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## The Sublime Frequencies of New Old Media

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A new world of world music was built on *Cambodian Rocks*. The CD was released on the New York City–based Parallel World label in 1996, and for most listeners, it was hard to find anything else like it. The compilation collected tracks from a number of legendary 1960s Phnom Penh bar bands, most of whose members were executed by the Khmer Rouge soon after the recordings were made. Their brief reinventions of garage rock powerfully echo the impact of the US presence in Southeast Asia and the global spread of recording and broadcast technologies during this period. On *Cambodian Rocks*, the Western listener hears the psychedelic sounds of Santana, James Brown, and the Animals anew through the ears of seemingly anonymous Cambodian musicians.

The mystery of the music was amplified by the opaque presentation of its origins. The compiler, Paul Wheeler, an American English teacher in Japan who had collected cassettes on a brief tour of Cambodia in 1994, provided no biographical detail for the material, neglecting even track titles or artist names. Although several of these songs are beloved classics for Cambodians, the backgrounds and artistic intentions of the musicians were unknown for Western listeners. For those cognizant of Cambodian folk music styles, the mix of sounds might suggest the continuity of traditional vocal techniques and local song forms beneath the novel rhythms, reverb, and twang of imported rock music. But most North Americans, who heard this music for the first time in the 1990s, were surprised and intrigued

I would like to acknowledge the Society of Fellows in the Humanities at Columbia University for support in writing this article. Earlier versions were presented at the Experience Music Project Pop Conference and meetings of the Society for Ethnomusicology and the American Anthropological Association. I am grateful to all respondents and readers, including Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, Marilyn Ivy, Wayne Marshall, Brian Karl, and Alan Bishop.



Figure 1 Cambodian Rocks (Parallel World)

to encounter the transformation of familiar music in an unknown cultural context. The effect was less like hearing a documentary presentation of a recognizable musical culture than tuning a radio to the staticky, somehow familiar sounds of a fuzzed-out, reverb-soaked Khmer version of “Gloria.”

In this essay, I describe a recent intervention into the circulation of “world music,” which has been associated since the 1950s with the academic field of ethnomusicology and since the 1980s with the music industry categories of “world music” and “world beat.” I argue that both contexts have been substantially transformed in recent years by an underground redistribution of sound recordings in North America. As world music becomes part of online culture, its new listenership has realigned against hegemonic frameworks of intellectual property. This new world music,

sometimes called “World Music 2.0,” disengages from earlier collaborations and hybridized genres of world music in the 1980s and 1990s, which provoked a broad scholarly critique of its production and marketing as a thinly veiled form of musical imperialism.<sup>1</sup> Many of these reactions focused on the unauthorized use of specific song or sound material, as appropriated by Western authors via imitation, and/or quasi-coercive collaborations (Paul Simon, Peter Gabriel, and David Byrne are typical examples, but there are many others). The charge of appropriation was exacerbated by industrial procedures of technological sampling and rerecording, which were said to detach cultural materials from their original contexts. A well-known example was documented in Steven Feld’s 2000 *Public Culture* essay “A Sweet Lullaby for World Music.” Feld traces the charged ethical and legal situation involved in the circulation of “Rorogwela,” a song by the Solomon Island singer Afunakwa recorded in 1970 by the Swiss ethnomusicologist Hugo Zemp. In 1992 the track was licensed from the United Nations Edu-

1. Nineties literature in ethnomusicology and anthropology was particularly thick in the critique of world music; see in particular Feld 1994, 1996, 2000, as well as Meintjes 1990, 2003; Guilbault 1993; Erlmann 1996; Zemp 1996; Taylor 1997; Negus 1999; Frith 2000; Hutnyk 2000; Brennan 2001; and Stokes 2004.

cational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and sampled by the Belgian electronic group Deep Forest for their track “Sweet Lullaby,” which was subsequently reworked by the Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek as “Pygmy Lullaby.” Among other consequences, Feld (2000: 146) shows how Afunakwa’s voice was slowly drowned out in the remediated telephone games and sampled shuffles that marked the “triumphant industrialization of global sonic representation” in world music.

But World Music 2.0 does not originate in the appropriation of global sounds in popular works by Western authors, who impose technological mediation on traditional forms. Rather, it is based in the redistribution of existing recordings of regional popular music—most of which already bear a strong formal and technological relationship with Western popular culture—as a “new old” media. Its largely North American listenership came to world music from earlier contexts of analog exchange in an “independent” musical underground of the 1980s and 1990s, which began to circulate familiar-sounding pop music from Southeast Asia and Africa. Much of this is period-specific material, often contemporaneous with 1960s psychedelic and garage rock, but sung in local languages and incorporating regional musical influences. Releases compile different tracks under titles like *Love, Peace, and Poetry: Asian Psychedelic Music*, *Analog Africa*, *Thai Beat A-Go-Go*, and *Hava Narghile: Turkish Rock Music, 1966–1975*. A range of small independent labels circulates these “lost” recordings of Afro-funk and Asian surf guitar to a new transnational listenership. Redistributors stress their discovery of unknown gems (one “accidental world music” label is called Finders Keepers) in the hidden confluence between strange marginal forms and a familiar homeland of pop nostalgia.

If the first problem I want to bring out in this essay is the contemporary form of world music, the second is the relationship between old and new media. I put stress on the redistribution of world music as a process of “remediation,” in which content is transferred from one media context to another to create new media, but also new subjects of mediated culture.<sup>2</sup> Remediation shows us that new media always incorporate “experiences of older media, as well as the hopes and anxieties around the introduction of new media technologies themselves” (Silvio 2007: 286). In online networks, earlier imaginaries of local production and musical

2. The term *remediation* here draws from Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, who use the term to describe how forms of older media are incorporated into new technologies in an interdependent media environment, as well as from a recent literature that extends the concept further into cultural identities and socioeconomic networks (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Acland 2007; Silvio 2007; Novak 2010).

independence are juxtaposed with technical platforms that offer unprecedented accessibility to cultural material. World Music 2.0, then, is more than just the end point of a chain of misbegotten appropriations. It is the subject of an emergent open source culture of global media.

What are the ethical and ideological goals of constructing “new old” media in the present confluence of digital, analog, physical, and virtual forms? As redistributors argue for an open access circulation of world music, they wear their ambivalent relationship to its cultural representation on their sleeves. Their musical sources are both raw and technological; they are derivative of Western mass media but deeply transformed by local interpretations. For most North American listeners, the mix evokes surrealist collage as much as intercultural hybridity. Many labels champion the obscurity of their recorded sources, to appeal to their audience’s desire for direct access to raw uncirculated material. They reissue CD mixes of out-of-print (or never-printed) recordings, drawing sounds from bootleg cassette tapes, amateur home recordings, regional radio and television broadcasts, and field recordings not otherwise “released” into global circulation. MP3 blogs have proliferated, posting recordings of obscure recordings for free download. Bloggers like Brian Shimkovitz (a.k.a. thursdayborn, who posts MP3s of African cassette tapes on his *Awesome Tapes from Africa* blog) describe their “crate-digging” search for recordings as a kind of “aural ethnography” of lost and disappearing regional media, previously locked away in the vaults of academic research. But even when they continue to produce obsolescent physical media in the form of CDs (and also, importantly, on vinyl LP and cassette), redistributors orient world music from an analog past toward the free exchanges of a global digital commons.

