

The Songs of Felicca Lether

Juan Santiago Posada Abal

March 2025

Ethnomusicological archives must question what should and should not be listened to. This project does exactly that. The goal is to explore how I can manipulate sonic archives of dubious moral quality while not being morally dubious myself. By engaging with techniques to obscure the original songs and composing in a form to interrogate the need for the original recordings, a piece that attempts to answer the question can be answered.

The main musical inspiration comes from ambient music and *musique concrète*, specifically the National Institute of Design (NID) Ahmedabad, India. These are chosen because they place special importance on the space around music. *I am Sitting in a Room* by Alvin Lucier and Basinski's *Disintegration Loops* are also invoked as they deal with how exists in space and how it exists in a physical medium. All of the background sounds and percussion comes from stretched, spliced, and looped segments of vinyl noise from the *Songs of the...* albums, released by the Library of Congress and *Healing Songs of the American Indian* released by Folkways Records. The synthesizer melodies are derived from Alice Fletcher transcriptions, harmonized by John Comfort Philmore, that were printed out, cut up, and shuffled by hand.

These techniques serve one main purpose, encryption. The songs stored on the record are not included in the final composition, only the place where they were recorded and where they are now stored. Doing so refocuses the recordings from holding what was seen as a dying breed of American music or a fetishistic archive for the new, all-American composer encouraged to "look to their folk traditions to find their nation's voice" to hearing the places where Native Americans were recorded, often by force (Conlon 2014, 447).

The project seeks to construct a deficit narrative around the individuals that were recorded by the likes of Frances Densmore or Alice Fletcher. That is the reason for the cut-ups of the harmonized melodies. First, by using harmonized versions instead of more direct transcriptions, like that of Francis Densmore, more distance is placed between my project and the original song. Second, the melodies are made to be ridiculous, nonsensical abstractions by outsiders. It doubles down on the transformations that transcur in the process of transcribing melodies into the pentagram. Less than an accurate reproduction of what can be heard on the recordings, the piece is meant to display what I hear in the recordings and what I have read of their history and question at what exactly can be heard in transcriptions and reflect how I" they were two steps removed from the European art-song tradition, they were equally removed from original Indian performances" (Deloria 2022, 198). Encryption is taken furthest with the last melody played in which I do not use synthesizers or MIDI at all. I grab a section of vinyl noise and change its pitch, 100hz per staff line with middle C at 0hz of change. The result is a strange section of organized noise, which at times can sound musical. The cut ups also result in the title of project "Felicca Lether" being an anagram, a shuffle, of Alice Fletcher.

The project is an exploration of the role of archives. They should be open and used for more than just ogling. Regardless, this does not mean that archives should be open season for any overzealous musician to reign free. Musics are incredibly precious things and when they have history so complicated and violent, there is much more to lose from being rash than from being cautious.

That is why I take from the silences. My dialogue with the music is by acknowledging the archive, but refusing to engage with musics that were taken by force.

Works Cited

- Conlon, Paula J. 2013. *Bending or Breaking the Native American Flute Tradition?* Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199765034.013.010>.
- Philip J. Deloria. 2022. *Indians in Unexpected Places*. University Press of Kansas. doi:10.2307/jj.1507443.
- Healing Songs of the American Indians*. 1960. United States: Folkways Records. Folkways Records. <https://folkways.si.edu/healing-songs-of-the-american-indians/music/album/smithsonian>.
- Songs Of The Chippewa*. 1950. Vinyl, LP, Compilation. United States: Library Of Congress Division Of Music Recording Laboratory. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8lIglDsKOgY>.