

The Berea Appalachian Sound Archives Fellowship: On the Beauty of Collections

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“A person’s life consists of a collection of events, the last of which could also change the meaning of the whole, not because it counts more than the previous ones but because once they are included in a life, events are arranged in an order that is not chronological but rather corresponds to an inner architecture.” Italo Calvino, *Mr. Palomar*.

1. The first days

The first days of work in the Berea College Appalachian Sound Archives were spent feeling overwhelmed. I purposefully arrived with only a vague notion of what I would be looking for and listening to, but this did not prepare me sufficiently to cope with the crushing feeling of a mountain of cassette tapes being piled on my head. I spent three days just reading, trying to get my head around the collection. There was a certain kind of intimidation present, like going into a candy store and being allowed to have everything; wonderful at first, this feeling quickly becomes overpowering. Suddenly there was not enough time. I quickly realized that a limitless supply of sounds made the choosing much harder.

As a composer and sound artist, I knew that my approach to the collection would be unorthodox compared to those that may normally use and listen to these mostly noncommercial recordings. I was not interested in any particular performer, instrument, or style. Instead, I took a generalist approach, open to anything that might catch my ears. I was interested in sounds that are overlooked—in-between sounds of people talking and laughing, ambient noises, mistakes—that are nearly always discarded when making commercial recordings. These sounds not only show layers of history and meaning, but also bring a human quality to the all-too-often perfect world of recordings.

This generalist method of listening/understanding would never allow me to become the best at any one aspect of the music, but would give me the chance to make comparisons between melodies, songs, text, and peoples. It also allowed me to understand some of the relationships of music and musicians, to see an overview of what the archive has to offer. I spent much of my time listening, comparing, finding similarities (in melodic shape, words, texture, notes, or other elements that contrast or compliment one another) that being a specialist might not give me the luxury to do. The noted mythologist Joseph Campbell often considered himself a generalist, and said that, although he would never be able to become a saint or a guru, he was able to see a larger picture of humanity that those immersed in a single tradition could not afford to do.

However, my approach was not quite scholarly, either. The research that I conducted was ultimately going toward making new sound works created from the actual recordings of the archive. My goal was to pass these recordings on to others while adding my own touches to them, a concept that is part of many folk traditions. To be a caretaker of the songs, but also let them be filtered through my own personality and experiences.

After spending several days reading as much as I could if only to understand what the librarians and archivists and musicians were talking about, I remember sound archivist Harry Rice asking me, “Aren’t you going to actually listen to anything?” I realized that I had been almost afraid to approach the recordings, like a kid perched on the high dive.

So I gave up, and dove in.

Once the process of listening began, all kinds of unforeseen connections arose. One recording lead to another and another, creating a series of disparate layers, a history of connection and sound that is unique to my own listening experience. Additionally, connections were not limited to the collection alone. One of the first singers I listened to was Addie Graham, in her 90s, singing with bronchitis into a microphone into a reel-to-reel into a cassette into my headphones and ears thirty years later. A day later—by complete chance—I met her great granddaughter, a link, a physical presence that was ungraspable in my perfectly detached world of recordings, libraries, headphone listening.

Another moment of physical connection occurred while listening to hymns being “lined-out” by Howard Chalmer and Hurley Smith, the experience nearly driving me to tears. Raw, honest, and melismatic, the unison melodies were embellished by the whole group of singers. The sound of many individual voices finding their way in a melody together without fear, shame or shyness made me feel humble and woefully inadequate as a musician (but inspired, too). They were not “pretty” in any normal sense of the word, but this did not seem to matter. These recordings were an appropriate metaphor for the people creating this unique sound and for the way I hoped to approach the collection itself.

2. On archives and collectors, and how a collection is composition

One of the major ways the Berea Sound Archive is defined and categorized is by its song collectors. In trying to become familiar with the many recordings, the names of the collectors—such as Bruce Greene, William Tallmadge, Barbara Kunkle—became characters in the story of the archive. Each of the collectors had their own personality, education, upbringing, and background, which affected not only how they interacted with musicians but what they chose to record. Therefore, each collection says just as much about those collecting as those recorded, making a seemingly objective process into very much a subjective one.

As part of a larger picture, each song within a collection contributes to a history of interactions passing not only from person to person, but through many other filters. For example, any given song is replete with aural and oral histories, passing from one person to another:

song :: singer :: singer :: collector :: listener :: composer :: song, and so on.

And each of these people act as a kind of filter, adding their own personality (sometimes subtly, sometimes not) to the progression. An imperfect process, the song can move back and forth among these filters, and often one person may encompass several or all of these roles. With each filter or human interaction (listening, learning, recording, or writing down, among others) a contribution is made (either by addition or subtraction), even when the later parties try to be as objective and scientific as possible. The history of song collecting is fraught with this subjectivity, from the early ballad collectors creating a false canon of folk music to the notion of Appalachia as a single homogenous group of people.

As a composer this process is very familiar to me, and is a central part of making a new work. Simply letting sounds filter through me—even with seemingly minimal involvement—is a form of composition. And in a very fundamental and profound way this makes composers out of those that pass “tradition” on, those that document it, and even those that collect it. Each person is a sieve, adding or subtracting a crucial (if often subtle) aspect to the tune, work, or larger tradition. In this way a jukebox, or even a mix tape made for friends is composition. Perhaps an ultimate modern example would be an

iPod: hit the “random” button and the result is a vast collection of music that comes from varied sources and reflects the interests and aesthetic choices of its owner.