Many redistributors consider their work as a corrective to the limited scope of academic field recordings. Ethnomusicology, they claim, has focused on revivalist projects and ethnonationalist folk genres that cut out the noise of the street and the technologically driven beats of popular music. Their own releases, however, are described as a way of opening access to the distorted reality of global pop beyond the academic frame. World Music 2.0 is celebrated for its impure mixes of imitative sounds, which bring global popular music into a contemporary realm of ethnographic surrealism “that values fragments, curious collections, [and] unexpected juxtapositions” (Clifford 1981: 540). But if this is aural ethnography, it documents the distortions of North American underground reception as much as the cultures that created the music. Even when cultural histories are not perceived as totally irrelevant, many bloggers post their strange media discoveries first and

ask questions later.<sup>3</sup> A recent post from Shimkovitz's blog is titled "What's the Name of This Band/Album?" immediately followed by a note that begins, "I have no idea, but this tape from Guelmim, a town in Southern Morocco, is INSANE."

World music, with all of its fascinated culturalist desires, anticorporate tones of collaborative resistance, and uneasy debates of appropriation, is back—but a new online public has recast its circulation as an open access project of redistribution. Listeners do not discover the borders of these musical worlds through copious explanatory notes providing details of sociocultural backgrounds. Regional music cultures are filtered through the wow and flutter of an unlabeled cassette, the obscuring static of an ephemeral radio signal, or the chains of quasi-anonymous speculations about sources in the comments of a YouTube video. These ripped files chart out a new galaxy of golden hits from unknown stars, whose distant light is filtered through time and space, reaching us only after its sources have changed or disappeared. So what happens when we begin to hear, and really listen to, the distortions of World Music 2.0—not just as an orientalist appropriation of local culture but as part and parcel of an ethical remediation? We join this broadcast already in progress.

### **Remediating the Mysteries of World Music**

I turn first to the Seattle-based independent label Sublime Frequencies, whose popularity has crystallized the recent shift in the circulation of world music. Sublime Frequencies' mission statement describes the label as

a collective of explorers dedicated to acquiring and exposing obscure sights and sounds from modern and traditional urban and rural frontiers via film and video, field recordings, radio and short wave transmissions, international folk and pop music, sound anomalies, and other forms of human and natural expression not documented sufficiently through all channels of academic research, the modern recording industry, media, or corporate foundations.<sup>4</sup>

3. Many MP3 blogs advertise an "opt-out" policy to address possible disputes over unauthorized distribution of posted content. The blurb on the front page of the MP3 blog *Holy Warbles*, for example, reads: "we strongly believe in the free flow of artistic inspiration & kultural awareness. if you got beef because yer recording is featured in this realm, simply leave a comment & we'll happily remove the offending comment with the quickness." [holywarbles.blogspot.com](http://holywarbles.blogspot.com) (accessed January 29, 2011).

4. [www.sublimefrequencies.com](http://www.sublimefrequencies.com) (accessed October 3, 2008).

The label founders, Alan Bishop and Hisham Mayet, cite the inspiration of Ocora, Smithsonian Folkways, Nonesuch Explorer, Unesco, Lyricord, and other foundational world music labels that informed their broad aesthetic of “extra-geography and soulful experience.”<sup>5</sup> It might seem strange that Sublime Frequencies would champion these midcentury projects of musical preservation initiated by folklorists and ethnomusicologists, who often considered their field recordings of traditional music as auxiliary research material inseparable from extended projects of cultural documentation.<sup>6</sup> But these recordings were far more influential in public circulations than in the ethnographic texts they were meant to accompany. Consumer guides to world music (e.g., the Rough Guide series) have come to consider the contributions of ethnomusicology as a lineage of great field recordings, essential to the historical roster of alternative media. The fluid category of world music, then, was neither a purely commercial invention nor the supplemental by-product of an emerging academic discipline. It has also been circulated as an exemplary production of independent media, which was successfully distributed on the fringes of the music industry.

But if Sublime Frequencies embraces the media productions of ethnomusicology, it rejects its mission of cultural exegesis. Instead, the label stresses its own ethical ambivalence about cultural preservation in ways that align with the self-conscious skepticism of its North American underground audience. Listeners revisit familiar themes of cultural loss and modernization, but with a crucial change in protocol. For Sublime Frequencies, the core of world music’s difference does not lie in disappearing performance traditions or premodern musical survivals, and it does not mandate preservation for its own sake. Rather, its material is sieved from a global media mix that has become a conduit for new experimental channels of listening.

5. [www.sublimefrequencies.com](http://www.sublimefrequencies.com) (accessed October 3, 2008). Unmentioned here is perhaps the most obvious precedent for Sublime Frequencies: Harry Smith’s 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Folkway Records, New York), an unauthorized compilation mix of commercial recordings that became the touchstone for the burgeoning 1960s folk revival movement (Boon 2006). Partly to avoid the problem of copyright violation for redistributing commercial material, Smith’s notes for each track deliberately misspelled names and omitted information about the artists’ musical histories, regional locations, and race and instead used a mysterious set of narrative and cosmological categories to arrange the anthology’s complex mix of sources.

6. The ethnomusicologist John Bailey (2010: 116) remembers that his early fieldwork recordings in 1970s Afghanistan were uncompensated productions “made as research documents, without thought as to their eventual publication as world music records.” In recent decades, ethnomusicologists have turned their attention to issues of intellectual property, cultural rights, and repatriation of historical sound collections, as well as the popular recirculation of ethnomusicological field recordings (Feld 1996; Seeger 1996; Zemp 1996).

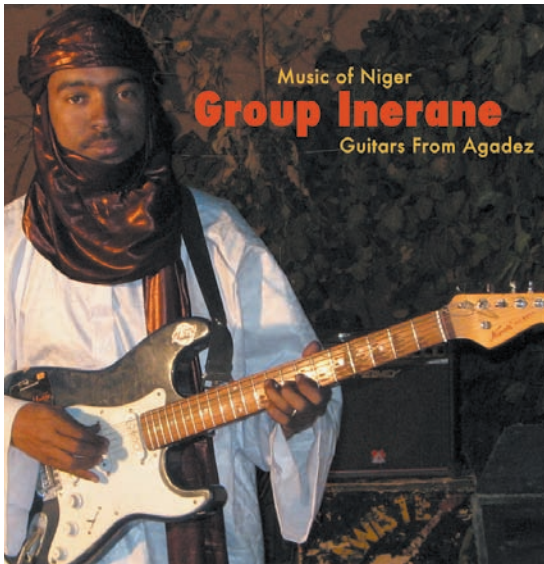


Figure 2 Sublime Frequencies covers: Shadow Music of Thailand; Radio Pyongyang; Group Inerane; Radio Phnom Penh (Images courtesy of Alan Bishop)

