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# Sound Recordings

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Sound recordings have played an important role in anthropological research, both as tools of fieldwork and data collection and as objects and contexts of ethnographic work on music, language, and cultural mediations of technology and environment. The process of sound recording introduced new techniques and materials that revolutionized anthropological studies of language, music, and culture, while, as objects of technological production and consumption, their media circulations have been analyzed as intrinsic to modern cultural formation and global social imaginaries.

The emergence of anthropology as a scholarly discipline coincided with the development of mechanical technologies for the preservation and reproduction of sound, following soon after the invention of the Edison cylinder phonograph in 1877. The phonograph made it possible for early ethnographers to capture and analyze the sounds of speech and ritual performance in Native America, beginning with the Passamaquoddy and Zuni songs and stories recorded in 1890 on wax cylinders by Jesse Walter Fewkes, and soon after by Frances Densmore and Alice Cunningham Fletcher. While oral historians, linguists, and musicologists regularly used the phonograph to collect and analyze the texts of threatened languages and musics in a preservationist mode, they did not typically preserve sound recordings themselves; in stark contrast to the archival standards that would emerge later, most of them destroyed or reused cylinders immediately after having transcribed their contents.

Nonetheless, sound-recording technologies quickly became embedded in the iconography of field collection that characterized early salvage anthropology. The presence of the recorder framed the dominant practices of ethnographic encounter, with the phonograph indexing a self-contained context of capture and analysis but not the more complex multidirectional aspects of exchanges with native informants. In a famous 1916 photograph taken outside the Smithsonian Institution, for example, Frances Densmore is depicted as if recording the voice of her informant, Mountain Chief, but it is the playback horn, rather than the recording horn, that is installed on the phonograph (Figure 1); in actuality, both subjects were listening as Mountain Chief interpreted a recording of Plains Sing Talk (Samuels and Porcello 2011). In other instances, subjects flipped the preservationist force of field recording toward a mode of direct communication, as when Ute chief Red Cap used Densmore's cylinder recorder to transmit demands to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in Washington (Brady 1999). Field recordings occasionally contributed to broader interventions in the lives of marginalized subjects, as when the singer Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter was granted early release from Angola Prison after John Lomax presented his recorded plea to Louisiana Governor Oscar Allen, on the B-side of a gramophone disc that also contained Lomax's recording of his hit song "Goodnight Irene."

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**Figure 1** Mountain Chief posing with Frances Densmore at the Smithsonian Institution (Harris and Ewing, 1916).

The widespread collection of field recordings (furthered by continuous advancements in portable recording technologies from acetate disc recorders to reel-to-reel recorders and cassette decks to digital recorders) provided an opportunity to build international archives of recorded sound that contributed to the institutional and public development of anthropology, ethnomusicology, and folklore throughout the twentieth century. Sound collections were established in national libraries, such as the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, the British Library, and the Archive of American Folksong at the Library of Congress, as well as in private collections controlled by universities and academic societies. Anthropological recordings were also issued commercially on small labels such as Folkways, Lyrichord, New World, Nonesuch, and Ocora, which made a selection of ethnographic materials available to a general public. Recent programs in public anthropology have recently begun to shift archival projects away from the passive enclosure of sound collections toward more active practices of digital redistribution and community-partnered repatriation. Organizations such as the British Library Sound Archive (<http://sounds.bl.uk>) and the Association for Cultural Equity (<http://research.culturalequity.org/home-audio.jsp>) make archival content accessible through interactive online platforms, while ongoing efforts such as the Hopi Music Repatriation Project at Columbia University's Center for Ethnomusicology (<https://hopimusic.wordpress.com>) work to return recorded materials and intellectual property rights to the communities from which they were extracted.

Contemporary anthropological studies show how cultural meanings are created and changed through the transnational production and circulation of recorded music. For example, recent ethnographies have considered the performance and contestation of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identities in the recording studio, as performers

and engineers shape sound into musical representations of local culture inflected by political and individual subjectivities (e.g., Louise Meintjes's [2003] analysis of different investments in the "sound of Africa" in a post-apartheid South African recording studio). Sound's intercultural circulations complicate the relational fields of power and agency in transnational formations of popular media. On the one hand, recording industries and distribution networks play a significant role in shaping local and national perceptions of music cultures, and in instituting legal conditions of appropriation and control that underscore the differently marginal positions of artistic and listening communities in reified contexts of transnational marketing and intellectual property law. On the other, studies of musical reception have stressed the agentive remixing and remediation of sound recordings as a generative force between diverse assemblages of global consumers, especially in emerging conditions of digital accessibility. In many cases, mediated listening is revealed as a creative process of social interpretation that feeds back into official and informal networks of economic distribution and develops emergent contexts of transcultural formation.

Audio recordings are in themselves an independent form of ethnographic representation and are increasingly recognized as a viable mode of scholarly publication in sound. Ethnographers use sound media to represent contexts and analyses that extend beyond text or to augment their monographs with the sounds of music, speech, ritual performances, and social and natural environments. Steven Feld, inspired by the work and ideas of Colin Turnbull and Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, mixed field recordings into multichannel soundscapes that document aural contexts of human social and multispecies interaction in the Bosavi region of Papua New Guinea (Feld [1991] 2011). Feld considers the recording process as a method of "doing ethnography in sound" that makes audible the "acoustemology" of listening in a rainforest environment (Feld and Brenneis 2004). Contemporary projects of ethnographic audio recording are published online in journals such as *Sensory Studies*, and sound installations of field recordings have been presented at scholarly meetings (including, e.g., Ethnographic Terminalia's *Audible Observatories* exhibition at the American Anthropological Association meeting in San Francisco in 2012). The trajectory of this work points to the potential for field recordings to extend a form of ethnographic production that aligns with the emergent fields of sound studies and sensory ethnography (while also providing an implicit critique of its visualist tendencies) and to contribute to the further development of an anthropology beyond text.

SEE ALSO: Anthropology: Scope of the Discipline; Music and Language; Acoustemology; Ethnography; Senses, Anthropology of; Media Anthropology

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