* (Hart 1990). One day he just showed up to talk about New Guinea drums. I'll always remember the way he kept inching his chair closer to me, finally saying, "Talk louder! I'm a drummer. I played last night to 25,000 kids!" Well, we kind of hit it off. I really just loved his enthusiasm for outside music, and he loved *Voices in the Forest* and played it at intermission during a Grateful Dead show. "Steven, get out there, come on, get into the audience. You're an anthropologist. Get out there!" So I'm walking around in the crowd and I'm thinking, "People are listening to this!" Then Mickey said to me, "See, if I'm interested in this, there are all these Deadheads who are interested in this, get it?" And I realized, "Oh, this is really a different way of thinking about a possible audience." Anyway, we stayed in touch. Some years later Mickey started a series on Rykodisc called "The World." He first released his own stuff, the field recordings he made in Egypt and elsewhere. Then he wanted to produce for other recordists, and that's when he called. "Come on out to my place. We're going to get [George] Lucas and Dolby [Laboratories] in on this. We're going to give you a Nagra on steroids. We're gonna take this thing out to the edge." And I said, "Well, I can go to New Guinea for the summer months, but then there's all the time for editing." He said, "No problem. I'll cut one of the engineers loose from the Grateful Dead herd and give him to you. How much time do you need? Five months?" And I'm thinking, "Whoa, this isn't like applying to NSF!" So I went to New Guinea with all this amazing equipment, and returned to Austin with 22 hours of tape recordings after that summer in Bosavi.

**DB:** You did this all with his equipment?

**SF:** Yes. We were testing the Dolby-Bryston unit, portable studio Dolby SR. This was the first remote field test for that equipment, which is quite remarkable. I could go on and on about the technology and audio experiments but I don't want to sound like a technofetishist. Let's just say that with Mickey's

equipment and connections it was really possible to do some amazing things. And at the same time Mickey's approach was quite respectful; when I questioned him about all the high-end gear, he just said, "Why should Kaluli music be recorded any less well than Grateful Dead music?" Nobody had ever made a commercial recording where there was an equal amount of environmental sounds and music before. I told Mickey, "I want people to hear what inspires the Bosavi composers and singers, what they're singing with and to and about; I want it to be an ecology of a day in the life of the forest." And he said, "Just go for it; I'll deal with the people upstairs."

At the opening for the CD at George Lucas's Skywalker ranch, Mickey went up to the head of Tower Records with me in tow and said, "It's Papua New Guinea. It's not Oceania. It's not Hawaii. It's not Mickey Hart. It's Papua New Guinea. Make a bin." I mean, academics can't do that sort of thing. Making the CD was one thing, dealing with being a sonic anthropologist in the world of rock star power and privilege a whole other ethnographic experience.

**DB:** Could you talk a little bit about what was involved in editing *Voices of the Rainforest*?

**SF:** Mickey liked the idea of 24 hours in one hour, to do a day in the life of the people and the forest. So in terms of editing, I did a hybrid of three sound genres, radio sound documentary, world music, and soundscape composition. You can simultaneously listen to *Voices* as one continuous hour-long composition, or listen to it as a document of Bosavi music contexted by ambient rain-forest sounds, or listen to it as a sonic tour, a story about environment, sound, and place. There's a lot of deep space on the recording because we layered the tracks on a multitrack recorder. I recorded in a way so that you can hear the height of sound and the depth of sound in the forest. That built on but went far beyond anything I'd done for the earlier LPs or the radio show.

**DB:** So you were really creating space as well as place by the way you edited both the time layers and the space layers.

**SF:** Yes; there are a lot of complex things in here, technical audio engineering things. But I didn't want the aesthetic of the recording to be dominated by them. I wanted local participation in creating the mix. So I had three cassette players in the bush. I would record tracks on the Nagra and then transfer them onto cassettes. And then I would sit with people and listen to the cassettes and invite my listeners to scroll the knobs on the cassettes. It was an ethnoaesthetic negotiation, trying to work with Bosavi people to

understand how they listened, how they heard the dimensionality of forest sound, how they would balance a mix of birds, water, cicadas, voices, and so forth. So you could say that to large extent the recording was premixed in the bush. The tracks that were chosen, the songs that were chosen, Ulahi as the featured composer, the sonic balance of the tracks, all of that was largely done with community consultation before I came back.

