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Field Recording Oral History

DAVID KING DUNAWAY

I. Introduction

Today a vast range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences rely upon field recording for documentation of cultural-historical-linguistic events; ethnomusicology, linguistics, anthropology, folklore, and oral history are among the most prominent of these. Video and sound recordings have served as primary research aids in fields as diverse as gerontology, geography, and genealogy, to explore only one letter of the alphabet. Used as a methodological

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An earlier version of this article was presented at field-recording workshops at the Universities of Nairobi and Copenhagen.

tool, field recording can also become a necessary part of basic training in ethnography.

Though the initial use of sound recording as a fieldwork methodology is dated as 1890, recording was looked at as a novelty before the 1970s except in fields such as linguistics and ethnomusicology, which had previously relied on handwritten transcriptions of sounds.¹ This inherent distrust of tape recordings persists among contemporary researchers who are “machine-shy” or comfortable only with paper-and-pencil documentation of fieldwork. Pulitzer prize-winning historian Barbara Tuchman once called the tape recorder “a monster with the appetite of a tape worm . . . I am quite certain I would not know how to make it work.”² More significantly, very few American universities consider the serious study of sound recording as essential training in either history or folklore.

Other writers have complained that novice recordists mistake the tape recorder for a vacuum cleaner swallowing all in its path.³ Anthropologists have commented that the preoccupation of running machines distracts from the ability to listen and observe during fieldwork and that neophytes are becoming more impressed with the quality of the sound than its substance, a view that echoes complaints about the legendary archaeological expedition that was “long on equipment and short on ethnography.”⁴

While these same charges could be made against anyone doing fieldwork without a research plan, this widespread prejudice against field recording is reflected in the paucity of publications on the subject. In 1964 the folklorist Kenneth Goldstein commented in his classic manual,

¹J. W. Fewkes, “A Contribution to Passamaquoddy Folklore,” *Journal of American Folklore* 3 (October 1890): 257-80.

²Barbara Tuchman, “Distinguishing the Significant from the Insignificant,” *Radcliffe Quarterly* 56 (October 1972): 9, reprinted in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. David Dunaway and Willa Baum (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1984).

³Charles Morrissey, “Oral History and the California Wine Industry,” *Agricultural History* 51 (July 1977): 592, reprinted in Dunaway and Baum, *Oral History*.

⁴Ivan Polunin, “Visual and Sound Recording Apparatus in Ethnographic Fieldwork,” *Current Anthropology* 11 (February 1970): 4.

Too many field workers treat their equipment as troublesome adjuncts to field work, and care little for the quality of their recordings as long as they are audible and transcriptions can be made from them. Yet these same collectors work extremely hard to insure the fidelity and exactness of their handwritten notes. Essentially, there is no difference between the two forms of data-collecting. Both should be treated with equal care.⁵

His advice was mostly true ten years later, when the manual was reprinted. Aside from books aimed at the hobbyist, a pair of articles by medical anthropologist Ivan Polunin, and a short book by folklorist Edward Ives, the lack of sources concerning field recording is surprising when one considers how many people conduct field recordings as a critical part of their research.⁶ Most researchers who collect data by means of sound recordings or images on film effectively have had to learn to do so on their own, by hook or by crook.

Yet the advantages of preserving a verbatim record of the field experience need little elaboration. During the recording session, the researcher is free to listen and watch the performer or narrator—to the extent that the researcher has mastered the equipment. At home the researcher can replay the event many times, transcribing and noting nuances overlooked during the event. Field recordings, with comprehensive notes to document the context of recorded events, provide objective material against which later researchers can measure their findings.

Oral historians have been making field recordings since the time of Thucydides. Whereas ethnomusicology, linguistics, and folklore

⁵Kenneth S. Goldstein, *A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore* (Hatboro, Penn.: Folklore Associates, 1964; Detroit: Gale Research, 1974), 45.

⁶Ivan Polunin, "Stereophonic Magnetic Tape Recorders and the Collection of Ethnographic Field Data," *Current Anthropology* 6 (April 1965): 227-30; Edward Ives, *The Tape Recorded Interview* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980). See also Sam Charters, "Some Dos and Don'ts of Field Recording," *Sing Out!* 12 (Summer 1962): 22-27; and George List, "Fieldwork: Collecting Oral Literature," both in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Richard Bauman, "The Field Study of Folklore in Context," and Carl Fleischhauer, "Sound Recording and Still Photography in the Field," both in *Handbook of American Folklore*, ed. Richard M. Dorson and Inta Gale Carpenter (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1983).

also rely on interviewing, these interviews often only preface the collection of texts. Oral historians are concerned with the literal and accurate rendering of historical testimony. Since linguistics and ethnomusicology require accurate rendering of tones and intervals, in addition to words, it is not surprising that some of the most elaborate discussions of field recording have come from these disciplines.

