
Compulsions of a field recordist:

Documentation and duty, Utopias and the sound of reality

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This article provides insight into the compulsions that drive those who partake in field recording, with sole focus on Australian practitioners. The motives, inspirations and work-context of selected individuals committed to this medium are presented for comparison and reader-education, bringing to light key considerations to be discovered when understanding their greater body of works. Whilst this article barely skims the surface of this growing practice, it discusses selected ideologies as encountered by myself through my own work, which exist across genres and career title. By tracing these common threads and discussing the points of similarity and conflict between practitioners, this article ultimately impresses upon the reader the organic growth and developments within Australia's field recording communities and the greater significance of the practice as a whole.

Introduction

The first field recordist that I remember meeting was Phil. In our initial encounters, he was never seen, however I quickly learned to assume he was always present. In late afternoons a group of us would sit on the front porch of a condemned house, light headed and in limbo between the night-before and the night-to-come. Conversation would wax and wane, swinging between intimacies and banal observation. Voices hummed in rise and fall with bursts of quiet laughter. Someone would drop a bottle, the euphoric shatter silence us all then inexplicably a voice would ask, 'Where's Phil?'

Phil would appear – dropping from the sky no-less – crashing at our feet from the verandah roof where he'd been recording who-knows-what, along with snippets of our private conversation. I was intrigued. His absences only a sign of his meticulous sound gathering – and vice versa, had ensnared me in an internal dialogue that still drives me as a field recordist today. Weeks later in the same house, in the darkest hours

of the night, an extended circle of friends would be milling around the maze of rooms with the moment's soundtrack provided by random individuals. In the thick of it you would hear the familiar smash of a bottle, a cacophony of voices, followed by dehumanised shouts and computer generated percussions. Phil had miraculously appeared again and commandeered the sound system....

I never questioned Phil over 'why he did what he did', but would argue that I did not need to. His intent and inspirations were openly shared to be celebrated at these rare and unexpected moments of reveal via playback. While he didn't have money for food, he did have a battered PC and a mini disc player gifted to him and as a friend I would say it was the new-found convenience of portability, teamed with his unfettered love of the moment and a subsequent instinctual reaction to preserve it that compelled him to record. We were living at a time and place, swathed in our own existence as creative's, forming a cohort as fragile as it was fierce and Phil was attempting to save it.

To preserve Culture's

The desire to record sounds as part of a culture is not a ground-breaking motivation. It's an ideal that can be traced back to Australia's first (known) field recordists. The base idea is prominent in works of individuals such as ethnomusicologist, Alice Marshall Moyle. Born in South Africa (1908), her family returned to Australia in 1912, where over her lifetime, she firmly established herself as a scholar, her expertise being in the art of finding, recording and documenting the music of Australia's Aboriginal populations. Her first recordings in the field were undertaken in 1959, in the Northern Territory. Widowed with two children in 1960, Moyle's dedication to her passion was unflinching as she worked to establish herself within the field of ethnomusicology, often lugging her heavy field equipment and undertaking physically demanding field trips¹.

As a founding member of Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Islander Studies (AIATSIS), Moyle worked tirelessly until her death

¹ Koch, G. 2005, 'Alice Marshall Moyle AM. 1908-2005', In Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) journal, Australian Aboriginal Studies, 2005/1). Retrieved from [http://aiatsis.gov.au/archive_digitised_collections/alice/bio.html], accessed on 9 July 2015.

in 2005. The breadth of her recordings and subsequent writings are renowned for their quality. Through this work she forged personal relationships with indigenous communities, who greatly appreciate the documentation and preservation of the sounds of their culture.

I am saying to that dear lady, I am grateful for what she did for us and for our children so that they can learn. Our words to you will stay forever, we will always be grateful. Thank you.²

This foresight of preservation via sound is a key consideration regularly found tied to the desire to record specific cultures – both artificial or of nature. At the same time that Moyle was beginning her field recording trips, an electronics and classical music enthusiast by the name of John Hutchinson had built himself a ‘portable’ recording unit consisting of tape recorder, radio, turntable cutter and playback machine.

Hutchinson’s earliest bush recordings are of indigenous communities encountered in his travels – shortly after which, his focus tuned in to the songs of the birds and their habitats. For over 50 years, Hutchinson has dedicated his life to recording Australia’s native bushland – his appreciation of its wonder matched only by his absolute conviction in the need to protect and preserve it.

My aim was to preserve in their purest form, the beautiful sounds of the Australian bush before it was too late; I wanted to save those songs³

Hutchinson and Moyle both bear the gift of keen observation and a social awareness. This combination of characteristics has enabled and compelled them in their practice, manifesting as an act of duty. As an elegant city-born and based lady, Moyle had no financial, moral or family-related responsibilities that dictated her commitment to preserving the sounds of Australia’s indigenous cultures. It was her considerations and realisations alone, that brought her to this decision and the care she took to document the recordings shows a sense of responsibility and admiration to cultures so polar to her own.

