

Poster proposal for Oxford Sound Day, 5th March 2011

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Poster title: **Recording and remembering the sounds of Africa: ethnomusicology, sound archiving and sound elicitation**

Abstract

Enchanted by recordings of African pygmy song, in 1986 an American carpenter put down his tools and instead picked up a microphone, tape player and batteries, and a one-way ticket to the Central African Republic. Louis Sarno still lives there today recording songs from the forest and has become an advocate for indigenous land and political rights. During the last three decades, he has built an unprecedented archive of recordings of music and forest soundscapes, as well as images of performance and everyday life of a little known and endangered nomadic community. Until recently, this archive remained virtually unknown, lying wrapped in an old jumper inside a battered suitcase in a storeroom in Oxford.

In this poster I illustrate some of the problems and possible solutions associated with ethnomusicological sound archiving, in order to consider why archival recordings so often remain un-examined, unused and unknown. Why are there no ethnographies of collections of field recordings? Why are recordings treated as objects that typically serve the collector rather than the collected? Why is there no sustained critical analysis of the place of field recording within ethnomusicology?

Using examples from Sarno's archive and from my own doctoral fieldwork in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, during which I examined the potential contemporary relevance of the musicologist Hugh Tracey's *Sound of Africa* series, a recording map of the musical memory of sub-Saharan Africa, I illustrate the value of 'sound elicitation'. This method, the circulation of archival recordings through local social mechanisms, is an attempt to build ongoing relationships between sound recordings and indigenous communities, to enhance collections of field recordings, and to try and ensure sensible and reciprocal sharing of musical and cultural knowledge.