There is no question that Sublime Frequencies provides access to an enormous range of rare and uncanny sounds. From its earliest releases in 2003, the label took as its mission the redistribution of “decaying documents and eccentric artifacts” drawn from “unknown” public media circulations in Southeast Asia and North Africa.<sup>7</sup> Over the past several years, it has released an astonishing amount of unique material. *Guitars of the Golden Triangle* presents previously undiscovered 1970s garage and psychedelic rock from the Shan state in Eastern Myanmar, while *Radio Pyongyang: Commie Funk and Agit Pop from the Hermit Kingdom* presents the “now now sound of North Korea . . . schmaltzy synthpop, revolutionary rock, cheeky child rap, and a healthy dose of hagiography for dear leader Kim Jong-Il.”<sup>8</sup> Sublime Frequencies has also released several films (including *Niger: Magic and Ecstasy in the Sahel*, *Phi Ta Khon: Ghosts of Isan*, and the “mindblowing IN YOUR FACE document” *Folk Music of the Sahara: Among the Tureg of Libya*), which consist of unnarrated and minimally edited raw footage of isolated cultural performances.<sup>9</sup> Recent recordings focus on individual artists and groups, such as the synthesizer-driven “street-level folk-pop” of the Syrian musician Omar Souleyman or the Moroccan ensemble Group Doueh, whose virtuosic guitarist weaves the melismatic melodies and quarter-tone scales of Mauritanian folk song into a Hendrixian warp of phasers and distortion. But most often, the label redistributes existing products of regional media, by reproducing and compiling recordings that have already been distributed in local circulations.

Sublime Frequencies is well known for its *Radio* compilations, which juxtapose a huge variety of sound materials from decades of personal field recordings. Ethnographic field recordings typically document live on-site performances, while most industrial world music CDs are produced in studios controlled by foreign producers or their local agents. Sublime Frequencies breaks from both modes. It occasionally makes field recordings of its own, capturing unidentified amplified street performances or public soundscapes, but most sounds are gleaned from informal circulations of local media. Songs are sometimes copied from cassette recordings bought in local markets or recorded straight from local radio, television, or other site-specific broadcasts. In the *Radio* series, music and other sounds are presented in montages that do not distinguish between live and mediated, historical and contemporary, local and foreign styles. Instead, they conjure the mystery of an immeasurable, unknowable mix of sounds beyond the reach of archival documentation and scholarly concern.

7. [www.sublimefrequencies.com](http://www.sublimefrequencies.com).

8. [www.sublimefrequencies.com/item.asp?Item\\_id=26](http://www.sublimefrequencies.com/item.asp?Item_id=26).

9. [www.sublimefrequencies.com/item.asp?Item\\_id=12](http://www.sublimefrequencies.com/item.asp?Item_id=12).



In deference to the “impossibility” of identifying its sources, the label discourages curious listeners from being distracted by such details. “To the veteran international sound collector,” state the liner notes for *Radio Java* (2003), “Javanese music is no secret. For the uninitiated, rather than going through an introductory outline of Javanese music history, I will wish you away to the internet, a library, or bookstore where you can find plenty of information on the subject.” But it is left to the ironic reader to note the extreme unlikelihood of finding resources from a title like “Music Collage w/Imam/Sunda/JPG” or “Miscellaneous Music Collage.” Other titles for individual tracks surrealistically displace the sounds they name (e.g., “Shiny Radio in a Blind Man’s Wallet”). The sound objects on many Sublime Frequencies releases, too—fuzzy broadcasts of local AM, FM, and shortwave radio; truncated recordings of television ads and public address announcements; noisy soundscapes of public markets and streets; and distorted home-cassette recordings—reinforce the sensory displacement valued by the label’s underground listenership. “What’s happening NOW on Indonesian Radio from the FM airwaves of Sumatra?” “A completely mystifying Universe of Sound swirling in an explosive musical kaleidoscope, that’s what!”<sup>10</sup>

Where is this world of music? The scene of local cultural production is a relentlessly obscure collage of different sources, joined by their strangeness and irreconcilable difference from any sort of musical mainstream. The form of the regional compilation here—*Radio Java*, *Shadow Music of Thailand*, and so forth—is a common rubric for conjoining disparate material. North American music scenes, for example, are often introduced with compilation recordings that map out the “Seattle sound” or the “San Francisco underground.” The context of radio broadcast further downgrades the obligation to document local authors, as the distant listener tunes in to an imaginary media landscape through the flowing mix of sounds from “various artists.” The lo-fi qualities of distortion in these analog recordings, too, echo underground music’s sonic distance from institutional product. In these and other ways, new world music circulations are strongly derivative of “old media” aesthetics developed in the American musical underground of the 1980s and 1990s.

10. [www.sublimefrequencies.com/item.asp?Item\\_id=24](http://www.sublimefrequencies.com/item.asp?Item_id=24). Accessed October 3, 2007 (NB: the current text on this page has been altered since the original date of access).

**From Weird Music to World Music**

The experimental aesthetics of Sublime Frequencies were influenced by the social and musical background of its primary organizers, brothers Alan and Richard Bishop, who were mystical stars of American underground music in their group Sun City Girls. Formed in Arizona in 1981 along with drummer Charles Gocher, the trio toured extensively in North America over the next two and a half decades. Sun City Girls released more than one hundred recordings on vinyl, cassette, and CD. Most were self-released in limited editions and distributed by mail and person-to-person barter exchange in the burgeoning independent music scenes of North America and Europe. The obscurity and rarity of their recorded output helped generate a cult audience for their famously unpredictable live performances, in which the band would present an entire set of droning Middle Eastern–influenced guitar improvisation dressed in masks and robes or taunt the audience interminably between blasts of angular hardcore punk.

By embodying an untraceable mix of mysterious musical styles, Sun City Girls had an almost magical influence on an experimental listenership in North America during the 1980s and 1990s. The band’s musical and cultural references were unclear to most underground music fans in this period, though its travels in the East had become legendary gossip among their fans. The lack of background information on its album covers (sometimes adorned with surreally decontextualized images of foreign lands and people) added to the band’s inscrutability. Underground music “zines” occasionally published missives from the Bishop brothers that reported the mystical fruits of their travels. In one essay, Richard Bishop (1999) expounded on the “magic of the fourth world” and its effects:

Once you’ve tasted the third world, you realize the possibility of a fourth. It grows on you and in you like the sweetest of cancers, and when you return, if you decide to . . . there can be even greater experiences that you won’t dare share with anybody! Nobody would get it! . . . When you are traveling in a remote area and you come to the realization that you don’t know who, where, or what you are anymore, that’s when the magic of the fourth world begins. The senses explode on a grand scale, and the unknown, or at least the “unheard of,” presents itself . . . whether you’re ready for it or not.

