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The Politics of Amplification: Notes on "Endangered Music" and Musical Equity

By Stephen Feld

Ten years ago my politely obscure academic life as a researcher into the music and culture of the Papua New Guinea rainforests was interrupted by a phone call. The voice on the other end turned out to be Mickey Hart. After he came over to talk about New Guinea drums, we listened to a soundscape tape I had just made of rainforest birds and the music they inspire in a New Guinea community. When the half hour encompassing the sounds of a whole day in Bosavi was over, Mickey looked over at me and said, "that's incredible . . . and it's much too important to be kept an academic secret." And then, hardly missing a beat, he suggested playing it during intermission at a Grateful Dead performance! I gulped. "You want to play *this* at a Grateful Dead show?" Mickey smiled. "Of course! Don't you understand? If I'm hungry to hear this, thousands of others are too!"

I was stunned by the passion and directness of this statement. Mickey seemed impatient, almost insulted that music like this wasn't readily available for everyone to hear. Hardly the kind of attitude I was used to among my academic colleagues, whose vision was overwhelmingly less populist. Even though many in my profession, those of anthropology, ethnomusicology, and folklore have spent years living with other people and, in some cases, deeply and sincerely absorbing their systems of knowledge, academics do not typically imagine themselves as activists in the process of making other worlds more known and appreciated—except within the tiny world of their own, the world of the academy.

Aluku performers Aleïna Apalobi and Sephiro Maïs singing in the Great Hall of the Library of Congress, March 15. Photo by Yusef El-Amin

This made me think a lot about the difference between my work, for instance, telling a class of twenty about the destructive effects of logging and mining on rainforest environment and culture, and Mickey's work, amplifying music live and on record for millions of people. And I wondered, was Mickey putting me on? Or could it really be true that a world of people, like those who love rock and roll music, would also have the desire to listen to a Papua New Guinea musical world?

I will come back to that question and the stories that answer it in a minute, but I want to first consider "endangered music"—how it is both a term of alarm and a term of celebration; and how the idea is linked to an agenda that uses recording technology to promote musical empowerment.

The idea of "endangered music" immediately calls to mind the more familiar idea that is a mainstay of ecology, the idea of "endangered species." In both cases the terms remind us that loss of diversity is a form of impoverishment, whether in the biological or cultural sphere. More importantly, these kinds of loss and impoverishment are linked together, as every instance of the thinning out of biological diversity is connected to the thinning out of cultural, linguistic, and artistic diversity. So, linking the struggles for environments with the futures of the peoples whose lives are tied to them is essential to promoting the integrity of ecology and human rights.

But there is some risk in voicing these concerns with the word *endangered*. Equating music and culture with animal and plant species might lead some to believe that this is about human zoos, reservations, and conservation parks, or about a desire to freeze time, to deny change and history. Those ideas have to be rejected. Indigenous peoples, and indeed all dominated peoples, need control over the terminology and imagery of how their interests and identities are represented. For some, a term like "endangered music" may feel inappropriate, and outsiders must be sensitive to that response.

Yet, for those of us working from another position, those of us who are trying to create an alliance between activists for ecological and cultural survival, "endangered music" is a very useful term. When environmentalists report that we lose thousands of species of plants and animals every year, we should be asking, in parallel, how many cultures and languages are we losing? And with them, how many myths and stories? How many songs and instruments? How many human artistic inventions? It is the existence of questions and issues like these that make the phrase "endangered music" an important one in an activist vocabulary.

The idea of "endangered music," then, is a way of talking back to a world that has become musically diminished and a world that, despite rapid advances in the spread of technology, is actually less hearable. Raising the cry of "endangered music" is a way of urging the amplification of voices to actively counter the thinning out or the silencing of musical diversity.

The "endangered music" idea is also a way of talking back to those in the environmental movement who imagine that the only thing at stake in ecological destruction is cute and cuddly animals and the plants that Western pharmacy needs to cure cancer. Hearing "endangered music" dramatically reminds us that the struggle for these places is about much more—for societies under threat, for the survival of people whose knowledge and management of the local environment is central to expanding global knowledge, including medicinal resources.

While "endangered music" may be a new label, the urgency to recognize and foster musical empowerment is neither new nor unique to the Library of Congress Endangered Music Project. Some have forcefully voiced these concerns before, perhaps none more strongly than Alan Lomax, whose term "cultural equity" and center for its promotion through the "global jukebox" of songs he and others have collected has been an inspiration to many who have followed along this path.

