Charlie Grooves[1]

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AS A COLLEGE FRESHMAN I found myself digging deep into the pages of Charles Keil's *Urban Blues* (Keil 1966b) in the same week that Martin Luther King was murdered. I read, I cried; I listened to B.B. King and Aretha Franklin; I read, and I cried some more. So I want to start by saying that my late 1960s days as a college civil rights and anti-war activist had a lot to do with *Urban Blues*. And also with the only two other books about music and the real world that I could find: LeRoi Jones' *Blues People* (1963) and A.B. Spellman's *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (1966). Looking back, these were the books that sent me searching for a life path.

But of the three, *Urban Blues* set up the intellectual and social dilemma best, at least for where I was coming from, namely the white middle class suburbs. Charlie cracked open just what was really bugging me about music and race, the paradox of essence. *Urban Blues* began with the best takedown of racialized essence in the academic history of blues writing. And it developed the polemic by opening up the essence of soul as difference. Charlie did it by bringing music, class, race and masculinity together in a way that was absolutely revelatory, a way he has now recapped and extended powerfully in the Afterword to the book's second edition (Keil 1991).

Urban Blues only became more of an intellectual standout to me as I tried to make my way through graduate school in the anthropology of music. Then I met Charlie, in 1972, when Alan Merriam brought him out to Indiana University to lecture about his dissertation, the work that became *Tiv Song* (1979). It was still early in the game for me, but apolitical graduate school in the

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cornfields was driving me nuts. Charlie came and talked about the sounds of drums and the smell of death in Biafra, the way they mixed, took hold of him, and wouldn't let go. I was moved, and I thought, so this is how you get over, this is how you deal. Everything about the heaviness of theory got lighter for a moment. I began to contemplate the place where rhythm met resistance and could come to embody it. A window opened.

We went to a bar. Charlie told me about his own inspired undergraduate conversations with Malcolm X. I told him about mine, with a not yet Amiri Baraka and A.B. Spellman. I felt a connection. Then somehow we started talking about Thelonious Monk. Before I knew it we were singing "Evidence" and "Jackieing," tapping cross rhythms on the table, musicking our way out of speech and then back into it, a Monk tune at a time. Charlie told me he was a bassist and drummer. I told him that I was a trombonist. He told me that he had a cousin who played trombone, a guy named Roswell Rudd. Say what? Roswell Rudd? My tromboniphere hero, Archie Shepp's sonic foil, the great white hope of the angriest black music, is your Connecticut Yankee Yalie cousin? It went on like that.

Charlie sent me parts of *Tiv Song* to read. I was wowed. He was doing it again, working out the essence thing, this time with Africa and African music. He was moving through the politics of style, going deep into the heart of Tiv being. But he was doing it by opening every phenomenological and Marxist portal to take down a behaviorist and functional reading of Tiv aesthetics. I began to see the thread connecting "Motion and Feeling," his classic piece on the "swing is..." of jazz rhythm sections (Keil 1966a), with the "soul is..." of Urban Blues, and the "song is..." of Tiv Song. Charlie was thriving on a riff, getting under the skin of the discourse of jazzness, of Blackness, of Tivness. He was revealing the simultaneity of deeply material and deeply ephemeral musical worlds. These were worlds tied to histories but never exhausted by them. Worlds full of essences, yet never reducible to them. Worlds empowered by iconicities of style, yet never reducible to that either. There was no "other" there. Ever.

Charlie got into the humanity of the music without romanticizing the musicians; he got into the essences of differences without essentializing race or any other kind of difference. And he got to the music's joy without ever letting go of its politics, no matter how painful, dark, or contradictory. For me this was—and strongly remains—a model of the best in radical work, by which I mean work that never leaves hope and desire in the dust, work that

forcefully affirms life's powers while witnessing to the powers of hate and of destruction.

I can't adequately describe how deeply my student days were inspired by these first encounters with Charlie's groovological opus. I can only say that in the following twenty-some years that inspiration grew into many phone calls, many letters and postcards, many jam sessions, and many conference panels. Many papers were passed back and forth, and many cassettes traded. Many ideas were mutually illuminated, but many arguments and differences also emerged and provided the basis for other inspired conversations, poems, and emails. In the early 1990s we got together to tally them. It added up to a book we called *Music Grooves* (Keil and Feld 1994), a kind of map of our scholarly and personal dialogue. By juxtaposing our articles on the themes of musical experience and musical mediation we tried to expose old and new connections. Bracketing the article sections we presented tape-recorded dialogues where we discussed and argued through those papers and issues. By experimenting with both form and content we wanted to signal a challenge to certain standard modes of scholarship. We wanted to honor conversation and collaboration, and to invite others to join in.