Another obvious difference between these practitioners of field recording is that oral historians work from planned, researched interviews, whereas folklorists and ethnomusicologists often collect in a survey or spontaneous mode. The latter two fields also share an interest in the way a piece is performed and received, above and beyond the text and its textural features; in oral history, however, sociolinguistic gestures and audience expectation usually go untranscribed.

Whatever these differences, those conducting field recording projects share common concerns: problems of verifying and interpreting oral sources, an ethnographic stance, and a need to listen.

Space does not permit an analysis of problem areas common to all fieldworkers incorporating oral sources into their disciplines. All field recordists, however, necessarily adopt the philosophical stance of the ethnographer or documentarian whose function, like that of the professional oral historian, is to create an electromagnetic record of events for later study and distribution. This stance involves anticipating the needs of future researchers and interviewing beyond the scope of any individual research project. This approach also entails an expenditure of time, effort, and funds, without immediate return. Yet without commitment to extending the boundaries of the subject investigated, without depositing high-quality recordings, field recordists abuse the opportunities fieldwork presents, spoiling them for others arriving later.

An ethnographic stance such as the one just described is a necessary precondition of research for oral historians; we research to know, not to judge. The historical interviewer does not apply standards of his/her own time or of his/her subculture to historical testimony; s/he is in the business of eliciting witnessed facts and constructing a historical frame of reference that is neutral, as much as possible, for these facts. "Understanding in field research," writes Rosalie Wax in *Doing Fieldwork*, "is like the aural learning of

a language. The fieldworker begins ‘outside’ the interaction. . . .”⁷ Empathy and detailed research into an event or period allows us to view events approximately as participants did in their own time.

Another concern shared by fields that rely on oral sources is the importance of listening in addition to recording. Violations of this essential principle trigger the most telling criticism of documentation by sound recording: it is altogether too easy to proceed through a schedule of questions without listening for the chance statements that reveal unsuspected knowledge. The biographer Theodore Rosengarten once reported how he played back the tape of an interview he had just completed and was astonished to note how little of his narrator’s talk had reached his inner ear:

The problem was, I had set out to question, not to listen. My mind was full of chatter and thoughts about my questions. I had not listened at all. I had allowed my machine to do the listening for me, when I should have done it myself. Let the machine record, and you listen!⁸

The remarks that follow reflect my own fieldwork in history, folklore, and ethnomusicology. These projects range from collecting legends and historical narratives in the upper Amazon basin among the Ticuna Indians to recording traditional songs of the Masai in Kenya, to conducting traditional oral history interviews for biographies of Pete Seeger, American social activist and composer, and of the American years of Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), celebrated English novelist and social philosopher. The latter projects, similar to much oral historical research, nevertheless provide dramatic contrast; in the case of Seeger, I interviewed musicians and community organizers involved in grass-roots activity for a first biography; whereas Huxley involved “elite interviewing” by any standard: articulate, literary intellectuals, intelligentsia-on-intelligentsia, for a fifth biography. I add to this background fifteen years of documentary production in radio, television, and film, where I often encounter fine interviews in recordings of abysmal sound quality.

⁷Rosalie H. Wax, *Doing Fieldwork: Warnings and Advice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 12.

⁸Theodore Rosengarten, as quoted in *Telling Lives: The Biographer’s Art*, ed. Marc Pachter (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).

This essay is divided into three sections: a brief overview of field-recording procedures; aesthetic considerations in field recording; and suggestions on the theoretical implications of field recordings. (This essay does *not* include a listing of currently available equipment, which changes so rapidly that such a listing is out-of-date before it can reach the reader; it is primarily focused on sound, rather than vision recording, as the most widespread medium used in oral history.)

Throughout this discussion I will speak of field recording as more than an end in itself. The process lies midway between previous research, project design, and the eventual uses of that recording, whether in archives, exhibits, or audiovisual productions (see figure 1).

II. Procedures

Among the most common procedures in recording oral history are preparing a project design, finding local sponsorship, obtaining equipment, practicing with equipment, collecting biographical and contextual information, and depositing materials in archives. On the surface, recording and processing oral history seem uncomplicated, with manuals available to guide the inexperienced; yet each procedure reflects uncodified presumptions of the researcher.⁹

Field recording is obviously a great deal more complicated than setting up one's equipment and turning it on. Whether we use notebook, audio recorder, or video recording equipment, we cannot overlook the interactive nature of fieldwork: humans provide the information and humans operate the equipment; as the folklore of fieldwork tells us, the problems of fieldwork nearly all arise from one group of humans dealing with another.

A. Frame of reference. To elaborate this point, we must return to ethnography, the analytical descriptive cataloging of culture. We begin research inside our own culture, and in the case of the oral historian, inside our own time or period of study. Yet the moment our interview begins, we confront a different perspective.