² Jalbani, L 2005, *Musical Connections: Alice Moyle. The life and work of Alice Marshall Moyle.* Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, [http://aiatsis.gov.au/archive_digitised_collections/alice/home.html], accessed on 9 April 2015.

³ Hutchinson, J 1988, *Save That Song*, John Hutchinson, Balingup QLD.

In his book, *Save that Song*, Hutchinson describes a visit to a beloved recording site in 1979 that he had not seen in sometime with the following epiphany,

I saw that my life had been spent not observing the natural wonders of the bush, but instead I had witnessed the collapse of an eco-system. Its structure was shattered; The web of life was broken. Gone were the huge stalwart trees, those symbols of strength and stability; gone were the diverse life forms which characterise a true forest.⁴

It is these sensitivities to their surroundings which gave Hutchinson and Moyle the means to identify the intrinsic qualities that made these sonic elements invaluable, why the sounds are at risk and finally, compelled them to act via the ultimate sense of duty, to record them for preservation.

For Acoustic Ecology

The key motivations of a field recordist described above are not ones that have become dated as can be the case in fads of the creative industry. With the continued creep of urbanisation into natural environments worldwide, these ideals have only grown and are formally identified as concerns of ‘Acoustic Ecology’ – a term that is often used amongst composers and sound practitioners yet despite the obvious *simpatico*, is not a primary title that ‘Scientific’ recordists would associate with their work.

The reasons for this division tell us as much about what is the work of a field recordist as it does about what it is not. It draws a critical line between the key passion of a composer/artist and that of a documentarian, ultimately defining which camp an artist’s work falls into. I say ‘Work’ as opposed to ‘Artist’ or ‘Practitioner’, as there is no restriction that an individual’s practice must abide by the rules of one side and there are numerous practitioners who dabble in both. In my personal experience, concerns of Acoustic Ecology (whether recognised specifically as such or not) are to be found on both sides of the fence. I would consider both John Hutchinson and Alice Moyle as primary examples of practitioners who would not identify themselves

⁴ Hutchinson 1988 p.10.

as Acoustic Ecologists, but whose ideals and career achievements define them as such.

In regard to creative individuals who champion the title, Australia is fortunate to have a small but passionate community who work in this area. Dr Leah Barclay is one of the most active, current Australian practitioners in this domain. Her work often entails building relations with communities who live in areas of what she defines as, ‘environmental crisis’. These work methods are not unlike those of Moyle, where a risk is identified to a specific community and as such, they engage with them over a period of time in order to address these concerns.

Unlike Moyle, Barclay’s work is international and addresses holistic global concerns of an acoustic ecologist. Countries she has undertaken projects in include Mexico, USA, India, South Africa and Australia. Whilst Moyle’s practice was focussed specifically on the traditional music of indigenous communities, Barclay’s work has a broader reach that embraces the environment, its wildlife and its community. Elements within her projects are multi-platform and not only resultant in composition or an archive of recordings. Using field recordings, digital technology and virtual platforms Barclay seeks to foster an understanding of the nature of each ‘environmental crisis’ both within the community of its origin and to the rest of the world.

Examples of her works that illustrate her focus include;

‘Ground Interference’ - a piece that uses field recordings from the Southwest Deserts of America to address concerns such as climate change and its impact on their fragile ecosystems.⁵

‘River Listening’ - a collaborative project that explores creative possibilities of aquatic bioacoustics and new approaches for conservation of global river systems.⁶

⁵ Barclay, L. 2014, Ground Interference, [http://leahbarclay.com/portfolio_page/ground-interference-usa-2014/].accessed on 6 April 2015.

⁶ Barclay, L. 2014, River Listening, [http://leahbarclay.com/portfolio_page/river-listening/] accessed on 6 April 2015.

Each of these projects is intrinsically tied to one or multiple sites bearing the burden of a common environmental concern. Barclay's work hinges on this connection between sound, community and 'place'.

The idea of place is a key concern for a recordists work out in the field and I wish to discuss this further.

Place – our perception of

For those of us that spend odd hours being unseen, sinking into awkward corners and crystallising into dawn air in our eternal hunt for the 'perfect' recording, the link between sound and place of origin is immutable yet can be malleable. I would argue that this association is not unique to field recordists, however due to the nature of our work, it is somewhat hyper sensitised!

An effective way of illustrating the above is through atmospheric recordings. The sound of a city is immediately recognisable as is the beach, wilderness and even a concert hall performance with its acoustics and crowd ambience. What is interesting about these sounds is that the listener does not need to have experienced the exact environment in order to create their own association of 'place'. Drawing on life experiences - pooling together fractured memories and clear associations, they internally construct their own interpretation of the environment. Any knowledge they have of the sounds origins is of course, thrown into the mix, along with framing of the experience and general context. Whilst documentarians such as Hutchinson and Moyle were vigilant in recording sounds of a place or culture as true to reality as possible, creative field recordists, typically are not bound to this rule and allow the listener room for their own interpretation.