This led me to an understanding: just as there is no definitive version of a tune, there is no one definitive way to listen to or record or pass on that the tune. Furthermore, each step of the process is not passive, but is instead a form of composition. My own listening took me on a varied and unique journey, allowing me to follow suggestions of others (yet another subjective element to the process), which in turn added their own layers of perception to my own. This begins to boggle the mind, and it points out the very humanness of collections: that the truths of music and recordings are much more varied than we can even begin to imagine. And for me, this is the aspect of collections that keep them alive, a living tradition.

3. Counterpoint vs. Documentary

My own approach to making sound works involves two main elements that seem to be irreconcilable: counterpoint and documentary. If the traditional definition of counterpoint deals with two or more melodies and their interaction, my own opens the dialogue of sounds to the multiple histories, layers, and stratification latent within each recording and performance. Furthermore, the idea of documentary—a process of observation, leaving the material as it is, raw and un-cleaned-up—does not lend itself very well to the centuries-old practice of say, four-part harmony. But my own works combine these two ideas, further blurring the distinction between what is real, perceived, and created.

4. Calvino, Borges, and the creative process

Toward the end of the residency, I realized that what I was experiencing was a particular form of the creative process, one best described (in my opinion) in the writings of the novelists Italo Calvino and Jorge Louis Borges. First, you are overwhelmed. Then as a way of coping, you focus on very small aspects (you have to trick yourself into doing this, fool your mind into thinking this is your only option, that there are not hundreds, thousands of other, better choices out there). Then one small detail leads to another, and so on. The final stage is one of transcendence, where the small aspects lead your mind to a place where it can soar above all of the minute detail and understand (on a certain level) the entire picture, the whole collection, the area, the world, the universe.

For example, in Calvino’s *Mr. Palomar*, the protagonist passes by a cheese shop and decides to go in. He is immediately excited by the limitless number of choices and plans on trying every variety of cheese. He devises an objective plan but quickly becomes overwhelmed. He is consumed by too many variables and factors that cannot ever be fully controlled or understood, stating, “each instant, when described, expands so that its end can no longer be seen.” In Borges’ writing the reader is often lost in a labyrinth of ideas, meanings, lists, philosophies, and contexts, only to be transported to an understanding beyond those very things, as if the collections of words served only to get you past their inherent limitations.

Here is the process again: Excitement: “I will learn everything.” A plan: “It is possible, through logic, time, and categorization, to understand.” Overwhelmed: “There is not enough time. I can not possibly understand, learn, record, digest everything in this collection.” Giving up: “I can not take in any more, I am unable to complete the task in the manner that I thought I could.” Finally, transcendence: “By giving up, and the process of not understanding, I understand. Looking at a small detail allows my mind to soar above all details and take in—not literally or logically, but a more visceral, physical comprehending—all.”

A delight with potential, then confusion, ultimate transcendence and a deeper understanding allows your mind to soar: if you can not take hold of every star in the universe or count every single blade of grass, then one can become both a metaphor of and a pointer to the infinite, something bigger than we can grasp. This process is common to many traditions and disciplines, from physics and philosophy to religion. The Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross states in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*: “To come to the knowledge you have not, you must go by a way in which you know not.” This is applicable to every aspect of our lives, and is the particular beauty of collections.

5. Other inspirations and comparable works by contemporaries

This idea of artist-as-curator is not new. For example, two contemporary artists, Mark Dion and Christian Marclay, both approach collections of artifacts and art with the process of creative filtering through museum collections, pseudo-scientific digs, or recordings. Dion uses anthropological approaches to his material, making collections of insignificant “found” objects and in the process turning them into works of art. Marclay may use fragments of common words, images or sounds from commercial recordings and museums to juxtapose vastly different objects. Each is working as a kind of curator, but because there is an added element of new work, it becomes a process of renewal both for the objects used and the minds seeing and understanding them. And, because all objects are open to them, because everything is potentially material for them to use, new connections can be made and something apparently ordinary can be cast in a new light. The resulting piece creates a new perspective (and an additional layer of meaning) on both the established art and on the artist’s own work.

6. Two Berea sound archive projects

Two projects began to emerge after immersing myself into the collection. Both act as a filter of the sound archives, presenting the recordings in a new context. The first, entitled *american winter*, uses recordings of old-time instrumentalists and singers, interviews, radio broadcasts, fragments of melody, and other sounds from the archives to make new songs filled with layers of memory. Each phrase has its own genealogy, geography, and history. Often, fragments of recordings are heard out of context, or are combined with others that may not have been possible before, such as white and black women singing lullabies together, or instrumentalists from different centuries or continents.

The second is a kind of jukebox or curio cabinet of sounds, focusing on the overlooked and in-between fragments of field recordings. Each small moment is part of a larger network of sounds: dead time, foot stamping, tuning of an instrument, coughing, the spitting of tobacco. It is a collection of a collection, where sounds that are normally discarded are isolated and put under a magnifying glass, showing a hidden humanity within the recordings and bringing it to the foreground.

7. The last days

The final days at the Berea Sound Archives were spent making last-minute copies of recordings, eating dinner with friends, walking, and digesting the numerous sounds and words that I was privileged to take in. My ears had become fatigued, my perception diminished. However, a larger awareness and grasp of the collection was beginning to become apparent, and will certainly inform my own musical voice as I begin to process all that I have heard and experienced. I immediately began to use fragments of the collection in my own work, including a live performance at the Athens International Film festival in Athens, Ohio only a week after leaving Berea. The performance included

interviews of coal miners from Maggard mine in Kentucky, and a recording of Berzilla Wallin and Dellie Norton given to me in the last moments of the residency. The singing of these two women—callused, care-worn, without ego—were exactly what I came to Berea looking for. Even this very last gift given to me from the Archives, by chance, has an overwhelming potential concealed within it.