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Steven Feld e-interview with Jacopo Tomatis,
Il giornale della musica

JT: The Italian edition of Sound and Sentiment is opened by a conversation between you, Nicola Scaldaferrri and Carlo Serra. I found it quite funny that the first line of the interview is yours, that is when you ask them why they have decided to translate Sound and Sentiment...I turn that to you: why translating Sound and Sentiment now?

SF: Well of course I am happy that more Italian readers will see this book, and through it become exposed to a different reality, that of rainforest Papua New Guinea in the 1970s. The book tells about relations of people, myth, sound, and environment. Those relations are quite different now. I was present in Bosavi before the crises of mining, logging, capital intrusion, and environmental degradation began to really sweep through the interior of the country in the 1980s. So in a sense it is important to translate a book that helps us remember a world that once was quite different. But this is not just a negative or sad story. The book remains an inspiration because of the way it helps us to think about the deep importance of sound and poetry and music to environmental consciousness.

JT: What's the link between Sound and Sentiment and – for instance – your later works on bells?

SF: In Sound and Sentiment you are exposed to how rainforest bird sound habituates Bosavi listening and produces consciousness of space (forest height, depth, distance, etc.) and time (day, season, cycles). The story is not so different in many places in Europe with animal bells, church bells, town bells, carnival bells. Bells also habituate the listener to a sense of place and produce consciousness of space and time.

JT: Do you think that "anthropology of sound" is still a valid definition?

SF: Yes, of course; I think it is valid to study the social life of sound, all sound, and the relationships of language, music, voice, instruments, soundmaking devices,

ambient or environmental sound, technological and mediated sound. And I think that it is possible through "anthropology of sound" to join the work of sound artists and composers and musicians together with different kinds of researchers.

JT: You've developed key reflections on the relationship between "etic" and "emic" points of view – could you briefly introduce the concept of dialogic editing?

SF: "Dialogic editing" and "dialogic auditing" are about the necessity of feedback and playback. It is important for a community or a musician to know what the researcher is saying about them, or how the researcher "hears" their sound or music world. So playing back sounds for critical response, or reading back written materials for critical response, these are strategies for signaling respect, gaining a deeper understanding of difference, allowing the researched to question of the "authority" of the researcher.

JT: How does being a scholar influence your work with local musicians, as in Accra Trane Station project? Are there two "layers" in working with musicians – one for playing and one for research?

SF: I am a musician who became an anthropologist and never stopped being a musician. Being a musician helps me understand the materiality of sound and being an anthropologist helps me to ask questions about the social life of sound. It is no problem to weave them together. In the case of my work with Accra Trane Station I think that playing with Nii Noi Nortey and Nii Otoo Annan strengthens my authority to speak about the musical experiment they have made –Coltrane in Africa, Africa in Coltrane. After all, I love that Coltrane music as much as they do, but I hear it differently and know it in different ways. So the music and anthropology come together when we play the music and listen to it and discuss its meanings.

JT: Could you tell me something about your "soundwalks"? How the recording studio could re-create the experience of listening? Could you illustrate your way of recording on the field and the later editing processes?

SF: My "soundwalks" are eco-aoustic recordings made with the whole body. I wear the microphones on my head but I try to record the whole way that moving in and through a sound

field is registered on my body in many sensate levels. When you listen to the recordings I want you to be able to imagine the difference between walking while listening, sitting while listening, lying down while listening. I want each posture and position and attitude of the body to register. So the walk is a real physical experience for me and with the help of DSM microphone technology and the studio it can also be a more engaged physical experience for you the listener.

JT: As a music journalist, everyday I have to face the problem of categorizing some kinds of music as "world music". What do you think about this "old" definition? Is it still – or, has it ever been – usable?

SF: "World music" rewrites the same problem, the binary, "music" vs. "world music." It recreates and reifies the non-Western Other. As a marketing label it is perverse and colonial, just as perverse and colonial as "folk" or "ethnic" music, also terms that have done violence and reinscribed this West/Other divide. Why can we not simply have "music?"

JT: Since the beginning, one of the major problems in the world music field is – of course – copyright. What's your position today – as a scholar and a record producer?

SF: Copyright is an ownership regime. But many people in the world do not imagine that music is ownable property. So there is a potential conflict when societies with ownership regimes of intellectual or cultural property cannot accommodate other regimes of stewardship. Additionally copyright is a system of protections largely meant to protect written documents. And much of the world's musical production is not written. So this is how and why theft and abuse and violence is done every day to many musics of "oral tradition." Within the classic system of copyright it is hard to achieve cultural equity and balance. This is the painful reality of working in the world of music as both a scholar and as a recordist and publisher.

JT: Do you think that development in communication and music distribution via world wide web have changed or will change anything?

SF: On the negative side those with fast connections, plenty of bandwidth, and communications sophistication can be the new gold diggers, easily able to take, circulate,

manipulate materials that originate with those who are technologically less powerful and less resourceful. On the positive side new forms of communications are also easy to hijack and transform into new ways to amplify less powerful voices. Indigenous artists in fact have a very significant presence on the web, and are developing new techniques for broadcasting. But at the same time those with more technological power and access still have more control of the way voices and cultures are represented. So if you are an omnivorous privatist and monopolist like Murdoch or Berlusconi the situation is a wonderful control opportunity. If you are a democratic populist wishing to see technology provide space for resistance, equality, and empowerment, the situation is an up-hill struggle.