From a utilitarian perspective, a field recording can - from a given vantage point - authentically represent the sonic characteristics of a space and be used for documentary or archival purposes (such as a sound map or sound library). From a more practical perspective, a field recording may be used in a similar way to the above, but rather be extended in its application to aspects of composition - as an inspiration/point of reference or as sonic material.⁷

7 Louth 2015.

Tristan Louth-Robbins' 'Fleurieu Sound Map', is an elegant and noncomplex approach to exploring the relation between Sound, Place and listener experience.⁸ Traversing the line between documentation and inspiration, he uses Google Maps' functionality to create an online sound map, whereby the curious can listen by locality. Selection criteria for the sounds is relatively open (geographic, phenomenological, aesthetic or historical/personal significance) - ultimately the recording may just be pleasant to listen to, but each and every one is mapped at its point of origin. Again - listeners do not need to experience places in person but rather, are presented with enough context so as to connect sounds both historically and geographically. Louth-Robbins creates a trail of bread crumbs, enticing people to both discover more about the Fleurieu Peninsula and to exercise their own imagination, drawing on their memories and experiences so as to 'fill-the-gaps', of perceived place.

Sound from place for evocation is a method that he also uses in his piece, "The Roil For forty loudspeakers, visible wires, iron bars and eight-channel audio."⁹ As an installation, it uses multiple speakers to playback sounds that Louth-Robbins associates with his memory of a space he frequented as a child and occasionally in later years. Note that he is not seeking to perfectly represent its sonic origin's reality but rather, his own memory of how he imagines it was - particularly - 'the profound and curious memories of early life'¹⁰ he has attached to the place. The work itself presents us with a beautiful illustration of attachment to Place via sound, and sound as a tool by which to convey a most personal interpretation of its origins, one that is more based on the artist's portrayal of the ideal. A utopia if you will – more fiction than fact.

Stretching this bond between what is and what the field recordist remembers/imagines/wishes it to be, is a fundamental skill of artists working with field recordings. Documentarians such as Moyle and Hutchinson would want this bond to be as short as possible, whilst

8 Louth-Robbins, T 2011, Fleurieu Sound Map, [http://www.tristanlouthrobins.com/fleurieu_soundmap/about.html.] accessed on 2 March 2015.

9 Louth-Robbins, T 2012, The Roil, viewed 2nd of March 2015, [http://www.tristanlouthrobins.com/works/1_installation.html] accessed on 2 March 2015.

10 Louth-Robbins 2012.

field recording creative's explore this connection unhampered by a duty to document and often inspired by its extremities.

I'm driven by a desire for articulation of the world around me. ... Compositionally I like to work with sound in such a way that sonic environment's and landscapes are explored. I like to play with different layers to create imaginary worlds so that whilst they are composed from real word sources, are actually quite fantastic.¹¹

This is where the rabbit hole begins. It is the point at which science for pure documentation, firmly waves goodbye and imagination seizes the wheel. A key intent of these artists is not only to relate to what we know but to create something new. This may be their own perception of what is, an expression of their own experiences in said place, a utopic ideal of what they want it to be and/or anything and everything in/out-between. Hannan nails the baseline motivation that I believe is present in the work of numerous creative field recordists.

And so the rabbit hole takes a twist and delves further, with her piece, *Strangelands*. Composed using sounds gathered from four locations, the final composition is derived using source material solely from these places. The catch is that the places of origin do not exist outside of the imagination of Hannan and the listener. In the 'real world', you cannot visit them and there is no bus, train or ferry that will take you there. It's an interesting predicament. One that is best enjoyed by throwing preconceptions aside and entering these sonified worlds ready to embrace the realities your imagination will construct – an ideal in complete contrast to those of the documentarian, wishing to capture the place as authentically as possible.

In summary

What I find exciting are the developments in the practice of field recording and the growing community that traverses between these two extremes. Whilst there are still those who pitch their tent firmly in one camp, I would argue that advances in technical affordability, increased knowledge and understanding of audio technology and a growing

¹¹ Hannan, C 2014, *Strangelands*, [<http://camillahannan.com/discography/index.htm>] accessed on 12 March 2015.

familiarity and proficiency with the hardware and software used in the practice, enables artists and enthusiasts to dip in and out of the practice

Despite the differences between the recordists who document and those who create a new, the above illustrates that the practice as a whole, possess unique considerations that appeal to its craft. Points such as documenting cultures, community relations, the portrayal of Place/Reality, concerns of acoustic ecology and of course – the compulsion to record, are reoccurring themes that transcend intent of documentation, duty or to create new utopias. I like to think they are points of commonality to be shared and celebrated amongst the international community that champions such a specialised craft.

...the thrill of capturing a sound, particularly a sound new to me, still remains a great pleasure, perhaps fulfilling the innate hunter.¹²

Sources

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¹² Bayliss, T 2015.

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