**DB:** So they really let you know what the tracks would be. This use of playback and feedback, of what you have called "dialogic editing" (Feld 1987, 1990a), has been a big theme in your work.

**SF:** Yes, in that I was influenced by Jean Rouch's (2003) idea of the necessity of sonic and visual feedback and playback, what he called the "contredon audiovisuel." When *Sound and Sentiment* arrived in Bosavi, during my 1982 visit, I tried to translate certain sections and discuss them with friends. That was stimulating, but awkward, because of dealing with the abstraction of language. With *Voices of the Rainforest*, we were doing dialogic editing *and* dialogic auditing, and doing it in sound, the most natural local medium. The height of that dialogic process, and I think for me the most remarkable musical moment in the history of my relationship with Bosavi people, is right there on that recording. That's the spontaneous moment where Ulahi is singing in the creek, "My American men, what are your names? My Australian women, what are your names? What are your names, my Australian women, my American men?" Afterwards, I said to her, "What's that?" And she said, "Well, when we came here today, you were telling me that this song man in your own country was going to help, that many people in Australia and America would hear my voice. And I was thinking, well, my songs are about the names of our places, and if I just sing the names of our places, they won't understand. So I thought that, if I sang the words *America* and *Australia*, then these other people would understand." This is a poetic brilliance that I find stunning. "Who's going to be listening to me?" That's what she's saying to herself and to all of us, "Who's going to listen to me?" I mean, really, how much more dialogic can it get (Feld 1996, 2000)?

**DB:** That suggests an interesting heuristic distinction between echoic and anechoic anthropology. How would you parse out the *Voices of the Rainforest* audience? Who's listening to it? What do you think folks are hearing, and how does it speak particularly to the more academic or ethnographic part of the audience?

**SF:** Well, I wasn't interested in populist glamour, but I got it slapped in my face. Even though *Voices of the Rainforest* remains outside of anthropological

discussion, it was a huge popular success. And in terms of anthropology of sound, I consider it the most important thing I've ever done. The critical thing about *Voices of the Rainforest* is that I worked with the Bosavi people in the medium that is their medium and mine, bringing together the world of the recording studio and the world of the rain forest in a circulable representation of culture. The recording takes you there, into that place, and you can have a very sensuous, affecting, feelingful relationship with voice and place by listening. That's the best I can do, an anthropology of sound in and through sound, a representation of culture that is both a pleasure and an intellectual provocation, that gets your ears as close to the Bosavi world as I can get them.

**DB:** Let's fast forward. Tell me about the follow-up CD to *Voices*, the one you've talked about as even more a form of musical composition.

**SF:** The soundscape community responded quite generously to *Voices of the Rainforest*. It became part of the sound art curriculum and was part of discourses outside of anthropology. Steve Lacy, the great jazz soprano saxophonist, told me that what he loved most about *Voices* was the idea of hearing a place as people slept; he said it made him think about what they dreamed. So I started to think about Steve's comment, and about another kind of recording about sonic habitus, something to take you deeper into the dream world that is also the materiality of sound in the forest. And that became *Rainforest Soundwalks* (Feld 2001b), three 15-minute compositions about what you hear at the village edge morning, afternoon, and night. And as a kind of bonus, it opens with a predawn recording, also about fifteen minutes, of what is the longest single bird call on record, a beautiful solo by a hooded butcherbird.

