

Innovations in sound archiving: field recordings, audiences and digital inclusion

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ABSTRACT

This paper will present preliminary research from a new, collaborative and innovative digital sound archiving project, *Reel to Real*,¹ which proposes to make available for the widest possible use the unique sound collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM), Oxford University's Museum of Anthropology and World Archaeology. The project considers sound archives as a resource in its broadest sense, and seeks to expand and enhance different public experiences of, and engagement with, archival sound both in and beyond the museum space itself.

1. INTRODUCTION

No human sense is more neglected in ethnographic museums than sound. Thousands of hours of valuable and rare ethnographic sound, donated to the Museum since the early twentieth century, are currently held in storage, almost entirely unheard and unknown. These sound recordings – which range from children's songs in Britain to music from South America and the South Pacific, and from improvised water drumming to the sound of rare earth bows in the rainforests of the Central African Republic – have been preserved but remain unavailable to members of the public, teachers, researchers, or to the communities from which the sound originates. Vitality, the capacity of the sound collections to illuminate the related artefact and photograph collections held in the PRM remains to be fully explored.

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Drawing on identified expertise and innovative collaboration with the Oxford e-Research Centre, database and website designers, and the World and Traditional Music Section at the British Library Sound Archive, *Reel to Real* is exploring the potential for using digital solutions to make the PRM's sound recordings better understood and used within the Museum and beyond, for the benefit of the general public, future researchers and, where possible, source communities.

Through the establishment of a new *Sound in Museums* network and a series of workshops, the Museum and its partners also seek to reinvigorate the potential for sound collections to be used in museums and among wider and more diverse audiences.

2. BACKGROUND

Sound archivists agree that a major problem they face is the fact that non-specialists usually have no idea what sound archives contain or even what purpose they serve (Seeger and Chaudhuri, 2004: *passim*). Furthermore, archival sounds have often travelled far from the areas where they originate, retaining no ongoing connection with their source communities. It is acknowledged that the archival impetus still underpins much anthropological and ethnomusicological field methodology with sound, although the research context is changing with the emergence of new forms of electronic access, and broader awareness of intellectual and cultural property rights and informed consent (Samuels et al., 2010: 332).

Reel to Real in the longer term aims to build on the development of recent models of sound elicitation wherein archival recordings have been successfully returned to source communities in the Eastern Cape of South Africa and elsewhere by inserting digital sound files back in local social mechanisms beyond the archive, for example using street forums and DJs, mobile phones, ceremonies and other social gatherings (Lobley, 2010).

Today, however, a vast global store of recorded, and often extremely rare, sound still lies in storage and remains unheard, unused, and unknown. This problem is exemplified in the sound collections at the PRM, where, at present, there is no database or catalogue and, consequently, only a basic overview of the main sound collections and their content is possible. Most of the recordings are on currently inaccessible (and in some cases fragile) formats such as wax cylinder, reel to reel, DAT and audiocassette. All of the fieldwork sound collections are being digitized for preservation to enable them to be heard safely and then disseminated. A small percentage of the relevant collections have already been digitized by staff at the British Library Sound Archive, key collaborators on this project. Their expertise in working with fragile original formats (some of which are over one

hundred years old) is vital to enable the PRM to disseminate the material to new audiences, and respond to access requests that are received from researchers, sound artists and radio broadcasters.

Digitizing these sound collections and then bringing them online will allow them to be understood within the context of related object, image and film collections, and also to be shared and used by other institutions and individuals. Digitized sound recordings can then easily be used to develop music educational resources, such as songbooks and other practical tools that allow the demonstration of, and participation in, music making from a wide variety of cultures. Models for this type of work are already being developed, for example in projects working with different archival sound collections at Columbia University (New York) and at the World and Traditional Music Section of the British Library Sound Archive (Fox and Sakakibara, 2010; British Library Staff, 2008).

In addition, sound recordings have great potential for widespread use by, and engagement with, diverse audiences. Sound is highly portable and can be delivered digitally within museums in a variety of ways, for example through speaker installations, mobile phone applications, or remote triggering devices activated as people walk through gallery spaces.

3. CASE STUDIES

Preliminary research has explored the potential for new and creative methods of sound archiving to engage different audiences.

3.1. Creating ethnographic soundscapes

Recent experimental music events in the PRM galleries have included torch-lit evening performances during which a general public enters the darkened gallery spaces. Wandering freely with small torches, the audience explores the object collections while immersed in a live broadcast of soundscapes composed from a mix of ethnographic field recordings and the responses of live musicians amplified using wireless microphones. Working with sound engineers we have explored the potential for field recordings to add layers of meaning to object collections. Oral feedback collected from visitors as they leave the museum has demonstrated the potential for sound to enhance people's experience of the PRM, allowing them a freedom to see and interpret the collections in different ways. For example, visitors have been able to hear, for the first time, the sound of many rare African instruments, greatly enhancing their experience of viewing previously mute collected objects. Digitized sound can be used to illustrate object displays that are hard to see directly (for example where there are existing lighting, display height and other sightline problems), broadening awareness and appreciation of displays. Sound recordings can also be made available as a means of enhancing engagement with collections for visually impaired people. The development of these soundscapes and events are at an early trial stage and will be fully filmed and documented.

3.2 Sound elicitation among source communities in South Africa's Eastern Cape

Ethnomusicologists have recently been developing methods to explore the potential for sharing digitized heritage with indigenous source communities (Fox and Sakakibara, 2010; Lobley, 2010). For example, the results of a method of sound elicitation among Xhosa communities in the townships of South Africa's Eastern Cape suggested new and creative ways to circulate archival digital sounds among communities who are

almost entirely without internet connections. Technological solutions for sound delivery using local social mechanisms can be simple (MP3s distributed via phones) or more complicated (interactive blogs connecting remote communities using satellite phone and other technology). Clear evidence is emerging that source communities increasingly demand access to their recorded heritage once they become aware of its existence, but effective engagement requires nuanced understandings of the local social realities of music-making and transmission (Lobley, 2010).

3.3. The Louis Sarno archive of BayAka Music

Sarno's collection of more than 1000 hours of unique recordings spanning thirty years and documenting the changing music and sound environments of a group of BayAka musicians from the rainforests of the Central African Republic, will form one of the major case studies for *Reel to Real*. A long-term aim is to create ongoing relationships between archival recordings and the people whose cultures have been archived.

4. FUTURE WORK

To think through these complex ideas and potential outcomes, we are working across several fields, including collaboration with sound engineers and artists, to enable engagement through the development of innovative computational and information technology.² We are exploring new ways of engaging diverse audiences with ethnographic sound collections, making them available online, in museum spaces and beyond. The long-term aim of the project is to create ongoing relationships between archival music collections and the source communities whose music they contain, using the digital development of previously unknown heritage resources to engage the very communities who have to date rarely been digitally represented or connected.

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² The Pitt Rivers Museum, the Oxford e-Research Centre and the World and Traditional Music Section of the British Library Sound Archive are the principal collaborators.