⁹Willa K. Baum, *Transcribing and Editing Oral History* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977).

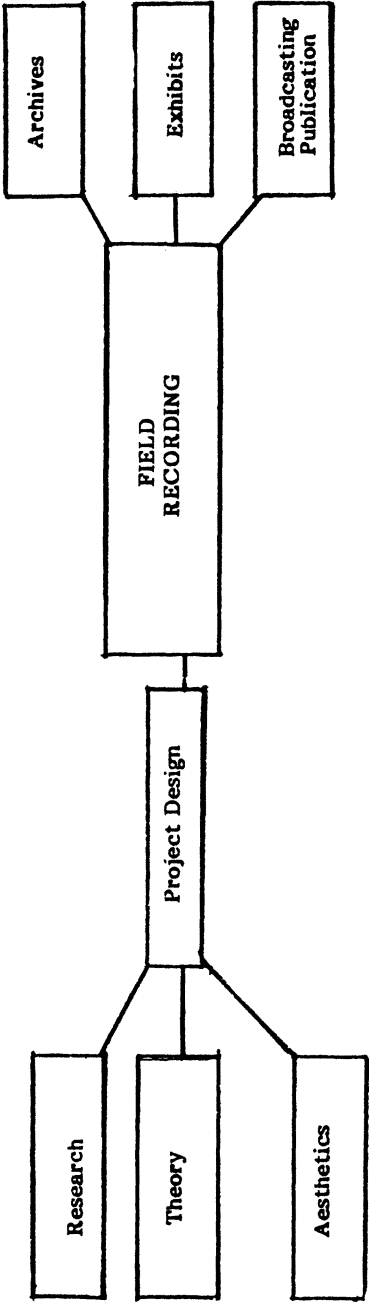


Fig. 1. Field Recording and Oral History.

For example, the historical frame of reference—the “time” of the interview—is never unilateral. While the events we seek to document took place in the past, the actual recording takes place in the present. Thus the historical frame is negotiated between the interviewer and the individual asked to recall the past, someone who in practice often has a present stake in the recording (e.g., justification or celebrity). Likewise, the interviewer has a present (and future) stake to consider: How much of significance will occur? And what will be the ramifications for history or for the interviewer’s career?

The two participants discuss the past, then, from dramatically different positions. The interviewer is at least a temporary expert on the topic or event; s/he will have a distinct chronology in mind and an agenda of questions to resolve critical, as yet unanswered, historical questions. The narrator typically has a more or less hazy chronology of the events s/he witnessed; unlike the interviewer, s/he may not have thought about the event for decades or, except in the rarest cases, s/he has not read secondary literature interpreting the event’s significance.

Thus in oral history fieldwork, we often start from mismatched pasts and different perspectives of the present. Most transcripts show a continuing tension between these frames of reference. The interviewer too grounded in a present view of the past may overlook why the hill has such a “funny” name or where its inhabitants went. The narrator not distanced enough from his/her community’s perspective may not stop to explain or fill in what the interviewer may be ignorant of.

Similarly, most interviewees experience a subtle testing from interviewees, who probe the interviewers’ knowledge of the subject at hand. There is in most interviews the same etic/emic (outsider/insider) tension that anthropologists have noted. In my interviews about Pete Seeger’s political activities, for example, my narrators consistently tried to ascertain my political stance before communicating their own positions. Some, thinking they had only to give textbook explanations of events, would not elaborate until I demonstrated (through use of names, insiders’ terminology, or other specifics) that I expected information useful to someone of their own cultural subgroup.

This ethnographic orientation to oral history interviewing stresses the differences between conducting an interview and

gathering historical information in multiple formats, including photographs and other cultural material. Such resources enrich interviews and unlock cultural associations that reveal an individual's or a family's culture-bearing identity. Without situating individuals within the larger context of community and family identities, we end up with more or less wooden replies to questions of "pure historical fact," itself a projection of one culture's world view—not the "thickness" of cultural interaction that anthropologist Clifford Geertz discusses.¹⁰ The "facts" collected in this manner usually reflect the interviewer's, rather than the interviewee's, historical frame. The more we elicit the narrators' world views, the more they, in telling history of their own lives, embed history in their own cultural sets.

B. Recording an interview. There are many guides for conducting fieldwork¹¹; our concern here is the specialized technique of recording tradition and the past. The best strategy is to know one's gear well, to be sure of what it can and cannot do under different circumstances. After evaluating the sound environment for distractions and interference and after positioning equipment accordingly, I try to set up quickly and efficiently. One succinct essay on field recording suggests that a confident set-up is the recordist's equivalent of the physician's bedside manner.¹²

A considered recording design saves time and tape. Once the field recordist knows exactly what s/he is listening for, the chances

¹⁰Clifford Geertz, "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man," in *Man Makes Sense: A Reader in Modern Cultural Anthropology*, ed. E. A. Hammel and W. S. Simmons (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965).

