

MAKING ACTIVIST SOUND

Christopher DeLaurenti

ABSTRACT The author discusses his approach to recording protests and other politically charged soundscapes.

To listen is to liberate. I start with myself by taking microphones toward and—when I muster enough courage—beyond the boundaries of property, the law and oppression. I make field recordings, but I am not interested in building a documentary archive or capturing the essence of a place or an event. When I tape small microphones to my skull, or button up a stout leather vest with sewn-in mics, or strap an ORTF [1] stereo pair to my homemade mic boom, I am venturing into the world to ask, “Who is heard?” “Who has?” “Who is here?” and “Why are we listening to this right now?” I ask these questions to open my ears and open my heart. Can I hear justice?

I do not wait for quiet utopias. Let other field recordists seek the primordial absence of civilization. My “field” is the city, among people. The field is not a place, but an unstable condition where the soundscape may change radically at any moment. In the studio, it seldom rains.

Out in the field, I listen and learn to re-listen. Recording spurs me to imagine what I will miss and what my microphones pick up. Subject to sensory adaptation, my ears quickly subsume passing cars and juddering helicopters into a dull, recessed drone while the portable recorder continues to capture rumbling and careening movement. Microphones help me bypass the cocktail party effect, preserving a polyphony otherwise bisected into foreground sound and everything else. “The ear selects,” writes John le Carré in *The Little Drummer Girl*, “machines don’t.”

Noise, tapestry, text: Protests are one of the few occasions when a city feels lived in, not just inhabited. Unlike chants at regimented sporting events, urban distance conjures poetic depth amidst open space: Every echoing group of marchers’ voices emanates a distinct timbre, spatial location and variably passionate presence. What we hear is for us, not for someone’s corporation or logo. Individual voices chime in too, creating a polyphony in which the lone and local blends with massed voices. Neither is drowned out. Beyond the bland term “collective listening,” we can hear an aural model of governing consensus, personal autonomy and perhaps the germinal sound of an unself-

ish, ad hoc social network. (In olden times we called them “neighbors.”)

Protests and marches contravene what we are supposed to do in a city: working, spending and not talking to strangers. Deterritorialized counterpublics gather, or in plain English, overlooked, ignored and stereotyped individuals, small groups and communities gather to reclaim and redefine the city through sound.

I record protests and other politically charged soundscapes. I might be marching in the crowd, but I do not count myself as a protester—yet. When the cry “Raise your fists in the air!” comes, my deck stays in my hand; and during the call and response of “No Justice? No Peace!” I stay silent, lest my proximate voice drown out everyone else.

“Activist Sound” is what I call the sound pieces, performances and installations I make from field recordings of protests, testimonies and other pertinent sonic materials of social change. The titles are deliberately long and generic, e.g. *N30: Live at the WTO Protest November 30, 1999*; *Live at Occupy Wall Street N15 M1 S17*; and *Live in Baltimore at the March for Freddie Gray April 25, 2015*. I hope my boring, anti-commercial titles accommodate, welcome and perhaps inspire similar or parallel pieces. Back in 1999, the artist collective Ultra-red made an *N30*, I made an *N30* and there are likely other *N30* titles out there for sound, film, poetry, etc.

Names of people, by contrast, wield much more power. Freightened with assumptions and bias (quick, who has a Ph.D.: Brian or B’Hazul?), names almost never appear in my work, except in litanies or recollections of the dead. No experts appear by name because I believe the truth of the voice can be judged by what we hear, not by who is named. Nameless voices tell us more.

Much of my work is in English. Shortly before a presentation of *N30* in 2003, I found out that most of the graduate students were from Spain and Mexico. Although they were whip-smart and elegantly fluent in English, for many the accents, words and idioms rocketed by too quickly for much comprehension. Afterwards, a graduate student keenly described the work as “updated Xenakis,” citing sound-masses of varying densities, trajectories and pulsation. I still rue wasting their time. Linguistic barriers leave additional room for fellow artists of other cultures and languages to make parallel pieces outside the dumb aura of exclusive competition.

Pieces such as *N30* are neither a primer on trade and globalization nor an objective record of what happened at the so-called Battle in Seattle or anywhere else. I try to probe root issues of presence, autonomy, property and dissent by showing individual voices collaborating and contending with collective action.

