Cultural Responsibility

Steven Feld interviewed by Robert Reigle

Robert Reigle: What do you think of David Toop's Ocean of Sound?
Steven Feld: I like David Toop's work and I think Ocean of Sound is an interesting book. His take on exotica and primitivo ethno-techno is less anxious than mine though, and he particularly seems easy on Eno. I made clear my feelings about Eno's ooga-booga Africa stuff in the pimpgy pop piece I wrote in the 1996 Yearbook for Traditional Music. It's a piece on the history of everybody from Herbie Hancock to Madonna to Eno doing the pimpgys. I'm concerned there with the conflation of avant-gardist space and Disney cartooning; a kind of history of sound caricatures ending with Deep Forest.

I've only emailed with Toop and heard little of his own improvisation work, although I've met some of the players who go way back with him in the London improvisation scene; I was on a tour with them a couple years ago, in Canada.

Robert Reigle: What did you do with?
Steven Feld: The trio from New Mexico that I play in with Tom Guralnick and Jefferson Voorhees was on a Canadian festival tour with The Recedents, the trio of Mike Cooper, Roger Turner, and Lol Coxhill. Cooper is a cool guitar effects soundwork guy who is also really into Pacific music and does a lot of Island songs.

Robert Reigle: Did you a Sub Rosa CD David Toop wrote the liner-notes for that places his Yanomami field recordings from Venezuela amidst techno-electronic music. Let's say that the Yanomami probably have no idea of how their sounds are going to be used; I don't know whether David Toop played them the techno music or not. Do you think that using some recordings like that in these contexts without a more specific kind of consent, is that okay?
Steven Feld: Complicated. I don't know the specifics of that use. But in general, once you record something, do you imagine that you have inalienable right to do whatever you want with it forever without consultation? Or if you paid somebody a few bucks to record them at one point in time, do you own their voice for all time? What's the nature of your moral, legal, aesthetic, and political responsibility to them over the course of time? Those are really deep and complex questions. People in the intellectual and cultural property arena have tried to address them in terms of the legal side, and you have addresses to it from the moral side as well, in writings like the book Simon Frith edited, called Music and Copyright. Everybody who has recorded sounds in small-scale societies has a horror story to tell you about dealing with the world of elite pop-stars and their sense that they have absolute inviolable right just because they're artists, to sample and access whatever they want and use it whenever they want. The story of the Deep Forest recording is probably the best example of that in recent times — did you see Hugo Zemp's article about having material taken without his consent?

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but it's not about that, it's about the power of art, of the avant-garde, of pop stars to do what they want.

**RR:** But perhaps the only really effective thing would be a truly international discussion and set of rules and agreements, and I think we're very far away from something like that.

**SF:** I think that's the most desperate way to phrase it—an international police force approach. The complications of law and the complications of policing have basically worked in favor of the largest owners in the Western music industry. In the hands of any moderately trained Western lawyer the phrase "oral tradition" simply means cheap and easy-to-acquire property. It's not a phrase that protects anything. Use of the word "tradition" by a lawyer is a way of claiming that something is arguably not owned by anybody in particular. What's going to happen with the issue of rights to recordings is the same thing that's happened with museum objects and other cultural properties. There are going to be increasing ground swells of concern about reappropriation. Like the international art market in so-called primitive art, we're going to have an international marketplace where the valuation and ownership of all this stuff is by increasingly smaller groups of people who are going to own larger and larger amounts of material. Basically from the point of view of the record industry, indigenous music just looks like source material that's incredibly cheap to acquire.

**RR:** So when you say fewer people own more of the stuff, are you talking just about the five giant record companies?

**SF:** The giant record companies, the giant publishing companies and the kind of people who buy archives, like Bill Gates, who would want to own all the pictures in the world, or people who want to control the distribution and access of music over the internet. What are the stakes in being able to do that? Why has the industry freaked out about MP3? I think it's pretty obvious. It's the same as why the people who manufacture and publish recordings want to own all the technology that's used to play the recordings. It's vertical and horizontal integration; it's the oldest story in advanced capitalism, and it has been the critical feature of the music industry for over 80 years.

I'm mostly interested in understanding it as a structure of late 20th century capitalism, that is, of capitalism's moves on the ownership of culture. I'm interested in who has stakes in owning culture, what kinds of things they're acquiring, and how the legal establishment works in relationship to all of that. What is the big picture about how music is circulating at the end of the 20th century? Who owns it, who has access to it, and why is there an increasing gap between creators and producers of certain kinds of music and those who ultimately get to curate, promote, advertise, own, and circulate it? Those are the kinds of questions I try to ask, and the kinds of things I've written about, like in the schizophrenia piece' and the pygmy pop piece.