¹¹See Goldstein, *Guide for Field Workers*, and Maud Karpeles, *The Collecting of Folk Music and Other Ethnomusicological Material: A Manual For Field Workers* (London: International Folkmusic Council and the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1958); for anthropology, Wax, *Doing Fieldwork*; Marguerite Lobsiger-Dellenboch, "Hints for Ethnographers," in *Field Guide for Museums* (Paris: UNESCO, 1970); P. Griaule, *Methode de l'Ethnographie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957); Peter Bartis, *Folklife and Fieldwork: A Layman's Introduction to Field Techniques* (Washington, D.C.: American Folklife Center, 1979); and Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, 6th ed. (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1951; 1971). See also various essays in Dorson and Carpenter, *Handbook of American Folklore*.

¹²Fleischhauer, "Sound Recording and Still Photography."

are greatly increased that s/he will record it. And the more the recordist knows of the context in which the item is told or performed, the more likely it is that s/he will record the event well. (Naturally, no plan of research can be made without a prior survey of existing archival holdings. Such a plan anticipates specific recording circumstances and microphone placement, avoiding difficulties before they can occur.) Once, before interviewing Sir Isiah Berlin at London's traditionalist Atheneum Club, I called to make arrangements concerning recording; after much consultation, I was told that the only place I could use a tape recorder was on the *stairway*, which made me change my plans and locale.

The most common problem in field recording is the recordist who does not fully understand the working of his/her equipment or how to maximize its capacity. There is little excuse for not knowing how to operate a tape recorder or a video camera when that is one's work. Would a truck driver begin driving without knowing how the gears operate? Does a tailor understand the sewing machine s/he uses?

The recordist should experiment with equipment at home before using it on someone else until, at the minimum, s/he:

- (1) knows the right level of recording volume on a specific microphone to yield clear sound, usually in the range of -3 +2 on the scale of the recording meter;
- (2) knows where to place the microphone so that it picks up the narrator's words clearly, usually about six to ten inches from the mouth;
- (3) gauges the approximate rate at which the batteries will be run down; and
- (4) sets up the gear, microphones included, in five minutes, with all the correct connections.¹³

C. Recording biographical and contextual information. No tape recording stands alone; we need to know who and what is on the tape. This biographical superstructure makes the recording analyzable: name, age, residence, birth, occupation.

The notes that the recordist takes as the interview proceeds (including its physical setting, artifacts that reveal character,

¹³Sandy Ives's *Tape-Recorded Interview* offers a delightfully casual entry into these subjects.

comments on the mood and atmosphere of the session) are included with the transcript as part of the interview history, which adds a three-dimensionality to the record. These notes also allow the interviewer to comment upon the narrator's cooperation; anyone who interviews a reluctant but experienced narrator knows how deceptive a transcript can be.

With the exception of writers such as Charles Joyner and Edward Ives, oral historians have been less sophisticated collectors of contextual information than their colleagues in anthropology, folklore, or linguistics.¹⁴ Kenneth Goldstein lists eight categories of context that might serve as a new standard for evaluating interview histories: (1) *physical setting*; (2) *social setting* (community status, dress, age, position—both narrator and interviewer); (3) *interaction between participants* (mood, rapport, interruptions); (4) *performance* (narrator's pace, enthusiasm, coherence, candor); (5) *time and duration* (time of day and length of interview); (6) *sentiments expressed* (nonverbal gestures, laughs, inflections); (7) *miscellaneous observation* (criteria for narrator, interviewer selection, unusual amendment of transcript, libelous statements, critical challenges to historical record); and (8) *the observer* (information on interviewer and project, external pressures such as pending litigation or media interest).¹⁵

In addition, oral historians need to establish how narrators view the event or period they are researching and how the narrator's community interprets its significance.¹⁶ While historians might feel that such information overburdens their work and the "facts" they seek, sometimes the performance context is so central that the text of the interview cannot be understood without it.

In the early seventies my fieldwork involved the collecting of Amazon historical legends. After months of searching out one particular narrator and tracking him down the river in a motorized canoe, I found him unwilling (and unable) to tell his history. The problem was that he now lived in a missionary community on the banks of the river, and those missionaries no longer permitted

¹⁴Charles Joyner, "Oral History as a Communicative Event," in Dunaway and Baum, *Oral History*, and Ives, *Tape-Recorded Interview*.

¹⁵This listing adapted from Goldstein, *Manual for Field Workers*, 91-93.