But there are some new alliances now being created to promote this musical and cultural equity. And one key development involves people with the access and ability to share the best in musical technology and distribution networks. To understand the change they are bringing about, we must remember that for many years indigenous peoples and dominated minorities often took a second-class ride on cheap recording equipment. The intentions to honor the music might have been there, but much so-called "noncommercial" recording involved minimal audio quality, minimal budgets, and lack of promotion and circulation. Not to mention few or no royalties to return to the musicians or community where the music was recorded. Lack of circulation, like lack of royalties, even came to be linked to claims for musical authenticity. In other words, the less commercial the product and its distribution, the more "pure" the music was thought to be. So marginality in the marketplace was sometimes taken to validate "real," "authentic," "ethno" music. This was often a result of academic hostility to involvement with popular commercial enterprise.

It is an unfortunate irony, but many attempts to respect musical diversity also, unwittingly, reproduced musical colonialism by bringing us recordings whose exotic content was matched by their muffled grooves. That is why the alternative that Mickey has insisted on is so important—that the best equipment, engineers, budgets, and distribution networks can and should be shared beyond the world of Western popular and elite arts. This kind of activist stance on musical empowerment imagines that the people recorded and listeners everywhere can be beneficiaries of a different kind of musical equity.

That is where Mickey's concern and mine came back together. Once his Rykodisc series *The World* was in place, Mickey offered to produce a new soundscape recording for me. Our goal was to dramatically amplify the musical ecology of the Bosavi rainforest in Papua New Guinea and its significance to the Kaluli people, whose music is directly inspired by the sounds of surrounding birds, crickets, and waterfalls. Mickey's crew customized the best field recording package available, I went off and made new recordings, and then spent four months editing with great engineering help and great equipment. Then the recording was launched with tremendous support from Rainforest Action Network and Rykodisc, who continue to enthusiastically promote it and explore new audiences. Coming from the nickel-and-dime, do-it-yourself, "sorry, there's no budget for that" world of academia, I have been overwhelmed by all this. The idea that there are people who really care about making distant musics available in this kind of high-quality, high-profile way opens a new page in the story of musical activism. And with it potential for new cultural dialogues, like this one:

On one of the sequences of *Voices of the Rainforest* you can hear Ulahi, the disc's featured composer, singing songs with the water flow of a local creek. After singing the first of the new songs she had composed since my return, Ulahi spontaneously launched into a tag melody. Her words were:

wo:-wo: ni America kalu-o-e
gi wi oba-e
ni Australia gayo-e
gi wi oba-e
ni America kalu-o-e
gi wi oba-e
ni Australia gayo-e
ni America kalu-o-e
a-ye wo:-wo:

(calling) my America men
what are your names?
my Australia women
who can you be?
my America men
who are you?
my Australia women
my America men
calling out "wo:-wo:"

Ulahi repeated these phrases several times; then, as my tape recorder kept running, she switched to speaking voice, and said:

> Well, myself, thinking about it, speaking sadly, I won't see your place but you see mine, I don't know your names, so I'm wondering, I'm thinking like that, you people living in far away lands, listening to me, I haven't heard your land names, so who are you? That's what I'm saying; you, Steve, having come here before, you can say, "my name is Steve, America man," but all the others, what are your names? "Many people will hear your Bosavi songs," you said like that to me before, but thinking about it, singing by myself I'm thinking, "What are your names?" that's what I was thinking. I don't really know your land names, just America, Australia, so I'm sadly singing like that so that they can hear it.