Sun City Girls fans passed along cassette mixes of the group’s output in a mail exchange network that incorporated all sorts of mixed “weird music,” which by the 1980s and 1990s began to include carefully selected examples of world music. A listener connected to this underground “cassette culture” might receive a tape



**Figure 3** Sun City Girls.  
© 2003 (Toby Dodds)

from a fellow trader compiling North American experimental groups juxtaposed with tracks of Tuvan throat singing, Bollywood film music, or Inuit versions of Rolling Stones hits. This informal distribution mixed old and new content — from lo-fi tapes by an up-and-coming Noise band to out-of-print LPs of Filipino *kulin-tang* percussion borrowed from a local library — anything, as long as it was surprising and unknown. By the time Sun City Girls disbanded in 2007 (after Gocher's death), North American fans of independent music had developed a new interest in strange sounds from the global margins.

Not the least legacy of this circulation is Sublime Frequencies, whose approach to world music strongly echoes the analog values of the 1980s underground. Like most punk and experimental recordings of this era, its releases are distributed in limited quantities (often one thousand copies) on CD, and the most in-demand recordings are also pressed in an especially limited run of LPs. The physical media become collectible almost immediately, especially the vinyl records, which have become concentrated objects of cultural capital for underground music fans. But LPs and CDs are rapidly transferred into digital file formats, and the content is usually redistributed online through a variety of free file-sharing programs and MP3 blogs within a few days of each release. As its base of underground

barter networks extends into a new context of circulation, Sublime Frequencies scales the boundless digital distribution of the Internet back down to the social models inspired by the label's punk roots, which insist on a "DIY [do-it-yourself] approach to everything" (Stosuy 2005). This meant subverting official histories of popular music with unfamiliar material that cannot be slotted into older categories, so that the sounds of "world music" can be heard as "experimental."

Both Sun City Girls and the Sublime Frequencies label became invested in the radical transformation of mass media through their discovery of the "psychedelic" difference and "raw punk spirit" in world music. Some have argued that Sublime Frequencies' ambivalence about cultural documentation is an effect of its founders' own ethnic positions. The Bishop brothers are both Lebanese Americans; Hisham Mayet was born in Tripoli, and Alan Bishop is married to a Burmese woman who helped gather a three-volume collection of folk and pop music from Myanmar. But the label owners reject celebratory multiculturalism and do not represent their catalog as a project of global hybridity. On the contrary, the mix here is a blind encounter with pure mystery, a punk transcendence of negotiable meaning, "an encyclopedia without an index," and a "strange mystical surround-sound that is very open to atmospheric interpretation" (Bugbee 1999). In the context of world music, where, as Michael C. Vazquez (2007) points out, "most 'songcatchers' today go to great lengths to demonstrate that they, in [Mickey] Hart's words, 'understand that music belongs to the people who make it,' the Sublime Frequencies crew are equally interested in the idea that music belongs to the people who hear it."

But to experience this self-conscious audition, one must abandon objectivity and listen beyond cultural context. When standard modes of representation become suspect, listeners tune in to culture as a realm of experimental possibility, where "the test of a work's resonance is precisely its irreducibility, its resistance to interpretation" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: 240).<sup>11</sup> Experimental listeners refuse translation, in order to embrace the strangeness of their unprecedented encounters with a raw and unfiltered musical difference. This perspective has a particularly powerful effect on the recognition of cultural ownership. Any attempts to clarify the mystery of the sounds with further information—

11. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995: 240) goes on to identify a process of "unlearning" at the heart of these "confusing pleasures," through which "aficionados of avant-garde and experimental performance can sit and watch something they don't 'understand' because of what they have unlearned—namely, the expectations, attitudes, values, and sensibility associated with establishment art forms."

the pretense of cultural knowledge condensed into liner notes, recordists' interpretations, biographies, and record company blurbs — would only get in the way of an authentically remediated experience. To receive the true message, listeners must unlearn official modes of explanation. And as the real experience of musical media is ripped from its false industrial curation, it is only well and good if peripheral information ends up being left by the side of the road.<sup>12</sup>

The ethical challenge of “new old” world music is thus to recognize the transformational distortions of another musical world without adhering to institutional logics that remake culture as property. For Alan Bishop, listening means experiencing unknown sounds without “giving in to respect.” “Tradition,” Bishop says, “is not about slavish imitation. The last thing I want to see is a bunch of fucking white guys playing Javanese gamelan proper. It’s disrespectful . . . they are not evolving the situation. They are not rolling the dice” (Davis 2004a). Against this failed attempt to reproduce musical tradition, Bishop considers Sublime Frequencies as a kind of avant-garde channel surfing, a creative act of tuning into the “fourth world” that bears out his claim that “the radio is the most underappreciated electronic instrument ever created” (Wolk 2005). He cites the extreme difficulty of documenting his sources and is frustrated by accusations regarding compensation. Bishop argues that independent labels rarely make money in an era of online file sharing and that the uncommercial nature of the material ensures that making a profit is impossible. “When it starts selling like fucking Outkast,” he claims, “I’ll fly to Medan and start handing out Benjamins [US\$100 bills] to anyone who looks like these guys” (Davis 2004a).

Those sympathetic to the label usually defend as part of a progressive modern cosmopolitanism the value of this “lost-in-translation” encounter with the extremes of cultural difference. One writer argues that while Sublime Frequencies’ confrontational approach can be “coarse, even prurient . . . theirs is an ethnographic surrealism that stalks the marvelous” (Davis 2004a). Others value the label as an intervention that disrupts commercial world music productions and deflates ethnomusicology’s aura of “superiority, exclusivity, expertise and analytical spin” (Wolk 2005). An early review on the website of the San Francisco experimental record store Aquarius Records fluently sums up this perspective:

12. Ironically, Alan Bishop (2008) complained to me that writers who accuse Sublime Frequencies releases of lacking liner notes have often downloaded ripped MP3s rather than purchase the physical CDs or LPs that include track descriptions.

while much of the post-Explorer purveyors of “world music” shamelessly produce an endless slough of slick garbage that sounds like the crap you can hear on any U.S. top 40 radio station merely sung in another language, the recordings you’ll hear presented by Sublime Frequencies come from the cracks in the pavement of the culture makers. . . . Balls to fidelity, none of the artists here would be allowed within 10 miles of a Putamayo A&R [Artist and Repertoire] executive, this is the punk rock of field recordings!<sup>13</sup>

But in a later take, the same reviewer admits to a creeping ambivalence, writing that “it seems somehow disingenuous to travel to another country, turn on the radio, record several hours worth of music and sound, come home, put those recordings on a CD and then sell them.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite his rhetorical stance, Alan Bishop says that Sublime Frequencies does compensate artists in many cases. When I presented an early version of this article in Seattle at the Experience Music Project Conference in April 2008, Sublime Frequencies filmmaker Mayet was in attendance. Over the course of a conversation following the talk and a phone interview a few weeks later, Bishop (2008) told me that, although Sublime Frequencies operates “outside the money-making machine,” he had in fact made attempts to compensate authors when possible. For some later releases, Sublime Frequencies reached agreements directly with artists, in contracts that conform to common standards for the release of original music.<sup>15</sup> But when Bishop could not easily locate or identify musicians — as in the mixes constructed from radio broadcasts — he decided it was fair game.

