

How Extraordinary Is It?

Steven Feld

REVIEW OF: *Bayaka: The Extraordinary Music of the BaBenzélé Pygmies*. Recordings, text, and photographs by Louis Sarno; CD produced and mixed by Bernie Krause (Roslyn, NY: Ellipsis Arts, 1996). 60-minute CD. 96-pp. book. 40 color photographs. \$28.95 hardcover.

Bayaka is an extraordinary CD, book, and photographic exploration of the world of the BaBenzélé Pygmies that involves a complex layering of several kinds of collaborations. It is an aesthetic collaboration between author, photographer, and recordist Louis Sarno and producer, editor, and sound designer Bernie Krause. It is a musical collaboration between BaBenzélé people and their Central African rainforest home. It is a marketing collaboration between the late new-age capitalism of Ellipsis Arts ("The Relaxation Company") and the global musical industry's traffic in ethnic otherness. These collaborations blur to produce a space of representation and desire, a space whose effect is the "extraordinary."

The Sarno and Krause collaboration is significant. Sarno's texts and recordings reflect his more than ten years in Central Africa. He projects a deep and sincere desire to be part of the forest world of the BaBenzélé, to come to terms with the people and their songs and stories. His unabashed romanticism, his lyrical phrasings, and his acknowledged crankiness at the changes he sees in his midst are all as abundant in the ninety pages of text, photographs, and recordings as they were in his 1993 book *Song from the Forest*:

Why are the Bayaka so musical? Living with them, I see part of the answer all round me. Children grow up in the midst of music. As babies they are serenaded constantly with lullabies. . . . They snuggle in the laps of their mothers during dance ceremonies, when the decibel level rattles eardrums, and hang on when their mothers leap to their feet and dance. . . . The ability to create melodies and harmonize is as deeply automatic and universal to the Bayaka as is the average person's ability to speak sentences in his or her native language. (pp. 17-18)

To this intensely local engagement add Bernie Krause, America's best-known recordist and producer of wildlife and environmental recordings. Krause's fifty albums and nearly three-thousand-hour archive of sound environments from around the world testify to another kind of intense dedication. His niche hypothesis

parallels the argument for acoustic ecological and aesthetic coevolution, the idea that adaptation and competition for filling acoustic niches defines musical/sonic interactions between all places and their inhabitants.¹ Together Sarno and Krause join low to high tech, forest to studio, music to environment.

For hard-core fans of this kind of recording—a recording representing the thorough and constant interlock of environmental presence and human invention—the real collaboration is the one that has been acoustically going on every day for hundreds of years between the sounding presence of the rainforest and the resoundingness of its human inhabitants. The rhythms of cicadas, the echoes and yodels of the BaBenzélé, the intermittent barks and groans of animals, the bursts of human song—this presence (or, better, interpresence) is the stuff of an acoustic ecology that finds its artistic realism in a recording like the one Sarno and Krause have created. Music is no more apart from the forest than the forest is apart from music. It is this dense, intermeshing idea that animates the full imagination of the rainforest world for many current scientific and artistic representations of the sense of place one finds there. This is certainly the kind of sense richly hearable in this collaboration.

Then there is another, equally complicated kind of collaboration, the kind that locates this recording in the world system of capital cultural production and consumable flows. I have listened to this recording and read Sarno's notes to it for a year. But alongside it I have also been listening to all the artists whose inspired appropriations of Pygmy music have created a global marketplace where musical inventions of "Pygmies" are worth several million dollars in commodities and copyright claims held by Sony Music, Columbia, Warner Brothers, and other major record companies. I have been wondering about how the world of the rainforest, of the Pygmy music recorded there, has led to the forms of "artistry" that made many dollars for record companies and for Deep Forest, Baka Beyond, Zap Mama, Madonna, Francis Bebey, Jean Paul Wabotai, Papa Wemba, MoBoma, Herbie Hancock, Leon Thomas, Jimmy Rowles, Egberto Gismonti, Brian Eno, Jon Hassell, and the dozens of other musicians who have sampled, performed, transformed, copied, recycled, or otherwise trafficked in the "schizophonic mimesis" of Pygmy music.² And I have been wondering about how all of those sales, and all of the desire and pygmyphilia that underlies that circulation, has fed back into a new and refigured marketplace for the kind of primal Pygmy product world packaged in *Bayaka*. I would contend that this is also a collaboration, one between production and consumption, between loss and desire, between capitalist concentration and imaginations of remote others.

All of this collaboration—Sarno and Krause, BaBenzélé and the forest, capitalism and its others—is productive of new and contradictory forms of representation, and *Bayaka* is its mixed-genre result. It joins the conventions of realist ethnomusicological records—that is, of typically academic documentary recordings with authoritative contextual notes—to a high-visibility commercial product most atypical of academic production. The *Bayaka* package is targeted for coffee tables to a largely nonacademic, largely upper-middle-class, new age-leaning audience, the sort of folks who want something more than just a CD and some-

thing less than a dry academic treatise with lots of exotic lore about some particular place, people, and music.