¹⁶For an overview of how to situate traditional culture, see "The Field Study of Folklore in Context," in Dorson and Carpenter, *Handbook of American Folklore*.

members of the tribe to gather and talk of the “old ways.” Yet, my narrator could not confide the history to an individual, only to the tribe at large. Persuading the Kansas Baptists of the historical significance of this legend was not easy. Only with the missionaries’ cooperation was I able to assemble the community to hear the tale as it had to be told, in its naturally occurring context.

Occasionally oral historians leap in where angels fear to tread, ready to record after a teacup’s worth of acquaintance with their narrators and communities. Anthropologists have long preached the importance of awaiting rather than hunting facts.

Margaret Mead’s account of her difficulties in interviewing the Omaha remains a classic: “This is a very discouraging job, ethnologically speaking. You find a man whose father or uncle had a vision. You go to see him four times, driving eight or ten miles, with an interpreter. The first time he isn’t home, the second time he’s drunk, and the next time his wife’s sick, and the fourth time, on the advice of the interpreter, you start the interview with a \$5 bill for which he offers thanks to Wakanda, prays Wakanda to give *him* a long life, and proceeds to lie steadily for four hours.”¹⁷

While few oral historians meet such obstacles, how many of us have realized halfway through an interview that we have turned on the recorder too soon, without allowing time to get to know our narrator and to be interviewed ourselves concerning our goals?

Sometimes this wait can be critical. The hardest question I ever asked Pete Seeger—concerning his membership in the Communist party—never had to be posed. He had previously accepted a \$10,000 fine and a sentence of ten years in jail rather than answer questions on this topic from the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Not until our fourth extended interview did the subject come up, raised by Seeger himself after he tired of waiting for me to raise the issue. This example reminds me of the way Amazon Indians hunt: when they see the fruit ripe, they wait for the birds to come.

III. Aesthetics

Taken together, a concern for listening and a concern for accurate reproduction of sound constitute an aesthetic for field

¹⁷Margaret Mead, as quoted in Wax, *Doing Fieldwork*, 18.

recording, based on a few central characteristics: the existence of a sound environment, the multidimensional nature of that environment, and the significance of selectivity and sound isolation in recording. Factors of performance, audience expectation, and interviewer bias also profoundly affect the field recording of oral history.

Some oral historians might wonder if aesthetic factors are not too frivolous to concern those working on limited resources. "To argue that the spoken word does not deserve the same care as music," answers Carl Fleischhauer of the American Folklife Center, "is to argue that speech is not as precious as songs or the style and content of narrative is less than that of music."¹⁸ Since collecting high-quality sound is not that much more difficult than recording poor sound, responsible oral historians take pains to perfect their recordings for a multitude of possible later uses.¹⁹

Then, too, provided that the interviewee knows that the recording is being made, why not make an extra effort to avoid self-consciousness through unobtrusive equipment? Many interviewees—and some interviewers!—feel stifled confronted by a microphone in front of their faces; lavalier (clip-on) microphones allow eye contact to be maintained. Recorders that are small, quiet, and kept out of the narrator's line of sight, with illuminated meters, allow today's oral historian to record broadcast-quality interviews with minimal fuss. The purpose of recording is not to test the narrator's ease with tape recorders (nor the recordist's) but to collect eyewitness accounts of historical significance: If mic or camera shyness gets in the way, minimizing this shyness must be a necessary part of oral history interviewing. Today, a newly sophisticated generation of oral history interviewers considers such problems as aesthetic issues.

A. Sound environment. Since video and audio tape recorders pick up sound from sources both near and far, recordists must evaluate the environment in which they will make their recordings. Ideally, the session should take place indoors, in a room with a fairly low ceiling, isolated from the rest of the noises of the household. Dens or

¹⁸Fleischhauer, "Sound Recording and Still Photography."

¹⁹David K. Dunaway, "Radio and the Public Use of Oral History," *Public Historian* 6 (Summer 1984): 77-90.

studios work well, particularly if carpeted; bare walls and floors echo sound harshly. The individual(s) should be seated comfortably facing or alongside the recordist.

With our recorder, we capture not only the sound source—a speaker or event—but the sound *environment* or soundscape, the collection of echoes, low-flying airplanes, refrigerator hums, and the like. If you doubt this fact, try comparing two interviews, one recorded in a large roomy hall such as a church, and the other done in a small book-lined study. The first will sound boomy, hollow, and live; the second, flat, more intimate. No one sound environment is best for all purposes, and you may choose to enhance or neutralize background noise to suit your purpose. An interview with a retired whaler might effectively be done outside, by the ocean. Alternatively, radio producer Imbert Orchard, at the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), successfully juxtaposed readings from the journals of early explorers with sounds recorded on a contemporary re-creation of their route.²⁰

On the other hand, undesirable sounds often enter oral history interviews: dripping water, pets, traffic noises. I once recorded an interview without noticing the bird cage above the dining room table where we sat; when I played back the tape, noises of the parakeet scratching in his cage all but drowned out the interviewee. Dishes washed next door rendered words unintelligible.