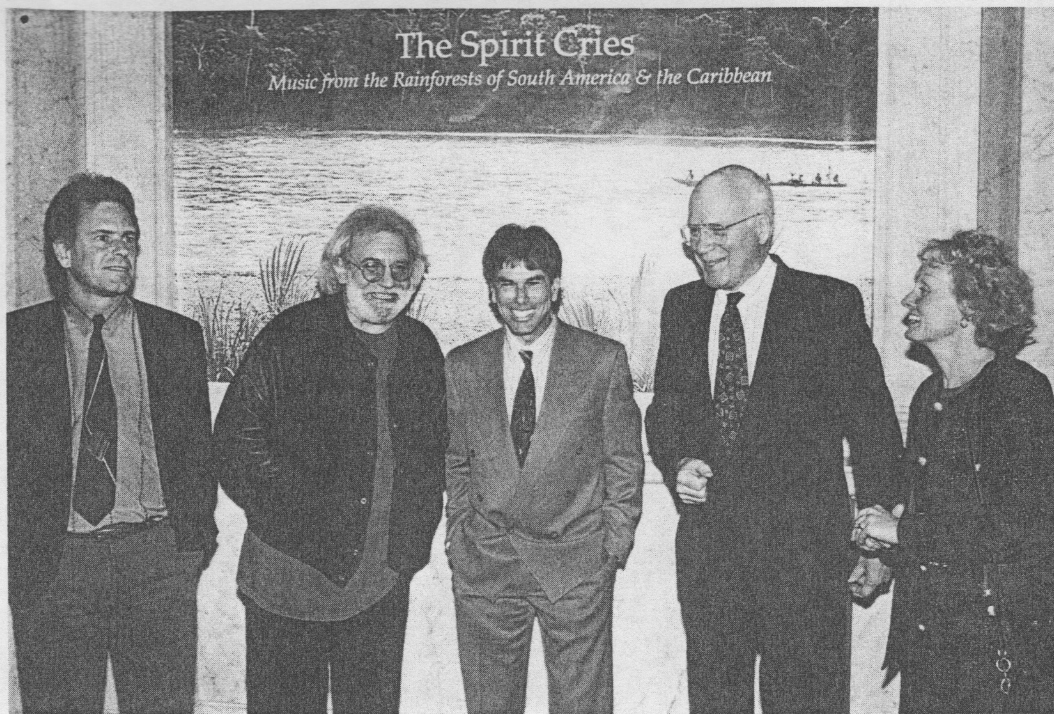
To understand this you must know that Kaluli songs are maps of local lands. These songs take their listeners on journeys, and these journeys are memorial ones, tracing the paths of spirit birds by citing all of the forest places they might frequent. Because I told Ulahi that many new people would hear her songs, she wanted to reach out to them. And the Kaluli way to connect with others near or far is by singing their lands, citing the placenames that make up the journeys we call biography. So Ulahi's little improvisation emerged at a moment when she thought about a world of people who would hear her, a world she'd never personally encounter. Her words imagine our humanity and presence, as well as our strangeness, our absence. Like all Kaluli singers whose best songs might make their listeners weep, Ulahi is wondering if, when we hear her voice, we might feel both her sense of recognition and her sense of loss.

This connection across huge cultural divides has touched many listeners in America and Australia. It touched Kaluli people, too. For example, after listening to the recording in its entirety just a few months ago, Ayasilo said to me, "Maybe your people can hear us now, maybe they will understand about our place." And Kaluli people are even more excited about the commercial success this recording has had, because the Bosavi Peoples Fund, a trust to distribute its royalties, has been able to fund needed projects in this isolated community that is currently spinning in the chaos of local oil and gold development and logging.

But, at the risk of sounding ungracious, I must voice concern that projects like these don't become a kind of musical tokenism. Here is what I mean: there are around 750 languages spoken in New Guinea, and just as many different artistic universes there. And there is just one commercially available CD, of a Papua New Guinea music and environment. And that one might—just possibly, maybe, hopefully—be available at your local record shop. But let's remember, it's only one recording. How long until we have the next? And the next? And how long until all of these musics, these

Alan Jabbour and Mickey Hart at the March 15 symposium "Music and Cultural Conservation." At an earlier interview with Ann McLean of the Library's Music Division, Hart spoke of his interest in world music:

"There is no such thing as isolated music anymore, . . . unless you're behind monastery walls for six hundred years where you get a music that is pure in that respect. [But] we're not really looking for music that is pure, because this music has a need in the community. It has a real function. This is not art music. This music goes through every part of life. This music accompanies every ceremony, every rite. It's very important music, and this music has been able to live on and still continues." Photo by Yusef El-Amin



At a reception in the Great Hall of the Library of Congress, March 15, Grateful Dead members Bob Weir, Jerry Garcia, and Mickey Hart, along with Senator and Mrs. Patrick Leahy. The Vermont senator acknowledges being a fan of the group for years. Photo by Yusef El-Amin

peoples, their artistic achievements, their survival struggles are a routine part of our cultural consciousness? That's why Mickey's admonition of ten years ago keeps ringing in my head: "this music is too important to be kept an academic secret." And all the more so when the music is tied to promoting more equitable futures.

Like all aspects of life and environment, music is part of a precarious ecology. This precarious ecology is why some music is "endangered," and why we are here, participating in this rite of amplification. It is a rite that celebrates the creators and the music that can be heard on *The Spirit Cries*. It is also a rite to remember that while we live in a world of tremendous cultural loss, musical diversity can still be actively amplified. And one forceful contribution to doing that is to create new links between the academic, public, and commercial sectors in order to extend to indigenous and dominated peoples the networks of music recording, distribution, and broadcast that have excluded them for far too long. This is what the collaboration of the Library of Congress, Mickey's 360° Productions, and Rykodisc signifies to me.

I recently experienced the excitement that *Voices of the Rainforest* generated when I played it back in Bosavi communities, and the excitement in the Papua New Guinea Education Department when a copy of the tape was placed in every high school in the country. That is why I want to end by emphasizing how important it is that projects like this do not just impact our airways, record stores, and home stereos; do not just end up enlightening and gratifying us. The recordings, the royalties, the activism, the enthusiasm—all of this must get back into the communities where it came from. This is where it can have the kind of impact on live music-making, on cultural and environmental integrity that will fully justify the mission of these projects.

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