**RR:** Do you see individual people making their own decisions about this as a viable way to combat it, or what sort of things do you think would be most beneficial?

**SF:** I haven't really thought about it so much on that level. I can only respond in terms of my experiences with the recordings that I've produced and how, over the last 25 years, I've negotiated an arrangement around them in one community. I would not for a minute propose that as a generalizable model for everybody else. I'm quite aware of how distinct and idiosyncratic it is, but it's the one thing I can answer to, as a person who has made recordings.

**RR:** I think what you've done is very impressive, and it would be good to summarize that for Resonance. The Rykodisc CD of music from Papua New Guinea, Voices of the Rainforest (RCD-10173, 1991), for example—a percentage of the profits goes to a Bosavi fund, right?

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**SF:** Here's what happened. Mickey Hart of Grateful Dead fame approached me, having heard some National Public Radio work I did. He said he'd like to do a CD with me. I knew that it would mean a much larger audience, and frankly I was very ambivalent about it because of that. I wasn't ambivalent about wonderful music being heard by lots and lots of people; I was worried about whether I was feeding a kind of voyeurism. I mean, I just was not convinced that moving the Bosavi people into a big commercial arena was really a very good thing for me or for them. Mickey made the effort that convinced me otherwise, suggesting a whole approach to doing something active that would connect to what was going on in that community, and in the rainforest of Papua New Guinea [PNG] with mining and logging. He wanted the recording to assert the musical uniqueness of that community, and he also felt it could dramatize rainforest destruction in PNG. Some of that came out of the historical commitment the Grateful Dead have had to the rainforest issue, and their connection to Rainforest Action Network. Mickey himself was personally very sympathetic to that issue and felt that we could do something good there, and he wanted to coordinate this with the work of non-governmental organizations like Cultural Survival and Rainforest Action Network. I think the model that he was coming from was his project with Tibetan monks [Freedom Chants from the Roof of the World, Rykodisc RCD-20113, 1989]; the royalties from that recording had gone to build a monastery for the monks. So he was into a kind of musical activism, which is how you use the popularity of the music as a tool for the empowerment of the communities who make the music. I was impressed with his sense that rock stars could use their connections to record companies and their resources in a way that promoted greater musical and cultural equity. I think in that he had been quite inspired by Alan Lomax's "Appeal for Cultural Equity" article.

For Voices of the Rainforest Mickey helped me establish a trust fund, so that the royalties could be collected and then used in the community of origin. Mickey and his partner helped me connect with the Tides Foundation in San Francisco, and we established something called the Bosavi People's Fund. 75% of what Rykodisc returns to 360 Degrees Productions, Mickey's company, goes directly to the Bosavi People's Fund. In other words, Mickey's company just takes what it actually costs to do the administrative work for the recording.

**RR:** So essentially 75% of the profits go to Bosavi people?

**SF:** Yes. I think Mickey just took that whole world of Grateful Dead populist politics and put it into action, giving me enormous support in the form of studio, engineers, the use of his connections to the world of Dolby and Lucas for technical support, and then his connection and access to all kinds of people for promotional support. Two thousand people in the forest of Papua New Guinea would not get that kind of attention from a mainstream label, obviously. Mickey really provided a whole alternative model of what it might mean to honour indigenous music. I think he phrased it to me better than I could phrase it myself, when he said, "Why should this music be recorded any less sensitively, why should it
be marketed any less well than Grateful Dead music? That's a pretty compelling way to put it.

**RR:** Yes, that's well said. It's a very difficult music to market. Record stores file that CD under New Age or Environment or under Africa, it's hardly ever filed in an Oceania section.

**SF:** When we released the record, Mickey nailed the head marketing guy from Tower Records and said, "You've got to have a bin in the record store that says Papua New Guinea; Oceania won't do. Don't put this under Australia and don't put it under Mickey Hart; this is Papua New Guinea, it's a real place." Well, at that time Voices of the Rainforest was the first CD that was entirely music from Papua New Guinea. Tower had never heard of the country. The only other CD with Papua New Guinea music was David Fanshawe's Musical Mariner, which just had a couple of tracks from PNG. Yes, there wasn't a marketing category, and I agree with you, Voices of the Rainforest shows up in an amazing number of catalogues and venues. Many of them are New Age, but actually we were rejected from a lot of New Age catalogues because there are people on the recording! The Nature Company wouldn't take it because they didn't like it when people started singing! How's that for environmental purism?