B. Multidimensional sound. An important aesthetic premise of sound recording is that the medium carries an audible sense of space. We are so accustomed to this fact that we often ignore it in recording. Standing in the middle of a room, one can easily tell whether a sound comes from right or left, front or back. With modern stereophonic recording equipment, this audio “presence” becomes a part of a sound record, often carrying valuable information.

The practical implications of audio space include the desirability of using a stereo recorder rather than a monaural one. Through creative placement of microphones it is possible to re-create the left-right, front-back situation of the event. An alternative to using two microphones to create presence is to divide up the two channels

²⁰Imbert Orchard, “Tape Recordings into Radio Documentaries,” *Sound Heritage* 3 (March 1974): 28-40.

of a stereo recording to allow two different narrators to be recorded independently, instead of aiming both microphones at the *same* source from different perspectives. This way of recording oral history is probably the best: two identical lavalier microphones connected to a stereo recorder, with different volumes for each channel, one of the narrator, the other of the interviewer. If one (stereo) lavalier is used, both sit side by side with the mic pinned to a collar in between.

C. Selectivity. As in photography and cinematography, a sound recording is focused; and sometimes recordings are more significant for what they *exclude* than for what they feature. Selection lies midway between observation and interpretation: mic placement and recording levels, for instance, represent critical aesthetic judgments. Here again project design is critical. For documentation of traditional folkways, a live microphone in the kitchen during food preparation would be mandatory; for an interview with a former senator about early campaigns, kitchen sounds could only be a distraction. (Careful researchers record such distractions in field notes or in an interview history.)

Selectivity implies the creation of an audio or visual foreground—what is being recorded—and a background. A general rule is to position the microphone or camera as close to the source as possible without disrupting the event in progress. Sometimes the foreground shifts as an interview moves through different phases: from history to study, from narrative to context, from context to recollected past.

To heighten selectivity in recording, fieldworkers can employ a variety of directional microphones, which collect sounds from the direction in which the microphone is pointed; these are particularly useful outdoors or in crowded surroundings. (Built-in mics and those provided with recorders usually are omnidirectional, accepting sound equally from all directions.) Directional microphones are called cardioid (a heart-shaped pattern pointed toward the sound source) and hyper- and super-cardioid (a blimp-shaped pattern that rejects sounds arriving from the side). Though more expensive than a clip-on microphone, these are easily obtained from stores selling tape recorders.

To many oral historians, selectivity refers to the screening process for interviewees; once the interview begins, however, anyone concerned with field recording aspires to the ideal of

gathering only the sounds (or images, in video recording) required by the project design.

D. Sound isolation. In any given recording situation, the recordist decides whether the recording will be inclusive (collecting sounds from different directions and sources) or exclusive (isolating sounds from a single source). Each is appropriate to different circumstances. I once recorded a Masai group in a manner to increase sound isolation, using the split-channel technique described above: one channel focused on the leader, the other on the chorus. I added a baffle (sound barrier) of foam rubber to keep each channel distinct and to emphasize the call-and-response pattern of their music. Similarly, a group historical interview might use separate lavalier microphones for each participant, running them either through dual recorders or a mixing console.

To test whether a channel of the recording is sufficiently isolated, the record level may be set while wearing earphones that wrap around the ear, blocking off external noises. Generally, a microphone records whatever it is placed closest to; thus, built-in microphones primarily pick up the inner workings of a recorder. An extra lavalier or directional microphone is more useful.

IV. Theoretical Issues

A. Performance. Each recording session can be conceived of as a unique performance, a “dialogue” among the narrator, the interviewer, and an audience of historical researchers and the public. In this view, the recollection of historical fact is a performance channeled by anticipations of what those listening will think. On the practical level, this consideration leads to requests for restricted access to portions of interviews. The theoretical issues of oral history-as-performance have not, however, received wide attention; yet no serious recordist can ignore their effect.

Focus on the narrators’ literal or historical meaning sometimes overshadows the symbolic and performance elements of their testimony. Ruth Finnegan, in an essay on oral tradition and historical evidence, characterizes this oversight as a common problem among outsiders studying historical testimony in Africa.²¹

²¹Ruth Finnegan, “A Note on Oral Tradition and Historical Evidence,” in Dunaway and Baum, *Oral History*, 107-15.

A *griot* in Africa may recount the lineage of a tribe as exactly as he can recall it, or he may fabricate and embroider various clans, especially if the current chief is listening. Readers, particularly those living many years after the testimony, cannot “see” or “read” this effect of performance in the processed transcripts of the event.