Music Grooves celebrated dialogic process as intellectual and political praxis. So before saying something about Charlie's ever more passionate preaching on the path of participation, I just want to thank him for always modeling the groove for me, for being the ultimate collaborator, the tension on my tone arm. I want to thank him for always being there for me with a poem, or a starter line or the idea for one; with a fat thought, a rant, a line from William Blake or James Brown; with a riff or rhythm, some cornet chop suey from Louis Armstrong or Wild Bill Davison, a bugatsa cream pie, an E. Twinkie Clark and the Clark Sisters cassette. All of those Charlie grooves are about affirming the necessity of participation, of physical joy, of daily ear-clearing in a world where historical horrors and musical miracles sit so outrageously side by side. What I'm thanking Charlie for is for helping me navigate the daily follies of an intellectual life-world drunk on disengaged ideas, and an institutional academia where there is too little space to groove and too little time to experience fun as intelligence. Example: A found poem spun out of three email exchanges with Charlie, on May 18, 1998, tells a story of writing as witnessing, of reflecting together in memorable form, a way of being in and dialoging with the news, the moment, lived histories.

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The Living End

Did you see it?
A dead Sinatra and deposed Suharto
front page of last Saturday's New York Times
    winking
at each other
in left to right big vertical pictures
Old Blue Eyes in 50s black and white
    booze and mic
Old Suharto in 90s living color
    velvet black hat
What a pair
    "the living end" Frank would say.

But the juxtaposition asks
    what song
is Sinatra singing Suharto?
"Stormy Weather?"
Would the don dare
    serenade the dictator
with "Come Fly With Me?"
Does a dead Chairman of the Board
    court a declined King of Java
crooning "Witchcraft?"
Invite him to join ratpack cronies
    in hot Vegas hell
to do it "My Way?"

No, Frank's too suave
he digs Suharto's smoothe
    detached cool
he'd sing "The Party's Over"
    then say
"endsville, brother."

But, of course, dialogue is not always mutual poetics and politics. So the little piece I now want to add to this conversation comes out of the place where Charlie and I have always argued the most, about technology. Charlie calls it tricknology. He has been ever greener in his dissing of its "substitution" effects and aesthetic perfection agendas, ever critical of any removal from the present moment, ever focused on holding on to the "live" and

keeping the "memorex" in its place, on the shelf or in the drawer. In response I've always refused to relegate mediation to the far side of the non-participatory. I've always loved to be present by ear-witnessing with a recorder. And I've always imagined sound recordings as potentially subversive modes of representation – very "live" ones- especially in a world full of infotainment pictorial hegemony, and an academy full of text fetishists and posers who could never write as passionately or lyrically as Charlie does.

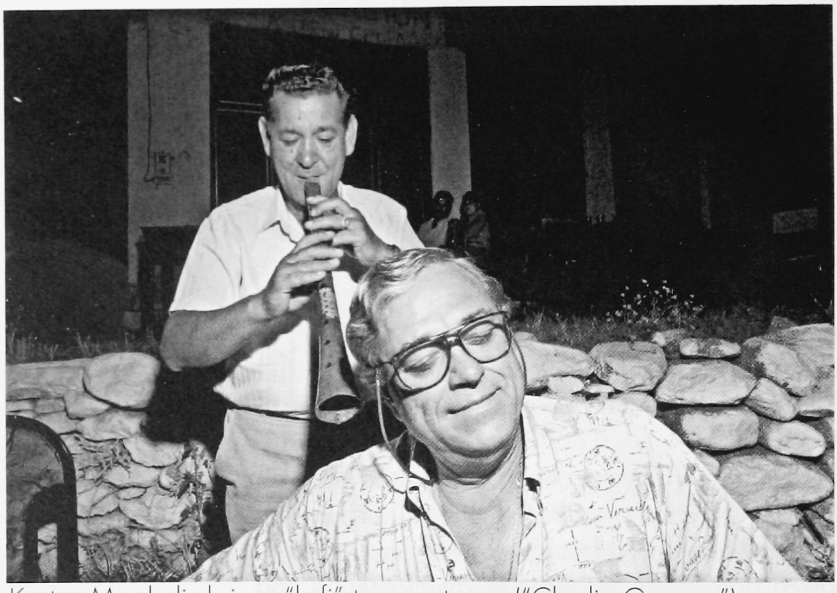
Being so committed to sound recording both as cultural advocacy, and as a direct and sensuous route into performance, I have never understood quite why Charlie is so resistant to an engaged politics of mediation. His assignment of technology into some global regressive slot always seemed to me to be defensive and shortsighted. I thought it an unnecessary denigration of an alternate form of experiencing and representing. And I was particularly suspicious of such a broad dismissal of a whole range of processes and possibilities for being there, for experiencing, for representing, for unleashing the power of familiar and new scenes.