Bayaka's mass touristic appeal is announced through romantic travelogue conventions, even claims to special, inspired, truly "insider" wisdom. (Of Sarno, the Ellipsis publicity urges, "He has been welcomed into their cooperative community of hunter-gatherers like no other before him.") *Bayaka*, then, is a musical safari. It gets you close to the action through expert guides. But it never threatens to overwhelm you with what the guides know, much less with the possibility that the guides don't understand fully what is going on or even understand fully the situated nature of their own narrative production.

The representational complexities embodied in *Bayaka's* genre blurring deserve some fuller exploration. Author and recordist Sarno, for example, comes off as a unique hybrid combination of the delighting and romantic yet wisely naive ethnographer (as if one could ever equal Colin Turnbull for hyperempathetic Pygmy ethnography, not to mention beautiful and romantic travel writing³). At the same time, he comes off as the sonically alert recordist spontaneously ready to document every musical form and variety (as if one could ever equal Simha Arom for hyperrigorous musical documentation⁴). In fact, what emerges is Sarno's brilliance at synthesizing and simplifying the Turnbull and Arom approaches and legacies without hardly mentioning them, thereby creating a middle ground for popularizing the *Bayaka* world while rarely ever having to say something that hasn't already been said by his predecessors.

What he adds, of course, is the new-age ethnoboutique pitch, those flavorful phrases about "the power to heal damaged souls" that presumably will make the music marketable to those seeking release through the revelatory power of contact with a spiritually advanced faraway people. It is this desire for the "exuberance" of the Other, so as to replace or heal the presumed alienation of the listener, that most underscores Sarno's representational moves. His trope is *discovery*, and through this he joins a quest to reject his own world to a desire to find a more humane one among the BaBenzélé. "Extraordinary, not primitive," says the publicity hype. But what is this "extraordinary" world if not the marketing of a transcendental primitivity?

The representational excesses of this production can't be separated from the extraordinary sonic pleasure it provides. The recordings are sensuous and compelling, and this is true no matter how thoroughly or how often one has listened to the twenty other available CDs of Central African forest "Pygmy" music—or, for that matter, the twenty LPs that preceded them. This is a music with an extraordinary commercial history.

Among the reasons why this CD is so likable for the initiated listener is that it shows developments and extensions in previously known genres. The recording can be located in a history of continuity and change. Yet it can also be located as a distinct and specific presentation. Its specificity comes through hearing Krause's mix of local environmental sounds and BaBenzélé musical invention. This mix stimulates new and important ways of thinking about the sonic integrity of place and people. And it develops a technique only hinted at in the pre-

sensation of environmental sounds on earlier Pygmy CD and LP recordings. Unfortunately, the technique didn't entirely work for me because the environmental interludes were not indexed to either temporal or spatial relations with the musical selections. Through the interludes I got a general sense of the surround sound of a **pygmy** encampment, the "you are there" **realism** that brings the music into new **immediacy**. This was effective. **But** I occasionally got irritated by some of the places where animal voices were brought up and down in the mix so that they could more prominently jam with the musicians. Krause's mixing techniques are certainly evocative; they also seemed occasionally overenunciated, particularly when it came to animal voices. I ended up feeling too aware of certain environmental sounds mixed tightly into a spatial foreground. I was led to wonder what motivated such choices and particularly why the environmental sounds weren't more transparent.

Dozens of researchers from around the world have worked for more than twenty-five years to understand the ecology of these rainforests and the knowledge of them held in indigenous systems of thought and action. None of those researchers are ever cited by Sarno or Krause, and the publicity machine for *Bayaka* continuously tries to manufacture the idea that Sarno is the only person who has access to these people, their knowledge, and their world. This is ludicrous. Equally ludicrous is that neither Sarno nor Krause acknowledge that other researchers have studied the relations between music and acoustic ecology in rainforests around the world for just as many years and have presented many of their insights long ago. As a matter of fact, not only have they been presented, but they have been presented far more humbly and in ways far more closely grounded in the local languages and perspectives of indigenous people. Against this backdrop it is difficult not to get annoyed with totalizing rhetorics about how the "primitives" have more complete musical vocabularies than "avant-gardes." Sarno and Krause might think such pronouncements somehow honor, protect, validate, or elevate the "primitives" to a place of respectability. In fact, they don't. Not only are they either empirically wrong or overstated, but their effect is to caricature and essentialize non-Western others. Exploring and comprehending difference requires much more in the way of real research as well as an acceptance of subtlety, patience, and tact.