Whether the subject is a general’s career or a homesteader’s reflections, our recorded interview is necessarily a static representation of an interactive speech act—what someone said to a particular interviewer at a particular time of life and in a particular mood. (And some of those moods can be particular!)

Because we cannot record an entire culture, or the historical world view that underlies it, we interview to reassemble or illuminate that tradition; but how much can one historical example bring us? We work at the juncture of history and ethnography, with each interview a tangent to the world it expresses. Recollection embodies culture through a combination of traditional storytelling formulas and individual memories.

We compensate for the tangential nature of the interview by research and observation, by eliciting information on the context of the interview. We design our projects so that the narrators are representative. Yet we search out and record the best bearers of history, not the worst or even the average. As oral historians, we are often biased in favor of the articulate or the retentive.

B. Audience expectation. The oral interview is a multilayered communicative event, reflected only palely by a transcript, a photo, or a recording. The narrator may have said what we type, but to capture his/her meaning, we must keep a clear impression of his/her expected and actual audience in front of us. This image involves more than reminding oneself that a particular interviewer has a research hypothesis to test, or that s/he has known the interviewee for twenty years. We must also look into the formulas of the words collected to ascertain if the individual is performing a “set piece.” Those who have been interviewed repeatedly or who speak often to the media are particularly likely to answer questions by such semiconscious recitations.

Field recordists should listen carefully for stories that sound too neatly expressed to be a spontaneous recollection. Once, having corrected Pete Seeger as to the year he first heard the instrument

that became his trademark, the five-string banjo, I nevertheless overheard him offering the incorrect date in a broadcast interview—out of force of habit. For good reason does folklorist D. K. Wilgus say that collecting by interview is “the most significant and actually the most demanding for the fieldworker.”²²

A major part of audience expectation in oral history is the effect the interviewer has upon the recording situation. This thought is not new; psychologists and sociologists routinely refer to the halo effect, when what the interviewer wishes to hear determines the narrator’s testimony.

A related notion, derived from research into sub-atomic particles in physics, suggests a Heisenberg principle of fieldwork; as interviewers arrive and set up their equipment, their very presence skews the history-telling situation. So many of our narrators require convincing, in the first place, that their narrative is worth recording; is it not likely that we, as recordists, must guard against their tendency to elaborate or even fabricate facts to win our approval—particularly as we hungrily press them for detail on a half-remembered event in the distant past?

In discussing ethnographic film, anthropologist Karl Heider notes categories of distortion that arise in documenting traditional culture; a number of these have relevance to field recording oral history: (1) microphone or camera consciousness; (2) the interviewer’s presence and the above mentioned halo effect; (3) selection or omission in the interview process (involving a prejudgment of the narrator or his/her subject); and (4) technical distortion (including editing out of “undesired” remarks).²³

Interviewers clearly differ according to their understanding of context and performance; less obviously, they differ in attitudes toward acculturation and cultural pluralism. One also finds differences in training and “sensitivity,” that hard-to-define quality that allows experienced interviewers to ask a question four ways until the pieces of the answer are connected. Historian Arthur Hansen has recounted his own discomfort as an interviewer when working among Japanese Americans: “My prescriptive rules for

²²D. K. Wilgus, “Collecting Musical Folklore and Folksong,” in Dorson and Carpenter, *Handbook of American Folklore*, 373.

²³Karl Heider, *Ethnographic Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), 49-63.

interviewing,” he realized, “were derived from a cultural base that was particularly mainstream American; these rules were hardly universally valid.”²⁴ Hansen discovered that posing open-ended questions, traditionally used to start the narrator’s flow, were instead causing an agony of confusion among older Japanese Americans because they were unsure exactly what the interviewer sought. With eye-contact rules he fared little better, an illustration of the value of grounding oneself in local communication styles before interviewing across cultures.

Another example of how audience expectation affects the interviewee comes from Rosalie Wax, reflecting on work in Native American communities:

I found that my Indian guide and interpreter had given most of her friends and relatives the impression my job consisted of asking Indian parents a specific series of questions about schools. In consequence, whenever she and I would call on a new “respondent,” the Indian lady would sit up straight and brace herself, and I was obligated to pull out my questionnaire and administer it, whether I wanted to or not. Clearly, the woman whom I did not “subject” to an interview would feel slighted. This task accomplished, I could put away my notebook, pencil, and schedule, and ladies would relax and “really talk,” as the Indians put it.²⁵

How cumbersome a process; yet how much worse an interviewer Wax would have been to ignore these expectations.

The interviewer/recordist should reflect on the cultural roles s/he assumes, his/her personality, and other facts concerning his/her function in the society studied. The problem is, of course, familiar to the director of any large oral history program: should interviewers be chosen by sex, age, race? If so, should these duplicate, complement, or contrast with the interviewee’s background? The point here is that interviewer-interviewee interaction cannot be taken for granted in designing or recording oral history.