In any case, my part in the Bosavi People's Fund was going back to the community and talking with people there about how they could actually use the money. The problem in a community where people don't have a notion of royalties is, how do you pay people if you've recorded the birds or if you've recorded the insects or if you've recorded the water? If there's a featured composer on the recording, you can't just give that person all the money, because that's just not acceptable. The people who worked on the recording and who helped me, received gifts and payment for their time, which suited them, but the community as a whole receives a benefit, the community that supported me and where I've lived over the years. The money from the recording is being collected for them and they're building a community resource development centre. It will be a combination library and archive where all of the recordings and photographs that my colleagues and I have made will be available to the community, as well as other books and educational resources not provided by the community school system. The money is also used for other projects. Because I've been supported by the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, I tried to get some money to them to try to help their music publishing and recording projects. While the Bosavi people are the primary beneficiaries, I'd like people elsewhere in PNG to benefit from the success of this project as well.

**RR:** I think New Guinea is a special case in terms of ownership and payments. You said that you have to give it to the whole village and you can't just give it to the people that wrote the songs. That's a Melanesian characteristic, in many other cultures you can give it to the person who owns the songs.

**SF:** Yes. There isn't a real strong thing there about individual ownership of the songs, at least in Bosavi. But in Melanesia in general, there's a kind of obligation for benefit and wealth to be amplified over time in proportion to the meaning of the social relationships that are involved. I've been going to this community since 1976, and people have done a lot to support and help me, and increasingly as I get older and as they get older, they expect that I will do more for them, for the community as a whole. That is a distinctly Melanesian dimension of how social reciprocity and obligation is about the importance of social relationships. The Bosavi People's Fund, for instance, supported the publication of one of the things that the Bosavi community wanted me to do. Bambi Schieffelin, a linguist colleague, and I did a dictionary of the Bosavi language, which was published in December 1998. We worked with five Bosavi colleagues over a period of many years to produce this. It's something they wanted for the school. That comes out of our research relationship with the community. It's the kind of thing that's very time consuming and costly. It validates our commitment and our relationship to the community, and luckily people said it was okay to use some of the recording royalty money to support the actual publication of the dictionary, which will also mean that they'll have copies of it forever, for free.

I don't want to sound like I think this is an ideal model that others should follow. What I've done comes out of the distinct historical relationship I have with that community and with my co-researchers as well as the distinct relationship I have to Mickey Hart. Having done Voices of the Rainforest, and now that it had enormous commercial success, I'm thrilled at how many people have been able to hear that world, and make a connection to it. I'm thrilled that it actually can pay off for Bosavi people in terms of some money to support high school, community school, and building things that people need to build. But it is unrealistic to imagine that this sort of thing could work in the case of all field recordings. I'd just want what happened for us to inspire other people to think about the issues and alternatives.

**RR:** What CD's are you working on now?

**SF:** Three, hopefully to be combined into a box set sometime. One project is a ten-years-after re-edition of Voices of the Rainforest in 5.1 surround, with some DVD ROM tracks. Another project is taking the early '80s LPs that I did for Barenreiter and for the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, and a bunch of other recordings and doing a CD that is a historical anthology of 30 years of Bosavi music. The third one is a CD compilation of the Bosavi music of the 90s, the string band sound. That's what I was doing in December and January (98-99) when I went back there. While I was there six different bands composed songs and performed for the dictionary presentation ceremonies. Many of the songs are composed by the sons and daughters of
the musicians I worked with and recorded most in the 70s and 80s. So I'm really following musical and generational changes.

RR: The idea of applied anthropology really took off in the sixties, but ethnomusicology hasn't really been able to get very far along that way.

SF: Ethnomusicology needs to start out by being considerably more historical and critical about power relations and the complicity of the whole discipline in the history of commerce. Ethnomusicologists have been the guarantors of forms of musical authenticity. They've also been recipients of the major wealth and the major respect and the major institutional and social power around controlling musical representations. This is not to trash ethnomusicologists at all; it's just to say that in the past many things were simply ignored about the power relationship between a researcher and a community, or about collecting-institutions in a country and the researcher in the community. All of that has to be continually rethought — opened to criticism, reflection, and revision, and thought out again. The work of ethnomusicologists has produced complex representations of different communities. They're certainly not neutral. They have contributed in important ways to the increased anger and anxiety about Indigenous cultural and intellectual property. It's the obligation of ethnomusicologists to help sort this out. The only thing I can say in general about it is, people who make recordings, the record companies, and people who circulate this music, all have to pro-actively be part of investigating and pursuing possibilities for how to do this in a better way. If we researchers are going to be entrusted with this stuff we have to show that there's some reason why, it's not ours for the taking, not ours just because we PhDs have rooms with thermostats and humidity controls.