I was particularly amused by some of the claims to singularity and originality. My own CD, *Voices of the Rainforest*, which presents a Papua New Guinea rainforest "day-in-the-life" in a one-hour soundscape of songs and environmental sounds, was released in 1991 and greeted by inaccurate reviews claiming it was the first thoroughly integrating environmental sound and the human music it inspired. It, too, had its popular predecessors. What I'm trying to say is that there is a significant history to this whole line of work. The connections between anthropological and audio experimentalism have been around for quite a while, as has the effect of a crossover popularity. I'm not suggesting that *Bayaka* isn't unique, significant, and **potentially popular** in **ways** of its own. **But *Bayaka* was born into a world of research, representation, and marketing that both prefigured it and was waiting for it in every conceivable intellectual and commercial way.**

Let these criticisms be misunderstood or, worse, personalized, let me repeat that there is much here that brings knowledge and pleasure. Sarno's specific encounter with the BaBenzélé's world and music is, of course, worthy of attention. His is a personally engaged attempt to bring a particular humanity, one that has moved him deeply, more closely into the lives of those more remote from it. There is passion in Sarno's writing, and it comes through as well in his speaking voice. World's separate the two of us, but within moments on the phone I found him searching, humane, and hopeful. At the same time he was full of worry about how life was going and would go for the BaBenzélé. I valued that short time on the phone; I was talking with someone who really wanted others to know what he found extraordinary in BaBenzélé forms of cultural invention. I was also taken by his concerns with NGOs, particularly his sense that Pygmies were disenfranchised by the newfound territorial claims of environmentalists on the forest. I could hardly say I've had as positive a response to my first encounter with many anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, or researchers who spend their lives doing the kinds of things that Sarno does. In the overall scheme of things, I have no reason to doubt his decency for a moment.

Likewise, Krause's passion for recording, presenting, and raising the popular awareness about musical habitats and his desire to work with Sarno to transform low-tech cassettes into a more evocative piece of digital artistry are clear to me. In my first direct encounter with Krause, I was within moments impressed by his openness, his frankness, and his deep enthusiasm and sense of hope about bringing this work to a large and diverse public. In the year since that phone conversation, I have valued our continuing correspondence and phone talks and his generous offers to share work in progress and to help me in my own recording work.

However, Sarno and Krause have allowed the Ellipsis/music-industry machine to package them into a model of new age knowingness. Research and representations of Pygmy music have circulated for two thousand years. Ancient Egyptians had similar things to say about their forest Pygmy muses.

I don't want to end up sounding less taken, less happy, less pleased with *Bayaka* than I am. I've looked at it often and have even given several copies as Christmas gifts. I've been listening to it regularly for a year. So why am I hedging my enthusiasm for this project? It's certainly not that I want genres to be less blurred. It's certainly not that I want fewer people to hear *Bayaka*. It's certainly not that I doubt Sarno and Krause's goodwill and hard work. It's not that I don't like the sounds, the photographs, or the gentle ease of Sarno's lyricism. Does the nature of the market require that companies lie to sell their products? Would I have been happier with a title like *Bayaka: The Extraordinary Music of the BaBenzélé Pygmies and the Extraordinary Environment of the Central African Rainforests Meet the Extraordinary Romantic Passions of Louis Sarno and the Extraordinary High-Tech Skills of Bernie Krause in the Extraordinary New-Age Entrepreneurial Capitalism of Ellipsis Arts and the Extraordinary World of Desires in the Merchandising Trade in Otherness?* Too many extraordinaries I'm afraid.

But that's exactly my problem with *Bayaka*. This production has the effect of making the Pygmies "extraordinary" enough to sit on coffee tables. In the end

I can't get past the contradiction the genre creates: I love the music but am overwhelmed by how much this package makes me worry about Pygmies as exotic cultural capital for the searching and alienated who live in industrial pleasure domes.

Notes

1. See Bernie Krause, "The Niche Hypothesis: A Virtual Symphony of Animal Sounds, the Origins of Musical Expression and the Health of Habitats," *Soundscape Newsletter* (June 1993).
2. This is all discussed in detail in Steven Feld, "Pygmy POP: A Genealogy of Schizophonic Mimesis," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 28 (1996):1-35.
3. See Colin Turnbull's books, *The Forest People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961) and *The Mbuti Pygmies: Change and Adaptation* (New York: Holt Rinehart Winston, 1983), along with his early LPs *Music of the Ituri Forest* (Folkways Records, 1957) and *Music of the Rainforest Pygmies* (Lyricord Records, 1961). These are just a few of the many precedents to *Bayaka*.
4. See the recordings made by Simha Arom: *Music of the BaBenzélé Pygmies* (Barenreiter Musicaphon, 1966), *Aka Pygmy Music* (AUVIDIS, 1994), and *Centrafrique: Anthologie de la Musique des Pygmées Aka* (Paris: OCORA, 1993), as well as his book, *African Polyphony and Polyrythm* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Steven Feld is a MacArthur fellow and professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is the author of *Sound and Sentiment* (University of Pennsylvania Press 1990) and the editor of *Senses of Place* (School of American Research Press, 1997). Excerpts from Feld's *Voices of the Rainforest* and from Sarno and Krause's *Bayaka* appear on our CD.