There are many reasons to dismiss Sublime Frequencies as a punk-rock reiteration of orientalist procedures of appropriation and exploitation. Bishop’s invocation of the *mondo bizarro* of cultural difference is blithely provocative. His anachronistic critique of academic ethnography reduces its complex history to a straw-man caricature of cultural imperialism. And in light of a rapidly changing

13. [www.aquariusrecords.org](http://www.aquariusrecords.org) (accessed January 31, 2008).

14. [www.aquariusrecords.org](http://www.aquariusrecords.org) (accessed January 31, 2008). Many underground writers are dismissive of the orientalist critique of Sublime Frequencies. In his eulogy for the Sun City Girls, the critic and underground music archivist Byron Coley (2007: 5) describes “sniping in some quarters regarding the band’s purported heisting of ethnic musical traditions,” but says that “we had a good laugh about the idea of them as cultural imperialists.”

15. Bishop claims to be endorsed by local broadcast institutions, and he has visited Radio Republic Indonesia with copies of his Indonesian radio compilations for special programs. He told me that no one at the national radio station mentioned issues of compensation: “They just want the music to be promoted — they see it that way, and I see it that way” (Bishop 2008).

discourse about cultural rights, his indifference to issues of ownership and compensation may seem disingenuously naive. But in several important ways, Sublime Frequencies' approach is rooted in an emergent public ethics of new media.<sup>16</sup> Bishop argues for an approach to media circulation that is already in place in informal economies worldwide: one that recognizes that media are limited by their own structures of reproduction, that appropriation is multidirectional, and that any attempt to regulate access is an attempt to control public consciousness. In the remainder of this article, I examine the following questions: What do redistributions of world music tell us about changing frameworks of intellectual property? How have informal economies of redistribution, especially online circulations, influenced contemporary representations of local music cultures? And what is the relationship between the aesthetics of distortion formed by this Northern listenership and the conditions of technological reproduction in the global South?

### **World Music Wants to Be Free**

As legal interpretations of intellectual property have tightened in the past decade, listeners broadly refuse to accept the terms of copyright law, which expand the power of media industries to control artistic content and limit creativity, even as they fail to fairly compensate original authors. And on a global scale, consumers do not attribute authorship to recorded media in the ways demanded by institutional logics of ownership. Increasingly, a shared commons of information is viewed as a global democratic ideal of open source culture, and any attempt to regulate its flow is characterized as the corporate censorship of instrumental capitalism. In the United States, this argument has been associated with a cluster of overlapping policy groups: the "free culture" movement of Lawrence Lessig's Creative Commons project, the legal advocacy of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and communities of free software developers such as the Free Software foundation, all of which gather under the oft-cited slogan "Information wants to be free" (attributed initially to Stewart Brand and repoliticized by the "copyleft" free software pioneer Richard Stallman) (Lessig 2004, 2008).<sup>17</sup>

16. My approach to media ethics in this article is descriptive of the social contexts within which moral positions about media are developed. I consider the ways that standards of right and wrong are applied to remediations and redistributions of music recordings rather than evaluating possible good or bad outcomes of ethical behavior or prescribing normative solutions for the moral problems of appropriation and open access in relation to authorial rights.

17. See [www.eff.org](http://www.eff.org), [www.fsf.org](http://www.fsf.org), [www.free-culture.cc](http://www.free-culture.cc), and [creativecommons.org](http://creativecommons.org) for more on copyleft licensing as a less-restrictive alternative to existing copyright law.

This notion of informational freedom could only emerge in a US-based social context that has historically foregrounded the legal rights of independent liberal subjects (Coleman and Golub 2008). Freedom to access information is first presented as an individual right and then extended into an ideological mandate for an open society. But this notion of individual freedom was redoubled by the alternative consumption imagined by populist countercultures, for whom freeing music from commodity systems of distribution required that they must also be free of monetary value (“Free, as in beer,” to paraphrase Stallman, as well as “free, as in speech”). Alternative media imposed the goals of an earlier project of independence, which demanded new and participatory modes of distribution that would liberate popular culture from commodity markets. Contemporary open source movements have brought these long-standing countercultural binaries—of utopian alternative systems opposed to the corporate regulation of culture—into the sphere of digital circulations and productions of “new media.”

The current resistance to musical copyright fuses the oppositional politics of popular music with ethical codes that have filtered up from 1980s cyberpunks and hackers, who developed the multiple-access user systems and Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) that informed the later structure of the Internet. The hacker ethic challenged the use of technology to form elites: hackers demanded that information technologies be decentralized, proposing that all “users had a basic right to free access to all information” (Ross 1991: 116). In the 1990s, the nascent politics of online society drew heavily on the romantic libertarianism of North American countercultures, combining values of underground popular culture with new systems for disseminating information. But as the Internet became realized on a mass scale in the 2000s, online publics began to project the underground populism of open source culture against the backdrop of a mass-mediated consumption that could “rip” music away from its corporate curation. In other words, they developed an ethical position that demanded that consumers free musical culture from its industrial context by forming an independent network of individual redistributors.

The populist demand for free media joined voices with policy groups outraged by legal reinterpretations of intellectual property law that favored corporate industry. Several high-profile legislative battles (most notoriously the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, which were both signed into law in 1998 and enabled the technology of Digital Rights Management) fueled a groundswell of antagonism toward “permission culture.” Among online freedom advocates, ownership of content was characterized as a



top-down control system that disregards artistic compensation and locks culture away from disenfranchised citizens. As a result, industrial media distribution was associated with state projects of exploitation and censorship, as opposed to practices of creative sharing and free information exchange that take place on the level of the individual subject.<sup>18</sup>

Music has become the terrain on which this battle has been fought in the starkest terms. Widespread use of digital file-sharing services, and the legal repercussions that followed, has inspired far-reaching projections of global musical communities as well as paranoid visions of social control. Against desperate, late corporate attempts to control online media circulation and stem the flow of piracy, music redistributors validate their project through the demands of a changing public sphere. We, they claim, can get the job of media circulation done better, faster, and more democratically than either industry or academe. Because of their historical relationship to DIY projects of independent music, then, redistributors like Sublime Frequencies are easily mapped onto new media discourses about participatory ethics of open access, despite having formed in old media networks of analog cassette and LP. Music redistributors, like hackers, view their activity as a corrective to the failures of industry. If creative expression is bound by untenable copyright protection laws or falsified cultural revivals, they claim people will naturally bypass these controls to appropriate content for liberatory purposes.

But the legacy of independent music also helps listeners to envision a decentralized and egalitarian public for world music. If listeners develop the ability to tune in to the experimentalism of marginal cultural forms, the argument goes, then world music could escape industrial mediation in ways that aid its producers as well as distant consumers.<sup>19</sup> For instance, although the music on the *Cambodian Rocks* compilation has long been important in Cambodia, its overseas success affects the local population in several ways. American reissues of classic Khmer pop music by artists such as Sinn Sisamouth and Ros Sereysothea are embraced,

18. Coleman (2010) points out that the common binaries of “open and closed” and “proprietary and free” foreclose other possibilities in the complex field of digital circulations, which is reduced to a clash between capitalist proprietorship and liberal access.