Additionally, I've often felt Charlie's mediation politics were on the edge of a big contradiction, making uncommon company with a whole cast of conservative and elitist high culure types, helping to reinscribe writing as the only authentic mode of cultural or aesthetic representation or memory. It seemed like he was taking a few big enemies (TV, advertising, large-scale corporate media controls, commodity capitalist practices dominating popular culture dissemination) and projecting them onto the entirety of mediation and media practice. Our exasperation with each other on these themes colors the third dialogue of *Music Grooves* (Keil and Feld 1994: 290-330).

In *My Music*, a collaborative project and book edited with his Buffalo students (Crafts, Cavicchi, and Keil, 1993) Charlie actually found out quite a bit about what people do with their recorded sounds, and showed how every listening has a biography and history. But he also showed that even that doesn't determine the power of the moment, the immediate, unique, ephemeral surge that comes from getting down with the sound. Music's ideolects have no bounds, even when they do have remarkable, enduring biographical associations. Despite this breakthrough into mediation through agency, despite the few moments in *Music Grooves* where we confirmed similar politics about music industrialization and commodification, Charlie and I have never been able to reconcile our differing takes on the meaning and value of mediated grooves. Indeed, the more I devote myself to studying the media-

tions of "world music" (Feld 1996, 2000) and to using audio media more than writing to publicly represent some of the deepest complexities of cultural history I've encountered in twenty-five years of work in the rainforests of Papua New Guinea (Feld 2001), the more I find myself made impatient and irritated by Charlie's anti-technology bumper stickers and pronouncements.

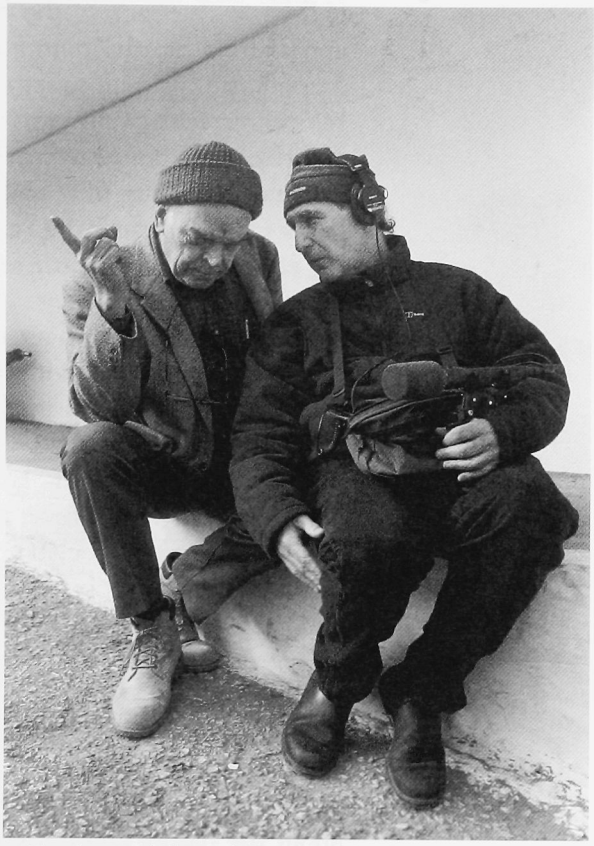
Then Charlie and Angeliki took me along to Greek Macedonia, where for many years they have visited with and come to know the life worlds of Romani musicians. They have recently completed a compilation of these musicians' stories into a new book, *Bright Balkan Morning* (Keil, Keil, Blau and Feld 2002), accompanied by many gorgeous photographs by Dick Blau, their *Polka Happiness* collaborator (Keil, Keil and Blau 1992). Like *Polka Happiness*, this new book is about the people and the parties, about the histories and feelings that shape both musical community and musical communitas. The book situates Romani instrumentalists as the most multicultural and cosmopolitan musicians you could imagine, and locates their lives in more historical nightmares and heartbreaks than you could imagine too.