**DB:** And then the *Bosavi* box, you did that at the same time?

**SF:** Yes, I produced the *Bosavi* box set (Feld 2001a) for Smithsonian Folkways at the same time that I did *Rainforest Soundwalks*, in 2001. It is a three CD and book set, featuring 25 years of my recordings, and two, in some cases three, generations of Bosavi composers and performers. The first CD is guitar bands of the nineties. The CD features people who were infants and little kids when I first went to Bosavi; at the turn of the millennium they were 25–30 years old. They are the first generation with guitars and ukuleles, playing acoustic string band music, merging the poetics of their parents and grandparents with a new music. The second CD is sounds and songs of everyday life. That's the Ulahi generation and the sounds of men and women in the forest, in their homes, on the trails, working in the gardens. And the third CD is ceremo-

nial music, the ritual song and weeping, which was already well on the wane when I first went there. It's sort of like, with my left hand, I've been the midwife at the birth of the new music of guitars and ukuleles, and, with my right hand, I've been the undertaker at the death of the ritual music. And, in between, I have heard 25 years of people listening to and singing with, to, and about the forest world. *Bosavi* shifts focus from the sonic ecology of the rain forest, the theme of *Voices of the Rainforest*, to historical representation. It is an attempt to present those layers and layers of Bosavi sound as embodied and emplaced history (Feld and Crowdy 2002).

**DB:** One of the recurrent participles that has come up throughout this whole conversation has been "layering." And you've written very eloquently about layering in relationship to the rain forest and relationship to the nature of sound and also what you've been doing in terms of your editing. That's also a recurrent theme in the subsequent collaborative project, the Greece book.

**SF:** I've talked regularly with Charlie Keil for many years, and that led to the collaborative, dialogic book, *Music Grooves* (Keil and Feld 1994). In *Music Grooves*, we explored the groove as layers of experience and mediation in music. And we play with how to represent that by juxtaposing essays and dialogues—tape-recorded conversations like this one. Charlie has been influenced in his use of the "layering" metaphor by identities in the Balkans, where he and his wife Angeliki have worked for many years with Romani instrumentalists. This work led to them producing the texts for a book called *Bright Balkan Morning: Romani Lives and the Power of Music in Greek Macedonia* (Blau et al. 2002); in fact, one of their chapters is titled "Layered Identities and Improvised Traditions." The book itself is very layered. First, because it features Dick Blau's photographs of this community, layered with photographs taken from the home picture albums of the Romani instrumentalists. Next, because it features Charlie and Angie's dialogic texts, layered with the life stories of Romani instrumentalists in their own words and voices. Then they brought me into the project, and a third set of layers emerged. This is a CD featuring the instrumentalists at parties, layered with my soundscape editing of the market, neighborhood, homes, parties, cafes, broadcasts, and other prominent sounds of everyday life. So the book consists of the three layers of visuals, texts, and sound, and each of them opens into other multiple layers. In this way, the form of the book, like *Music Grooves*, suggests something of a commentary on its content and on the process of its collaborative construction.

At the time that I was there, I was really struck by the presence of bells in the countryside. Following



shepherds, I was thinking about the sonic ecology, with the goats and their bells, the sheep and their bells, then town bells, church bells, winter festivals where people dress up in bells, parades of bagpipes and frame drums and people dressed in bells. That led to a second CD with a focus on music and place, titled *Bells and Winter Festivals of Greek Macedonia* (Feld et al. 2002). It was published by Smithsonian Folkways around the same time as the book. It's also a collaborative project with Dick, Charlie, and Angie.

**DB:** One level of obvious contrast with the Kaluli work, which comes out of three decades' deep embedding in a particular sonic world, is that here the sonic document, a point of interpretive expansion, is about the way you listen in for the first time. But like your Bosavi work, where you were in dialogue with the Schieffelin, here you are also doing dialogues, with the Keils and Dick Blau.

**SF:** Even better, also in Greece I met generous Greek anthropologists, Alexandra Bakalaki and Anastasia [Tassoula] Karakasidou, who were willing to dialogue about sound. They helped me think a lot about what it means for somebody who doesn't speak Greek and doesn't know much about Greek ethnography to simply come as a professional listener. Like, when we were all in a café one day and I was wrapped in headphones, recording the sounds of kids playing video games. One of them went up to Alexandra and Tassoula, and, commenting on my mute intensity, said, "This poor fellow is obviously hard of hearing so he uses that prosthesis." How's that for a reminder of what it means to listen and not interact?