²⁴Arthur A. Hansen, “Beyond Prescription to Probabilism: Advanced Interviewing Techniques in Oral History,” *Southwest Oral History Association Newsletter* 8 (Summer 1985): 9.

²⁵Wax, *Doing Fieldwork*, 6.

V. Conclusion

This brief survey of field recording has been designed for the intermediate and advanced recordist. To explore in depth topics such as microphone design and placement, years of experience and a technical education are useful, but we all must start someplace.

Further theoretical discussion of the common problems of working with field-recorded oral sources is overdue. A linguist and an oral historian might make different use of the same field recording; does the original design behind that recording render it more or less applicable to either field? Ethical problems in field recording hold provocative implications for field recordists; to what extent do the demands of recording alter a history-telling performance? The television news crew that demands a ceremony be restaged at a different hour for better lighting is an extreme example of this effect, but is this situation so different from the woeful oral historian who persuades a narrator to be reinterviewed because the equipment failed to work the first time?

Dilemmas such as restaging become even more acute when the recording is presented to the public, often in foreshortened form. If there are caveats to media presentation of history, the profession has yet to agree upon them. Some practitioners dismiss media applications of their work. Others, seeking to reach a public beyond the archives, face hard decisions. The inevitable compression of time in media presentation forces us to edit, trying hard not to interpret as we select. The temptation is to focus on our subject, rather than on a reflexive presentation of our method. Perhaps this is actually appropriate (though unfashionable in anthropological circles)—must every viewer or listener learn oral history techniques before s/he can appreciate the recollections of pioneer settlers, for example?

On the other hand, omitting data normally included in an interview history may decontextualize media presentations. Can we conflate multiple sessions into one, layer sound effect and commentary, edit for brevity of expression—all without compromising the original field recording? In a 1976 documentary on the Civil Rights Movement in the American South, I mixed on-the-spot news recordings, archival sound, and oral history interviews, some recorded in the 1960s and some made ten years later. After many weeks of labor, these interviews melded; few listeners will distinguish the ones recorded a decade later. Yet, as originally

recorded, the mood of the after-the-fact interviews differed substantially; did a distortion occur or was that art?²⁶

Video recording of oral history has become increasingly popular due to technical advances such as the video 8 format (which allows digital audio recording at the same time as unprecedentedly lightweight equipment); but the presence of equipment still alters the performance.²⁷ What interviewees are used to sitting under a 300-watt bulb and floor lights? If a tape recorder curbs people's candor, what does a glaring lens cause, even if the operator manages to avoid fidgeting with it?

Other theoretical questions include a reflexive approach to what seem like the basic, simple steps of the oral history process: what do we actually do when we process and transcribe tapes?²⁸ How much does the analytical reference behind our questions shape the answers we receive? Does field recording have a democratizing effect or any other ideology inherent in it? (My answer is only that, if we record, we owe it to our sources to record well. Settling for poor quality in oral history resembles accepting poor government or poor medicine—even a little can be fatal for the profession.)

Finally, the affective side of fieldwork merits more discussion among oral historians: what exactly happens in the course of multiple interviews with the same narrator, as a sympathy develops which causes the interviewer, at least temporarily, to lose that distance that allows him/her to record and probe objectively? Our empathetic bond travels with us like our shadow. Pressured to focus on product rather than process, many oral historians have learned to omit this shadow from our portraits; but just because it is invisible does not mean that it is gone. A parallel concern in ethnography has

²⁶David K. Dunaway, "We Shall Overcome" (Washington, D. C.: Produced for the National Endowment for the Arts; distributed by the Pacifica Program Service, East Hollywood, Calif., 1976).

²⁷Richard Blaustein, "Using Video in the Field," in Dorson and Carpenter, *Handbook of American Folklore*; Richard Whitaker, "Why Not Try Video-taping Oral History?" *Oral History Review* 9 (1981): 115-23.

²⁸David Dunaway, "Processing Oral Sources" (Nairobi, Kenya: Institute of African Studies Seminar Paper #161, March 1984). Two studies exploring transcription in a theoretical light are Charles Briggs, *Learning How to Ask: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal of the Role of the Interview in Social Research* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and Elizabeth Fine, *The Folklore Text: From Performance to Print* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

led film and video recorders to keep one lens on the ethnographic "text" and another on the recordist, to document the interaction.

Beyond these questions is the imperative that inspires ethnographers, oral historians, and documentarians: to record a valuable cultural expression for the rest of humankind and for scholarship. This is the root desire of the field recordist, and we must not lose sight of this drive, which ultimately supersedes shoptalk of gear and anecdotes of recording disasters and triumphs. To stimulate a recounting of neglected history has elements of the divine; to record for future generations adds the prospect of immortality.