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Sound files related to this article can be found at <delarenti.net/protest/>. See also <mitpressjournals.org/toc/lmj/-/25> for audio, video and other supplementary files associated with this issue of LMJ.

"As I see it," declared Igor Stravinsky in *Retrospectives and Conclusions*, "even the greatest symphony is able to do very little about Hiroshima." Symphonies—by me or anyone else—cannot bandage a wound and feed someone, but they can help expose the behaviors, choices and culprits who allow evil—poverty, racism, property, war and naive, faultless money—to continue.

Most of what I make remains free, online. There is scant cultural capital and no money in activist sound. I hope a just, radical transformation of society renders these works obsolete, leaving quaint, bygone documents for thesis-hungry scholars.

Reference

- 1 Named after the French National Broadcasting organization (Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française), the ORTF microphone configuration "consists of two cardioid microphones oriented outward from the centerline of the sound source with an included angle of 110 degrees and with a capsule space of 17 cm." See Streicher and Dooley, "Basic Stereo Microphone Perspectives," *JAES Journal* 33, Nos. 7/8 (1985) p. 549.

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THE LINES BENEATH YOUR FEET: REPRESENTING URBAN PROTEST THROUGH SOUND

Christopher Wood

ABSTRACT The author describes the development of a series of pieces based on recordings of protest in public spaces. Particular attention is paid to the ability of each form to represent the experience of participating in a protest.

The biggest strike of U.K. public sector workers in a generation took place on 30 November 2011. The protest was called by a coalition of unions in response to government austerity measures. These measures included pay freezes and a re-drawing of the rules around pensions for public sector workers. Picket lines formed outside major public buildings, and a mass of workers marched through central London. Parallel protests included vocal demonstrations at Liverpool Street station (a major commuter hub in the financial district) and an attempted occupation of an office building near Piccadilly Circus.

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For 12 hours that day I moved around the city making binaural recordings to edit into a short soundscape piece. I wanted to make a piece of reportage, capturing events in their acoustic, spatial context. Sound has a particular ability to depict an environment in an uncanny way, especially in a culture where the weight of reality and verification are usually placed on the visual realm (primarily in news media contexts). I recorded speeches, chants and crowd sounds within a breadth of acoustics (both social and physical). Through this I hoped to give a version of events that would better convey the sense of solidarity experienced during marches and protests. For me, the act of street protest is significant because it is a collectively felt and collectively created disruption of the usual function of an urban space. This significance is lost when the depiction is set in an expected and repeatable set of visual news media tropes.

The resulting piece, *Sounds of the Strike*, was carried online on the *New Statesman* website (a relatively left-wing news review magazine). I received comments from listeners that the piece "really felt like being there." While this could be considered a success, I was troubled by the idea that I had just created a different type of fetish for a different audience. The piece may have presented a more nuanced depiction of protest by emphasizing it as a site of spatial disruption, but the fundamental relationship between producer/artist and consumer remained the same. This was a problem for me, as I understand protest to be an act of engagement, exploration and action, not one of remote listening to a predefined object. To investigate the further potential of the recordings I used them in an interactive installation.

The Lines Beneath Your Feet (Fig. 1) used floor pads as triggers for sections of the recordings. The pads were covered with images of the road surface in London's financial district. The interaction was intended to invoke the act of marching and the feeling of being present in the streets. I did not draw up any rules regarding how many people

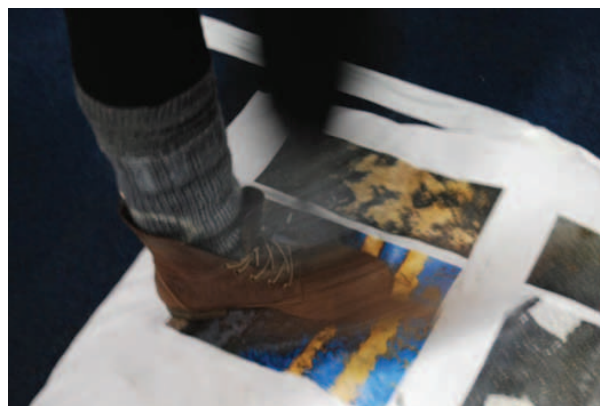


Fig. 1. Christopher Wood, *The Lines Beneath Your Feet*, interactive sound installation, Construction Gallery, London, 2012. The floor mat that triggers recordings of the 2011 protest is decorated with images of the street along the route of the protest march. (Photo © Christopher Wood)