RR: Earlier you had said that one of the reasons you were ambivalent about putting out that Rykodisc CD was that you didn't want it to lead to voyeurism. That's a complicated question. How can recordings get published, how can people have access to them and appreciate them without a certain amount of voyeurism?

SF: Sure. I think that was a good example of a kind of elitism in my own thinking. It obviously involved a very patronizing politics of protection. I was trained in an era where you were taught that you were doing something unfeasibly good by recording this music, but you were not taught to think about the idea that you didn't own it, that you were just the partial steward of this material. When I had a knee-jerk reaction to Mickey's suggestion that we make a recording, I was basically saying, 'Do I really want to get involved with a rock star, with that kind of power, with that kind of wealth, with those kinds of record companies?' I was doing what a lot of academics do, which is have an elitist knee-jerk reaction to the possibility of a really populist audience for the recording. When Mickey said to me: 'If I'm interested in this stuff, just think of those thousands or millions of Deadheads who would be equally interested, well, it really scared me, because I thought, I'm supposed to be identifying with the academy, not with Deadheads. Then I thought to myself, that's completely screwed up. Who am I to say academics should be listening to this, but it's not for Deadheads? When I told Mickey that I was making recordings for NPR [National Public Radio], he looked at me and said, 'Oh that's so highbrow!' I thought NPR was populist, but from the standpoint of a rock star, NPR was completely elitist. Basically I had a moment of culture shock. When the anthropologist is in the world of the rock and rollers, you think that because it's familiar in certain ways it's not a different world. But it is. Basically Mickey opened up a different world to me, a much more populist way of thinking about what it would be like to distribute and provide access to this music. What I have to acknowledge is that he shook down a lot of the elitism that I had assumed, and a lot of the specific kind of privilege. That said, I'd have to tell you that it opened up other kinds of problems about elitism, because his world is extremely privileged, and very powerful. Rock star wealth is a kind of privilege that you definitely don't see in the academic world.

RR: It's very powerful, and in New Guinea all the bands want to sign with Peter Gabriel, or at least get him to listen to their recordings.

SF: Yes, right. These things are not unambiguously positive, ever. I've had my own problems with it at every stage, and it has to be continuously reevaluated and rethought. It's an endless issue for me, really. Every time I go back to Bosavi there are aspects of it that have to be reworked and discussed again. It's open to negotiation, and open to criticism and refinement.

RR: The village in Modang Province where I lived seemed to be somewhat split, where the heads of clans and the older people were more enthusiastic about so-called traditional or older songs, and the young people just wanted to do siks-tu-siks guitar dances [six p.m. to six a.m.]. Many ethnomusicologists believe that we shouldn't do anything to sway the tide one way or the other, but just let things play out by themselves. But my very presence in the village encouraged traditional performances and the reevaluation of their status among both the young and the old. Some ethnomusicologists feel that we shouldn't even document things, that all music should just survive totally on its own commercial strength.

SF: This is an area where you're going to get a face full of ideological positions, every kind of version of free-market and laissez faire approach and every variety of protectionist approach, and everything in between, from models of intense policing and ownership to intense anti-corporate, anti-copyright, or anti-legal. In PNG there are a lot of people who say, 'Hey it's great, we don't have copyright, so if we want to cover Michael Jackson's tunes and sing them in Tok Pisin, rubbish Michael Jackson, it's our business.' But then I read an interview with George Telek in the Australian newspaper saying, hey, it's really great to record in Australia because there is copyright here and we don't have copyright back home, so I feel like now that I've recorded in Australia, my songs will be protected.

So you see how somebody like Telek, after that experience with Not Drowning Waving and dozens of cassettes all over the place, might want to record the same songs in different arrangements in Australia, to establish a unique and distinctive right to those songs. He realizes that he's not just in PNG, he's out there in the world music marketplace. Now he has signed with Real World and Peter Gabriel. RR: Now that he's playing in that ballpark he's got more power.

SF: He's going to be the first Papua New Guinean whose music will reach an international audience, not just PNG or the much increased Australian audience that he reached through recording with Not Drowning Waving, and David Bridely.

