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2022

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A Sound Artist's Breakdown of Field Recording over History

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The conceptual sound artist, turntablist, and curator Maria Chavez muses about storing and accessing sounds. Building on Ursula Le Guin's concept of the carrier bag, she describes four eras of sound recording and containment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ursula Le Guin once wrote a paper on the bucket as one of the first forms of technology to help advance humanity. In that essay, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', she remarkably notes:

If you haven't got something to put it in, food will escape you. . . . If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it's useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf . . . and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people . . . if to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all. (Le Guin 1996: 151)

Humans' storage is an essential part of culture, and our vessels for containing have been an evolutionary, vital part of humans' interest in the self. Translating Le Guin's storage perspective to sound, my works in sound installation practice understand field recording via three historical eras: 1) before the advent of recording technology, when 'field recording' consisted of mimicry, either through specially designed foley sound tools or through extended playing techniques on conventional musical instruments; 2) recording technology now exists but is not accessible to the general public – the evolution of field recordings into sampling, if seen in tandem with the advancement of technological convenience, moves us into era 3; 3) bringing into question the ownership of sounds as we can now record anything on our smartphones and other easily accessible playback devices that provide storage.

2. ERA 1

Prior to audio recording technology, attempts at field recordings started as specially designed foley sound

objects to mimic what humans heard in their surroundings. One can look to the Whistling Vases of the Incan civilization¹ and the Mexican Death Whistle² as examples of this early attempt. If described in current audio technology terms, these objects were an ancient version of foley equipment for sound design, not meant for music but rather as sonic accompaniment to imagery in ceremonies and storytelling.

As instruments were codified in Europe, humans' audio 'capturing' evolved into composition incorporating acoustic extended techniques. For instance, in 1626, Baroque composer Carlo Farina created *Capriccio stravagante*, a *composed* field recording (Walden 2012: 1). Shocking in its contemporary Baroque context and still considered one of the most avant-garde works in early compositional music history, the piece forced string instrumentalists to create new techniques to mimic the sounds of a bustling city. Not only did the piece call for 'new effects' (for the 1600s) on the violin, that is, glissando, pizzicato, sul ponticello (bowing close to the bridge), col legno (playing with the wood of the bow), tremolo – some of these 'experiments' for string instruments were used for the first time when it was performed live. In 2015 I was asked to make a piece in response to this vital work and upon my initial listening found Farina's *Capriccio* to be quite funny. The instruments imitate the clucking of a hen, the crowing of a rooster, the meowing and fighting of cats, the barking of a dog, and a closing section that ends in no particular key but simply slows down, gets softer, and fades away. That moment stuck with me the most. Farina composed the 'fade out', which is now regularly used in all popularised recordings and sound design. Farina's work could almost be seen as a form of early 'field recording'. Yet since society had not created recording technology, like the Incas and other ancient civilizations before them, Farina was at the mercy of mimicry in order to 'hold' everyday sound. In a way, the sonic emission *was* the vessel for sound.

¹www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4fsl-SBWU.

²www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9QuO09z-SI.

3. ERA 2

While it is still being disputed, the earliest, truly recorded non-anthropocentric sound came from Ludwig Koch, who recorded the common shrike, a bird, with his father's wax cylinder recorder in 1889 (Bruyninckx 2019: S193). Suddenly, mimicry was no longer needed; humanity could finally hold sound in its hands. Thus, eras 2 and 3 (recording technology extant and common, respectively) more fully fulfil Le Guin's theory of humans' need for containment.

The early and partial dissemination of recording technology was accompanied by a staking out of the territory for sound design. Era 2's recording technology also further defined the roles of field recording and sampling. While the technology was still relatively inaccessible to the general public, those with access were able to make field recordings of sonic environments that were then stored in sound libraries and archives for institutions throughout the United States. These archives were then used for sound design purposes for TV and film, further introducing a sonic environment to the masses.

It is during this era that pop culture demonstrated the insertion of field recording into commercially successful music as sound design. Legend has it that the bayside audio that begins Otis Redding's '(Sittin' on) The Dock of the Bay' is a field recording (Miller 2017). Though it almost escapes conscious attention, this 10 second introductory field recording importantly conveys the physical setting of the song: '[Steve] Cropper went to a local jingle company and recorded an extended loop of seagulls and ocean waves on separate tracks. He then used trial-and-error to figure out where to bring the sounds up in the song.' 'I got to thinking about Otis clowning around on some of the outtakes. He was trying to make seagull sounds but he sounded like a dying crow.' Booth now tells a story that does not jibe with the facts, writing in an email, 'The day after the song was recorded, I went in the control room, where it was being played back. All of a sudden there were seagulls on it! "Steve," I said, "Where'd you get them birds?" He gave me a blank look. "Sound effects," he said' (Miller 2017). So whether the field recording was recorded for the actual song or was derived from a sound archive is still under debate. Yet the act of using a recorded environment to further depict the imagery of a story was quietly impactful. This iconic song is one of many that utilises field recording as sound design and further characterises era 2 as having a more refined recording technology than era 1 while continuing era 1's practice of using field recording to depict imagery or convey story.

4. ERA 3

Era 3's portable, more broadly accessible recording technology enables more people to capture sound

themselves on our smartphones and other playback technology with storage. This accessibility further defines field recording practice through individual ownership of technology and of resultant audio. The distinction of field recording and sampling gained growing relevance due to this accessibility. Anyone can freely move between writing popular music, sound design, intermedia art and electroacoustic music, and sometimes making DJ mixes for radio with the self audio archiving now being independent of institutions and their sound libraries.

The separation of field recordings and samples becomes more defined when a field recording is recorded for a particular project. A sample becomes more defined as it is drawing from a previous recording that was not related to the project it is now being used for.

A particularly interesting example straddling the field recording/sample distinction is Masters at Work, famous house music DJs from the 1990s, who made a field recording of rings jingling on the singer India's fingers. The jingling was an accidental sound bleed issue with India's vocal recording as she kept shaking her hands as she sang. Kenny 'Dope' Gonzalez and 'Little' Louie Vega decided they actually liked the sound of her rings and used it as a 'tambourine' sample for the song. Afterwards, they realised they could use the recording as a sample for other songs, recontextualising the field recording into a sample.³

More recently, Billie Eilish's hit *Bad Guy* famously used an iPhone recording of a pedestrian crossing signal from Brisbane, Australia as sound design. Whether she recorded the pedestrian cross herself is unknown; it is clear that it was recorded by someone in her team while they were visiting the area. Which makes its usage in her song *Bad Guy* a field recording and not a sample.

5. ERA 4: FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As we move into era 4 of field recording, I wonder how the regularity of accessibility will change how it is being presented in social media. The format of creating short videos is the most individualised container of all. It is our container alone, as we decide what we want to record for our own stored memory, which in this case can be described as the 'cloud'.

As suggested by Le Guin, storage is a basic human impulse, and recorded sound is no exception. Having evolved from unique instrument design and playing techniques, the advent and proliferation of audio technologies make the basic task of sound containment accessible to a great many people today. In parallel, this has led to innovative approaches that now have

³www.kingbritt.com/blacktronika-afrofuturism-in-electronic-music.

the potential to blur the lines between pop and experimental musical practices.

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