**DB:** So, despite the brevity of your visit and opportunistic nature of the two Greek CDs, they end up, processually, being very like the Bosavi project in terms of being a densely dialogic, again, *layered*, experience. Which means that you are always thinking about sound as a primary or stand-alone statement but also about the meaning of sound in relation to image and text, in relation to your conversations with other anthropologists and local interlocutors. Taking off from how you did that on the *Bells and Winter Festivals* CD, it's very interesting to think about the way the anthropology of sound is connecting now with such rich historical work on sound, like Corbin's remarkably social book on *Village Bells* (1998).

**SF:** The idea that bells are part of an acoustic ecology that joins space and time in history, the place where the Bahktinian chronotope meets the Bergsonian *longue durée*, that was the hit that I got off of my first experience of seriously listening to layered village and city modernities. Going between Serres and Thessaloniki and Jumaya and Sohos and Nikisiani

and Kali Vrissi was an auditory crash course in Greek history. It's where I started to think that bells are to European space-times what birds are to rain-forest space-times.

**DB:** One of the fascinating issues here for me is that people tend to think of sound largely in terms of its ephemerality. And one of the things that's striking—it's striking in *Voices of the Rainforest* and *Bosavi* but in a different way in *Bright Balkan Morning* and *Bells and Winter Festivals*—is the sense of sound as perduring and transforming over long stretches of time and doing that chronotopic kind of thing to our ears.

**SF:** Yes, I'm presently captivated by the ways that you hear history and you hear transformation in European bells. The project that I've got going now, *The Time of Bells* (Feld 2004), will be a five-CD series over as many years, listening globally to the social history of bells. I'm starting in Europe and the first CD is soundscapes from Italy, France, Finland, and Greece. I'm fascinated by relationships of bells and music, for example, a church bell with the same resonant decay time as one of the oldest organs in Finland. Or bells and space, for example, when walking with a shepherd in Italy and hearing, a kilometer away, the funeral bells from the church overlapping the bells of his 50 sheep. These are historically layered relationships in sound, like the way belled flocks move through the countryside, making place audible (Panopoulos 2003). Or the way time bells and chimes make communities audible. And the particularity of interactions of these kinds of bell sounds with cars and motorbikes, with televisions and radios, and all the sounds of the modern world. This is the sort of thing that I'm recording for the *Time of Bells* series. The second volume, which I'll release at the end of 2004, concerns how bells signal both authority and disruption. Authority will be explored by soundscapes of Sunday bells in Venice, Oslo, and Turku. And disruption is explored in pre-Lenten and carnival festivals in southern Italy and island Greece featuring the most wild and raucously deafening animal bells you can imagine. You'll really hear Foucault talking to Rabelais and Bakhtin on this CD!

**DB:** Are these relatively heavily edited? More like *Rainforest Soundwalks* and *Voices of the Rainforest* in terms of your technical mediations?

**SF:** Some of the pieces are just two-track, stereo recordings that I edited to compress the time and to make certain kinds of juxtapositions that heighten specific sonic relations. Some of them are four-, six-, or eight-track mixes so you can hear the density and layers of sound in other kinds of spatial and temporal juxtaposition. A hyperrealism informs the documentary politics and the aesthetics of the editing. What does it mean in ten minutes to be able to open up a

certain kind of big ethnographic or historical window while simultaneously walking by a church over the course of exactly that much time?

**DB:** That's directly analogous to an issue that's been central to the discourse on representation and ethnographic writing: narrativity.

**SF:** Indeed. There's been a great attention to it in ethnographic writing—some would say kind of fetishization—both before and since *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986; see also Feld 1998). We don't have a parallel literature or consciousness about narrativity in sound—a parallel literature about film and representation, perhaps, but no real parallel for sound. I see these recordings as a way to animate that conversation directly.

**DB:** In addition to working with Mickey Hart and Rykodisc, with Smithsonian Folkways, and with Earthear, you now have your own record company, Voxlox. Why did you start it?

**SF:** Right now I have two passionate interests in sound, and neither of them is perfectly served by existing publishers. One is recordings related to human rights, related to the way the indigenous, refugee, diasporic, and exile world of music has changed. I have in mind recordings that mainstream world music publishers often think are too political. The other is ambient recordings that are really more historical and cultural than what the acoustic ecology publishers tend to favor. That's the *Time of Bells* series.