RR: Some of the political issues and struggles
of musicians from small countries might be similar to those of avant-garde musicians. Avant-garde music is marginalized and those musicians have to carve out their own niche, and a lot of the traditional music is very much fighting some of those same battles. There are also parallels in terms of the marketability and how much money it makes.

SF: What I'm on about here is that, no matter how much you try and just focus your attention on musical esthetics, musical difference, and the greater circulation of musical difference in the world, none of these things can be separated from politics. It's only a kind of unwillingness to deal with the world as it really is now, that can keep these political questions out of the discussion. The thing that amazes me most about music right now is how the politics of mediation, the politics of recording, circulation, and ownership are continually kept out of the discussion, as if all of this stuff is just about "the music" in some kind of rarefied, idealized universe. It's like some dream world. I don't think it's possible to make, record, or circulate music without coming to terms with the enormous impact these mediating technologies and processes have had on musical aesthetics, on who hears what, and on what it means for music to equitably be part of human history.

My blunt take on it is that right now we're experiencing a new and unbelievably powerful kind of imperialism and colonialism in the world of music.

The record industry has reproduced most of the main features of colonialism. I find it extraordinary that that is barely contested by the people who are most knowledgeable about indigenous music or musical difference and musical diversity. It seems to me that the people who are most invested in musical diversity have to also be most critically aware and most critically engaged with the politics of curation and promotion and distribution and circulation and ownership.

As much as I would love to sit and talk for hours about the intricacies of Bosavi music, how important it is musically, and how the groove gets to me, the politics can't be elided or erased by this continual veneration of the love of groove. The disciplines in which I was trained, anthropology and ethnomusicology, are completely complicit in the kind of new industrial colonialism of the "world music" business. I've got to be a part of interrogating that.

RR: Complicit by not questioning the record companies?

SF: Complicit by accepting standard commercial business practices. How many ethnomusicologists have released recordings and signed contracts with record companies knowing full well that no royalties would ever go to the community where the stuff was recorded, and just were so happy that somebody would take the stuff off their hands and publish it? How many academics thought that because there were no royalties, that really made what they were doing pure and authentic? How many academics were able to thumb their noses at commerce and consider themselves pure and authentic in what they were doing by saying this music has no commercial appeal? How many of us have thought the idea of putting out a record that only sold 200 copies was something good? There's a whole range of kinds of complicity, but at the first level it starts with willfully ignoring the politics of commodity capitalism.

RR: Even just returning what one writes to the source.

SF: But written stuff is different because it presents a huge abstraction from the original experience. We can't always imagine that people will recognize themselves or will want to recognize themselves in what we write. But recordings and films are really quite different in this way because they provide people a direct, unique, and immediate shared access to how we're listening to each other.

RR: It seems that in the U.S. the discipline of Ethnomusicology is moving away from tangible, hands-on things, towards abstraction, post-post-modernism, and whatever is the current theory of the day. Do you think that this trend can help people understand the politics of economic colonialism?

SF: I think that engagements with all kinds of cultural theory are important for musical disciplines. Music has been taught and promoted endlessly in this kind of rarefied atmosphere, where people are rigorously a-theoretical. That supports this ideology that there is something called "the music itself." But the fact is that "the music itself" is discursive, it's an ideological construct, it's something that comes out of a particular cultural, historical, and intellectual tradition. The importance of understanding lots of theory is that it provides you access, it provides you possibilities for denaturalizing these received categories. It provides in some ways real possibilities for access to meanings that you simply can't get from assuming that the sound is a totality which is complete in and of itself.

I would never want to denigrate the primacy and the uniqueness of sound as an intensely deep symbolic system, but I also would not want to denigrate the possibility that you can penetrate, imagine, and deal with sound in increasingly interesting ways through lineages of intellectual and political theory. I don't see this as a gap between theoretical and applied forms of research. This is the kind of point that Charlie Keil and I were trying to make in Music Grooves. The groove is the primary experiential dimension of music, and the groove is also the whole mediating structure, the whole wrapping, the whole politics, the whole commodity. We were just trying to theorize the relationship between the experiential groove and the commodity groove. Sound doesn't just circulate as sound, it circulates in a particular kind of wrapper, and that wrapper -- those mediated grooves, commodified grooves -- are deeply connected to experiential grooves. That's one way of trying to break down a rigid distinction between "the music itself" and the social, cultural, historical, and political context of the music.

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