19. The recent experimental turn in world music extends earlier projects of musical recovery. In the late 1990s, Brazilian rock “nuggets”—first recirculated on bootlegs, then on the small indie label Omplatten, and eventually on David Byrne’s “major indie” label, Luaka Bop—sparked a cult fandom of the late 1960s *tropicália* movement led by artists such as Caetano Veloso, Tom Zé, and Os Mutantes. *Tropicália* offered a potential nexus of global affinities that had previously been unlinked in existing histories of rock music, as “cannibalistic hipsters” excavated global undergrounds in hopes of finding common aesthetic ground (Harvey 2001: 117).



**Figure 4** Dengue Fever  
(Courtesy of Dengue  
Fever)

both as a homage to the cosmopolitan public lost during the destructive regime of Pol Pot and as a boon to tourism that has brought much-needed economic stimulus to the region (Mamula 2008). The recirculation of this material has inspired new connections with the diaspora as well, most significantly by the Los Angeles–based group Dengue Fever, which performs classic 1960s Cambodian garage rock mixed with some original songs.<sup>20</sup> Founding member Ethan Holtzman was inspired by *Cambodian Rocks* to travel to Cambodia as a tourist. On his return, he organized a band to perform Khmer rock music, eventually convincing recent emigrant Chhom Nimol to join the group. Although Nimol was initially reluctant to sing such dated material, the group found great success in North America with indie rock audiences and Cambodians alike, and Dengue Fever went on to perform in Cambodia in 2005 (the tour is documented in the 2007 film *Sleepwalking through the Mekong* [dir. John Pirozzi, Film 101 Productions]).<sup>21</sup>

20. Dengue Fever is also praised for creating a new kind of underground world music fan. As the bassist Senon Williams puts it, “The underground people are getting hip to world music, and the world music side is getting hip to how you don’t have to have a dreadlock wig and Guatemalan pants to be cool” (Smith 2008).

21. Several recent US–released films focus on the cultural history of Cambodian rock music. *The Golden Voice* (dir. Greg Cahill, Rising Falcon Cinema, 2006) is a short biopic on Ros Sereysothea, and a documentary on 1960s Cambodian garage rock, *Don’t Think I’ve Forgotten* (dir. John Pirozzi, unfinished), was recently shot in Cambodia and is now in the final stages of production (the tagline

Proponents of an open access network of media redistribution argue that music would be kept from its present and future publics—and that these publics could not even begin to be formed—if circulation were forced to comply with purified perspectives of intellectual property. Mack Hagood (2004), on his blog *The Far Eastern Audio Review*, chastised the Parallel World label for neglecting proper credits even in its second reissue of *Cambodian Rocks*—by which time the artists and tracks had been properly identified by listeners—but admitted that the compilation “is a perfect example of something great that couldn’t have existed if our Draconian copyright laws had been followed.” Most redistributors describe themselves as selfless amateurs dedicated to providing access to uncommercial music without achieving personal gain (the logo of Mississippi Records reads “Always—Love over Gold”). This is small-scale material, they say, that could never enter circulation without breaking the rules; to become known, it requires the determined work of an underresourced independent agent. “If I didn’t release this music,” Alan Bishop (2008) told me, “people would never get to hear it.”

This approach invokes a reverse architecture of online documentation. Redistributors leave it to the network to fill in the blanks, retroactively assembling a body of knowledge that trails after the recording after it has already been released. Information constantly develops around content through its public redistribution. Authentication follows access: first make the material available and then wait for its history to accumulate in circulation through a cloud of references, links, and associations. A blog post, for example, usually develops through constant updating and expansion of posted materials. It is not uncommon for bloggers to post a downloadable file of an undocumented LP recording alongside an image of its worn sleeve and ask, “What’s the name of this album? Does anyone know anything about this?” Commentators sometimes follow up by providing background on the content or links to other online resources. For instance, although the physical CD release of *Cambodian Rocks* neglected liner notes and song and artist data, many bloggers have discovered and posted the track information, often with brief explanations of the historical context and biographies of the musicians. So although the Parallel World label never redressed the initial lack of documenta-

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on the website states: “It was hypnotic / It was psychedelic / It was unforgettable”) ([www.cambodianrock.com](http://www.cambodianrock.com), accessed August 4, 2010). Other films use Cambodian rock prominently in their soundtracks, notably *City of Ghosts* (Mainline Productions), a 2002 independent feature shot in Cambodia by the writer, director, and star Matt Dillon.

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## Awesome Tapes from Africa

**About Me**

**Name:** brian shimkovitz  
**Location:** Brooklyn, NY, United States

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This is music you won't easily find anywhere else—except, perhaps in its region of origin. But if you are an artist/etc and wish for me to remove your music, click above and email me. For the record: it hasn't happened once so far. Just saying.

**Magnets**

- [Aduna](#)
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- [The Fader](#)
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**Tuesday, November 02, 2010**



**Wow, someone please tell me about this tape**

**Side A**

- [Track 1](#)
- [Track 2](#)
- [Track 3](#)
- [Track 4](#)
- [Track 5](#)

**Side B**

- [Track 6](#)
- [Track 7](#)
- [Track 8](#)
- [Track 9](#)

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- [The Fader](#)
- [The HipLife Complex](#)
- [20JazzFunkGreats](#)

**Tuesday, November 02, 2010**



**Wow, someone please tell me about this tape Alem Kebede**

**Side A**

- [Aceremamesew \(He Created Turmoil\)](#)
- [Yefeker Amalu \(The Behaviour of Love\)](#)
- [Zemere](#)
- [Ten Lebe Tesabeb \(Concentrate My Heart\)](#)
- [Godanaw \(Highway\)](#)

**Side B**

- [Belina Selaw \(Advance, Advance\)](#)
- [Gelesanete \(My Frankness\)](#)
- [Endekentay yetem \(Time Brought You Down\)](#)
- [Zemeyeye \(My Relative\)](#)
- [Musheraye \(My Groom\)](#)

Figure 5 Awesome Tapes from Africa (a) original and (b) revised blog posts from November 2, 2010

tion, the album is now redistributed online with the corrected track information provided by knowledgeable fans.<sup>22</sup>

Cultural preservation, in the logic of open source culture, demands that content be collectively backed up through a continuous process of redistribution. In order to keep an original, as many copies as possible must be circulated to the widest possible spectrum of recipients. Existing archives, however, are criticized for the narrowness of their scope, as well as for their unethical de facto ownership of usurped materials.<sup>23</sup> Institutional policies make important collections inaccessible to public circulation, and libraries fail their stated mission by allowing materials to disappear through negligence or deaccession. This loss is most egregious for underpreserved artifacts of popular culture. Mark Gergis, for example, spent six years copying materials from the Oakland Public library to collect the tracks for the Sublime Frequencies release *Cambodian Cassette Archives: Khmer Folk and Pop, Volume 1*. Gergis claims to have saved the archive from its ongoing demise at the hands of its would-be preservers, the library employees who unwittingly erased the cassettes by passing them through the magnetic security system. “Even with the best intentions of the public library as a repository for culture,” as one reviewer put it, “Cambodian music was being erased, one cassette at a time.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Piracy, Independence, and Control**