Kostas Mardarlis brings "kefi" to a customer ("Charlie Grooves").
Photo by Dick Blau

In a spirit of qualified tolerance and trust far beyond his better instincts about tricknology, Charlie commissioned me to make a soundscape and music recordings for inclusion in the book. So through Christmas and New Year's weeks of 2000-2001 we wandered and partied together. We walked through the streets of Jumaya listening to vendors and patrons at markets and shops. We recorded the disco sounds, whatever was on loudspeakers, car radios, transitors, or tvs. We went to local churches to record bells and chanting, and to cafes and nightclubs to record backgammon and video games, bands and jam ses-

sions. We recorded people at home and in the street. We followed the Roma instrumentalists to their New Year's gigs at cafes and restaurants in Serres and Sohos. We walked the fields of Assiros and Dorkas listening to shepherds and their belled goats and sheep, then went to folkloric festivals in Nikisiani and Kali Vrissi where we recorded costumed dancers draped in bigger bells, as well as the instrumentalists playing for their dancing and listening pleasure.



Charles Kiel (l) and Steve Feld. Photo © Dick Blau

It was amazing how everything and everyone had a distinctive acoustic niche. There were chestnut vendors, cheese pie vendors, chiquita banana vendors, canary vendors, pajama vendors; vendors of every fruit and vegetable, or every tool or household item from old-style crafted brooms to every electronic gadget imaginable. There were many kinds of human, animal, and church bells. There were many kinds of singing and speaking voices, often overlapping and interlocking one another. There were local Romani instrumentalists and visiting Gypsy bands from over the borders. There were bouzouki-clarinet-synthesizer pop bands, and roving kids with dumbeks, triangles and plastic recorders.

We heard "Silver Bells" and "We Wish You a Merry Chritsmas" from synthesizer Santas and local carols sung and played in every imaginable combination. We heard long medleys of tsifteteli, karsilamas, zembekikos, and Pontic tik from Romani instrumentalists at parties, mixed with the sounds of dance steps, clinking glasses, whoops and whistles, and sizzling barbecue grills. We heard old chestnuts east and west live and over loudspeakers. In fact, the first first song we heard when I turned the recorder on in the Jumaya market was Stevie Wonder singing "Isn't She Lovely" pumped out over the sound system behind the perfume salesman. And later on that first recording day, at a tax collection agency party, the first song I recorded from Roma instrumentalists was "La Paloma." I couldn't believe it. Charlie had put me in the

middle of a gypsy re-grooving of the habañera rhythm of one of the most recorded tunes of all time, a song covered by everyone from Elvis Presley to Charlie Parker, from Maria Callas to Dean Martin, from Chinese chin players to German punk rockers.

All of these sounds, or that is, my edited recordings of them, will be in the back of the book and another companion CD, to appear from Smithsonian Folkways. To the serious fun of soundscaping the global locality of Greek Macedonia, Charlie brought his characteristic enthusiasm and verve. I can't say how much I appreciate his desire to represent the sound world of the Romani instrumentalists as fully and as wonderfully as possible. But I also think Charlie actually had a good time recording and saw how taping each one of these little serendipitous, idiosyncratic, unplanned, and distinctive sound events also might address what he has always addressed, essence without essentialization, style in struggle with stereotype, difference without otherness. Process and groove and participation remained in the spotlight, despite the fact that we were there to record.

Nevertheless, for the last year, Charlie has responded to each edit the same way. "Steve, this is so amazing. I don't want to cut anything." That is a classic Charlie grooves statement. Charlie's desire to keep memory ahead of the memorex, to always honor the live moment will never go away, no matter how much the recorded groove embodies the memories of voices and scenes he holds dear. Every edit is just a reminder of what isn't there. But he has shown an excitement about what is there that strikes me as new and engaging.

There are probably many ways that Charlie and I still disagree about the nature and powers of mediation qua participation. But embarking on this new kind of collaboration together has brought a longstanding arena of argument into a new kind of focus, making it possible to situate the issue in the context of recordings themselves. Something new has opened up here about the politics of recording and editing, something that makes it possible to reframe the dialogue about tricknology into one about sound recording as a medium of representation. From a debate about the power of mediated grooves we have finally found a few momentary openings to groove on mediation, and to refine what for me has been a much valued dialogue about the politics of fieldwork, representation, and memory.

Notes

[1]This paper was written for oral delivery at the American Anthropological Association SUNTA panel in honor of Charles Keil (Friday, November 30, 2001). I have retained the oral form here, in honor of Charlie's aesthetic of liveness and in dialogic mimesis of the verbal style he has so beautifully developed in his own writing over the years. The paper is slightly expanded from the oral version as originally presented.

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