The first human rights Voxlox was a live concert that I recorded by Rahim AlHaj, an exile Iraqi oud composer and performer musician who has been in the U.S. for four years. I brought him to New York to do a teach-in with me on music and war, once the Iraq war heated up in April 2003. He performed a concert, and I recorded it just to give him a souvenir of his visit. It was a very powerful evening, a brilliant performance and an intensely emotional one, so we released the recording. It's titled *Iraqi Music in a Time of War* (AlHaj 2003). Rather than just a music recording featuring Rahim as an oud composer and performer, I wanted to do a recording which is really about how war impacts the musician and how a musician impacts the way we might think about a war. So it includes Rahim's voice, his verbal introductions, his stories about each of the pieces, like about his phone conversations with his mother in Baghdad as the war began.

Now imagine this. Here's somebody who was imprisoned and tortured by Saddam, who escaped in 1991,

who lived and taught in Syria and Jordan and performed all over the world in concert halls. Here's somebody who is a graduate of the Baghdad Conservatory of Music, where 2,000 oud players audition and only five are accepted. Somebody who has studied and traveled and performed with Munir Bashir, perhaps the most acclaimed oud player in the history of Arabic music. So a really brilliant musician comes to the United States and the UN High Commission on Refugees says to him, "We've got a job for you at McDonalds." And Rahim, clueless, looks at them and says, "Thank you very much. What kind of music conservatory is McDonalds? Will I be teaching Arabic music or Western music?" And when they said, "No, we're sorry, McDonalds is a restaurant, not a music conservatory," he said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I don't play in restaurants. I only play in concert halls." Can you imagine the kind of moment this is in this guy's life?

Anthropologists have been very dedicated to documenting and intervening in these new moral geographies of displacement, and I want to do that in a musical way.

**DB:** We've ranged over quite a number of topics, and now you have brought us from poetics back to politics, the politics of anthropological intervention and representation, with your interest in doing human rights recordings. Could we close on how some of the bits of this conversation, layering, dialogic editing and auditing, place, representation, history and narrative, fit into the bigger institutional anthropology picture, with presentation, institutions, publishing?

**SF:** Well, that's not a very positive place to end! I'm not very happy about presentation these days. I mean, think about the AAA meetings. It is impossible to present sound properly because the playback systems are awful in those hotels, as they come from rental AV companies who are only servicing voice presentation. So it is actually much harder for me to present my sound work to anthropologists than to any other group of academics or artists.

And think of journals, anthropology or ethnomusicology; very few of them include sound or the option to connect to a website to hear the sounds that are part of an argument or interpretation in an essay. As for books, there are virtually no anthropological books with CDs, and the CDs packaged in most ethnomusicological books I know are of an utterly miserable audio quality. I have no idea how people think they can get away with this; it is in such utter disrespect for the musicians. I can't believe editors ever seriously listen to, curate, or critique the CDs that people submit. I once evaluated one of these books for a press. I wrote as much about the CD as about the text

in my reader report. The acquisitions editor sent me an email admitting that he had not listened to the CD, in fact didn't want to, and felt that having it appended was simply an obligation to the author, not really a part of the academic presentation.

It seems to me that there is a serious issue of professionalism here. Publishing amateur or substandard sound, while perhaps grubby enough to strike the listener as really "authentic," only serves to undermine the seriousness of sound as an anthropological project. I'd rather the books came without CDs than listen to most of the rubbish published by respectable ethnomusicology and anthropology publishers like Chicago or Oxford.

Until the sound recorder is presented and taught as a technology of creative and analytic mediation, which requires craft and editing and articulation just like writing, little will happen of an interesting sort in the anthropology of sound. We take writing so deeply seriously—the anthropologist as author (Geertz 1988). Yet, like film and video, which are still incredibly marginal, I think it is going to take considerable time before a more sophisticated use of these sound technologies takes hold in ethnographic practice. Until then, the anthropology of sound will continue to be mostly about words.

## Note

1. Transcribed by Jefferson Voorhees and edited by the authors from a tape-recorded conversation in Santa Fe, New Mexico, December 17, 2003. Interested readers can continue to explore the anthropology of sound on the Web at [www.AESonline.org](http://www.AESonline.org).

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