The redistribution of new old media I have described here draws from technologies that have been transformed in the digital era. But it nostalgically extends the independence of analog media networks, like the 1980s cassette culture, which represented participatory musical exchange at an earlier technological stage. Brian Larkin proposes that analog infrastructures of piracy corrupt the official logics of media distribution by exploiting the discontinuities and breakdowns of technologi-

22. See, for example, the detailed commentary on the post of *Cambodian Rocks* MP3s on the blog of the freeform radio station WFMU, December 9, 2007, [blog.wfmu.org/freeform/2007/12/cambodian-rocks.html](http://blog.wfmu.org/freeform/2007/12/cambodian-rocks.html) (accessed May 7, 2008). Commenters added significant discographic information as well as some cultural and biographical background on the recordings. Critiques of redistribution practices are also strongly evidenced in online forums and blog commentaries, with redistributors posting in their own self-defense. For a complex and productive example, see the extensive commentary that followed Chief Boima’s post “The Scramble for Vinyl” on the blog *Africa Is a Country*, [africasacountry.com/2010/09/14/collection-cultures](http://africasacountry.com/2010/09/14/collection-cultures) (accessed October 6, 2010).

23. Ross Simonini, for example, credits Frank “Conakry” Gossner (a.k.a. DJ Soulpusher) with making the musical findings of his “crate-digging” expeditions to West Africa available to online publics on his *Voodoo Funk* blog. Under “academic circumstances,” Simonini (2008) writes, “you could picture Conakry’s findings remaining deep in the stacks at a university library.”

24. [www.aquariusrecords.com](http://www.aquariusrecords.com) (accessed January 5, 2009).

ical systems. This corruption is especially apparent in informal economies, which are necessarily “underground” and detached from centers of media production and legal frameworks of cultural ownership. In contexts like the Nigerian bootleg video market, the cultural effects of piracy are woven into a circulation “marked by poor transmission, interference, and noise” (Larkin 2004: 291). Distortion, miscommunication, loss of information—the by-products and accidental effects of analog media exchange have themselves become aesthetic icons of fair use and open access.<sup>25</sup> My point here is that projects of redistribution like *Sublime Frequencies* are rooted not just in ideologies of access and control but also in the technological limitations of media. As a result, overlapping categories of piracy, appropriation, sharing, and bootlegging have become crucial to the participatory ethics of World Music 2.0.

The criminality of piracy proposed by copyright law is not just defused or ignored, it is reversed. Redistributors insist that freedom of access always trumps the controls of ownership; in fact, it would be criminal to allow these recordings to remain uncirculated. Further, they argue that existing industrial setups for authorial compensation are practically dysfunctional anyway, especially in the informal economies of regional music scenes. For example, Jack Carneal, who releases Malian popular music on his *Yaala Yaala* label, claims to have made efforts to set up contractual terms for a release by the *ngoni* lute player Yoro Sidibe, only to discover that a corrupt producer had stolen the advance money (Goldberg 2008). Subsistence-level distributions are the only sensible channels for compensation, Carneal argues, especially in the face of piracy and online circulation. Recordings essentially serve as calling cards for musicians to drum up an audience for their live performances.<sup>26</sup> Carneal has since set up a fund called the *Yaala Yaala Rural Musicians Collective* that would distribute any profits from his releases, but he makes it clear that his small-scale productions are designed to cover costs only. As the music recording collapses as an exchangeable commodity, “people around the world have recognized that the old paradigm of ensuring that people hear your music is broken. . . . Bootlegging and other sub-industry means of distributing music will eradicate any semblance of the industry as we know it before too

25. For an in-depth discussion of the technological context of “fair use” legislation and its influence on the aesthetics of bootleg video circulation, see Hilderbrand 2009.

26. *Sublime Frequencies*, for example, arranged European and North American tours for Syrian singer Souleyman and the Moroccan guitar ensemble Group Doueh in 2009 and 2010. “The only reason we’re doing it,” Alan Bishop told *Wire* reporter Clive Bell, “is so these guys can make some real money. That’s the inspiration here, ‘cause albums don’t cut it” (Bell 2009: 28).

long” (Carneal 2008). But since musicians in the North American underground have been giving away their recordings for decades, the shift toward open access appears in many ways to vindicate an existing project of DIY circulation.

In bringing this subsistence model into a digital network, redistributors fuse two very different contexts of access, one from the online realm of “crowd-sourced” free culture and the other from an earlier model of independent media exchange. They write their open access manifesto on a page taken from analog music scenes, which limited the scale of circulation to an alternative circle operating beyond the mainstream. Music recordings are presented in a purist, amateur realm, whose possibilities for profit are naturally restricted by the aesthetic challenges of the musical material itself. The priority is that “people hear your music,” whether in a live or mediated context. Of course, this scenario also requires world music to stay in the scene—in the frame of an independent musical world created through local infrastructures—when, in the participatory context of online exchange, it is bound to do just the opposite.

Craig Calhoun argues that the social development of the Internet tends to tamp down public scrutiny over privacy concerns (and, as I am arguing, problems of cultural ownership and compensation) until after the network is already constructed and operational. Users “think mainly in terms of new information being gathered rather than recognizing the immense quantity of information already produced as by-products of computer use. . . . The issues involve not just ‘exposure’ but control” (Calhoun 2004: 241). In the face of this uncontrollable proliferation of material, the Internet finds its balance through an endless self-correction that provokes paranoid dialectics of freedom and control.<sup>27</sup> For the publics formed in this context, anything documented by an acknowledged institutional source must necessarily be incomplete, and possibly also biased beyond authentication. This means that the thing you haven’t heard before quickly becomes the next version of the truth. Anything outside the loop becomes new archival material for the constituents of Reality 2.0, who must mash up structures of the past to match the beat of an alternative future.

New media publics are created through an endless reiteration of their own possibilities within the fluid boundaries of online networks. Christopher Kelty (2008: 7) describes how the creation and exchange of free software helped programmers conceptualize themselves as a “recursive public,” that is, a public “con-

27. See Chun 2006 on the constitutive relationship between freedom and control in Internet ideologies.

cerned with the ability to build, control, modify, and maintain the infrastructure that allows [it] to come into being in the first place.” In the context of free software development, the ability to distribute new cultural materials carries with it an ethical mandate to maximize access. But access is always invoked with a purpose; its production of knowledge is aimed toward a certain set of limits. A recursive public remediates the construction of knowledge toward its own formation. Its ability to transform culture depends on defining the center of cultural participation within its own collaborative projects.

To remain independent in a participatory online context, musical undergrounds must generate similar limits on circulation, which will allow listeners to recognize specific transformations of content. The vinyl LP, then, remains a frontline standard of independent media, and some contemporary labels release cassettes as well. Unlike a digital file, an analog music recording is inherently limited by the transience and noise that accrues in its reproduction. As they are copied and redistributed, physical media are inevitably changed by their handlers; their content bears the marks of their circulation. The underground listenership of world music is distinguished by its recognition of these obscure analog traces in a parallel world, even as they are extended into a parallel world of digital exchange.

