

BECOMING VOICES IN THE FOREST

A REVIEW OF RAIN-FOREST SOUNDS

by David Rothenberg

A low, distant rumble. Faint cries of alarm. The animals know it is coming, and the leaves brace themselves for the coming deluge. I close my eyes and hear the rains approaching, drenching my surroundings, but only with sound. Out the window the sun still shines, the squirrels and starlings in the trees just slightly perplexed by the rush of a distant, intangible downpour.

I am listening to a recording of a rain forest, which brings a threatened and beautiful "soundscape" into the comfort of my home. The word was coined in this context by Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, who sought to remind people that environment is more than something to be seen or named, that it is something to be heard as well. The world's natural sounds are disappearing along with the species who produce them. Everywhere, the signs of the technological way of life—the hourly beep of the watch, the drone of electric current, the whir of an office fan—create a constant hum at the back of our aural horizon. The earth, however, offers many more sounds than those of our own civilization.

The first phonography turned voice and song into objects, things to be bought, owned, and sold. Now the same has been done with the din of the earth. Most composers of environmental recordings aim for superb technical sound. Some advertise that the sound you hear is exactly what is out there, with no editing, no mixing, and no reconstruction in the studio. Others fully acknowledge that their record is a careful construction designed to evoke in a short period of time the range of sounds that fully represent a particular habitat in a day, week, month, or season.

Those who champion purity in the recording process forget that simply placing a microphone is already a human intrusion. Just extracting the sound from the rest of the flow is an alienating choice. The only thing natural about the process is the human need to imitate, capture, and understand the surrounding world. And if the wild is to be evoked, there has to be a pattern clear enough to leave a mark on the listener. A musical composition must be created out of the raw material of nature's sound.

The best examples of this new kind of art form surprise us just when we think we understand what they are for, and are impossible to ignore or forget. I will concentrate on two recordings that manage to accomplish this.

The first, *Rain Forest*, is made by ecologist Ruth Happel as part of a four-compact disc set entitled *A Month in the Brazilian Rain Forest* (Rykodisc RCD 30180-83). After graduate study in biological anthropology at Harvard, Happel turned to field recording because it offered crucial scientific evidence of the biodiversity of given regions. In the field, she aims for exact documentation of rare and endangered sounds that might soon be lost to development and destruction, but when she assembles the sounds for public consumption, she mixes and blends different tracks and moments, recreating the forest within the limitations of two speakers and an hour of the listener's time.

Though these records were assembled in a state-of-the-art digital studio, Ruth's guiding aesthetic has been faithfulness to nature and the original experience. *Rain Forest*, which compresses an entire day into one hour, was composed "to provide a reproduction of natural transitions." It begins before dawn. The background fabric is of beating insects, and over it are the back-and-forth calls of frogs as the light begins to break. Close your eyes and you hear the day begin, as the chorus of insects rises.

I find that listening to this record does not shut out the sounds outside my urban window. On the contrary, I pay more attention to the noises of the local trees and streets as I strain to pick out which tones come from the record and which from the world outside and immediate. There is wind and the rustling of leaves, and, after seven minutes, a surging, disturbing, and metallic hum. Is that an airplane overhead? An electric shaver next door? No, it is some loud and strange creature in Brazil. It fades away into the chorus of calling things only to return after six more minutes, like a carefully spaced musical motif. Now I wait for its next appearance, as trucks in the street, construction next door blend into the introduced soundscape from afar.



This record came about after Mickey Hart, drummer for the Grateful Dead, stopped by to visit Feld in Texas and heard a tape of the Kaluli soundscape, which Feld had created for National Public Radio. Hart immediately ran off with the tape to play it during intermission at his next concert. This led to his sponsorship of a special expedition to Papua to produce the most advanced on-location forest recording possible, getting the individual sounds down on separate tracks with the finest of portable equipment. Each bird call was recorded from different locations up in the trees, and a guide track was used as a model to place the individual noises at the right times and places.

Back in the studio in Marin County, the aim was to underscore the presence of each sound and provide the enhancement that would allow the listener to imagine the original soundscape. The birds are louder than they would be in the forest, each a little closer and more intense than in the wild. Feld felt as if he were composing *musique concrète*, like early tape pioneers, except that he was sitting in a rock musician's dream studio with money no object.

In a sense, though, money is the object—money to go back to the Kaluli people in the form of the Bosavi People's Fund. Only 1,200 Bosavi people are left, with Kaluli one of just a few villages. The music is itself in danger: as in many places in the world, no one under twenty-five sings the old songs. Oil and gas exploration has reached the area, and there is strong pressure to work for industry and "improve" one's standard of living, which of course means the loss of tradition and habitat. I asked Steve what it would take to convince the Kaluli that the rest of the world values their way of life. He answered, "Money. They believe money is tied to their leaving of the forest." If they discover that people care enough to pay to help them retain their traditions, they may be moved to

reconsider leaving.

The sounds of the Kaluli people responding to the bird songs and rushing water would seem to prove that even the most wild and precarious of ecosystems can hold a place for the human voice. Perhaps we in the distant cities can even come to imagine our own true part in the symphony of the world's lift-up-over sounding. If so, recordings such as these can only be an impetus to real listening, not a substitute. For me, there is something tragic about the disembodied voices of a dwindling culture in a vanishing ecosystem. I am reminded of Tanizaki's parable of the captured nightingale, who will only sing if hidden in perpetual darkness in a covered cage. The song may be beautiful, but the singer is far from its native home.

Feld himself does not worry about how people will use his record. He gets letters saying how much children enjoy it, perhaps because it leaves more to the imagination than nature films or multimedia experiences that feign total control of the senses.

As for me, I put aside my reservations to play both of these records for the birds of the city, who seem immensely excited as they alight in the crabapple tree next to the window. I have noticed that the starlings, prolific mimics of anything they hear, have begun to toy with the melodious sweeps of the Bosavi birds, just before the dawn

breaks here in the urban jungle of Cambridge. As I play the wild calls of these birds for the wild birds of home, the voices of the distant forest become what they were: songs not for humans alone. ●

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