In this context, Sublime Frequencies comes to represent an untimely logic of authority and control: we circulate it, they don’t, and if we didn’t find it and reproduce it for you, you’d never hear it. At the very moment when all music will, it seems, be available to anyone at any time—when the very idea of a unique, undiscovered sound seems impossible—Sublime Frequencies revitalizes the limitations of an analog form. Its underground listenership replaces the industrial claim to mastery with its own circuitry of access, projecting the ghostly distortions of the underground into the limitless realms of digital media.

I have argued that the cultural appropriations of labels like Sublime Frequencies are neither a mere vestige of historical orientalism nor a function of new media that somehow clashes with earlier analog circulations of musical culture. Rather, these “new old” media are formed in a feedback loop, in which the political formations of online culture are used to highlight the distortions of world music. Central to this process of remediation are aesthetics derived from analog technology. I conclude by discussing how the sound of distortion has become emblematic of cultural representation in World Music 2.0. Distortion is important because it embodies the noisy, “lossy,” discontinuous experiences of media circulation. While official distribution attempts to make reproduction disappear into the background—“bringing the music to you” in a “lossless” repetition of



the original—experimental listeners bring the noise of media circulation to the surface. World Music 2.0 aestheticizes the distortions of a conflicted musical imaginary and in so doing attempts to return to listeners through reproduction the “capacity for experience which technological production threatens to take away” (Buck-Morss 1989: 268).

### Authenticating Distortion

Distortion is a crucial proof of world music’s authenticity. Because it is formed in the context of limitations, distortion authenticates world music in two ways. First, it verifies that regional popular music is still “raw” and therefore unintegrated into the fidelities of the music industry. But second, and equally important, distortion echoes the local sonic aesthetics of the North American underground. Distorted source materials emphasize direct access to cultural sources that overload the imagination of a distant listener. For example, *Welcome to Bamako*, the 2004 release by the Malian (but Paris-dwelling) duo Amadou and Mariam, blends studio-recorded guitar and drum tracks with noisy field recordings of public gatherings, conversations, and police cars recorded by the French-Spanish producer Manu Chao in the streets of Bamako. The contrasting mix of sound sources makes it difficult to know where the original musicians stand in relation to the end result. But in many ways, this is the point; distortion mediates the gaps of intentionality and accident between Northern media consumption and Southern cultural production.

Distortion has become a sonic emblem of local creativity under conditions of limited technological access. One of the clearest examples is Konono No. 1, a Congolese *likembé* (an African instrument also known as the mbira, or “thumb piano”) group whose 2005 album *Congotronics* became a smash hit among experimental listeners worldwide. A great part of the music’s appeal to its overseas audience derives from the distorted electronic sounds of the group’s makeshift amplifiers, which transform a locally recognized music style (“Bazombo trance music”) that might otherwise have been circulated as a “classic” ethnomusicological field recording of village music. In marketing Konono No. 1 as an “electro-traditional” group, the Belgian label Crammed Discs explains that this distortion is the product of local conditions and not aesthetic intention. Because they had no access to standard sound equipment, the musicians “had to incorporate the originally-unwanted distortions of their sound system. This has made them develop a unique style which, from a sonic viewpoint, has accidentally connected



**Figure 6** Press photos of Konono No. 1  
(Courtesy of Vincent Kenis)



them with the aesthetics of the most experimental forms of rock and electronic music, as much through their sounds than through their sheer volume.”<sup>28</sup>

These “accidental connections” are the material parallel of the listening aesthetics that have allowed Konono No. 1 to slip somewhere between underground and world music. Distortion represents the real sound of regional music. But it also makes audible the technological differences that disrupt the possibility of a global media commons.<sup>29</sup> To aestheticize these ruptures is to connect with new creativities based in limitations and liminality, which stress technocultural feedback over transcultural connections. Konono No. 1 amplifies its unique sounds through failed, jerry-rigged systems that echo half-forgotten moments of earlier Western musical technology. It was no surprise, then, that the Icelandic indie star Björk asked the band to record rhythm tracks on her 2007 album *Volta*, claim-

28. Crammed Discs web page for Konono No. 1, [www.crammed.be/konono](http://www.crammed.be/konono) (accessed May 29, 2009).

29. Lo-fi recording quality has been a long-standing sonic hallmark of ethnomusicological fieldwork. This lack of attention to marketplace standards of sound production can be seen as a purifying move, which attempts to disarticulate scholarly projects of field recordings from industrial curation and the traffic of musical commodities (Feld 1994; Turino 2008).

ing that the group's wild sound was both futuristic and somehow nostalgic of 1980s drum machines.<sup>30</sup> Experimental music listeners return to their own local world of magic in the icon of analog noise, which makes world music sensible as underground media. But this also means that there can be no authentic reproduction of world music that could carry this original context forward; "the very act of recording Konono's music," as one writer puts it, "breaks it out of the mold its history has cast for it" (Hugo 2010: 40).

Debates about musical locality — which have been strongly influential in public representations of cultural authenticity — have often presumed coterminous relationships between sounds and sources, particularly those of the body and the voice. Sonic representations of social "presence" put listeners back in the space of an original musical context, projecting their dislocated audition back onto unique scenarios of immediacy, "liveness," and local authorship (Meintjes 2003; Auslander 1999). But the desire for embodied local presence is undermined by increasing access to sounds, which leads to the constitutive participation of broader listening publics. The process appears to strip musicians of their cultural voices; at worst, they are ventriloquized by foreign agents through "schizophonic" techniques of recording, distribution, sampling, and remixing (Feld 1994, 2000).

And yet the deconstruction of world music's presence has also uncovered layers of productive distortion, which challenge listeners to "own" the problems of global media circulation. Remediation, technological manipulation, distance, and the mash-ups and remixes of cosmopolitan listening are more than the effects of distant reception: they reframe the conditions of musical creativity and participation on a global scale. The historical and social differences of circulation hit home in the noisy hardcore crunch of a synthesizer in Angolan *kuduro*, the looped horns of northern Mexican *banda* resampled in electronic *Nortec*, or the endlessly repetitive drum machines of Puerto Rican *reggaeton*. In the search for gritty cultural realities that characterize World Music 2.0, distortion is a crucial part of the sound — not a bug, but a feature, of global media.

30. Konono No. 1 continues to be a primary source for World Music 2.0's diverse remediations and remixes. In 2010 Crammed Discs released *Tradi-Mods vs Rockers*, a two-CD set of "alternative takes" on Congotronics by prominent US indie bands such as Deerhoof, Animal Collective, and Oneida. The same year, the Belgian-Congolese rapper Baloji used Konono No. 1 tracks on his single from *Kinshasa Succursale*, "Karibu ya Bintou" ("Welcome to Limbo"), the video for which was filmed through hazy, polluted air on the streets of Kinshasa. Baloji went "back to the future" to improvise tracks with other Kinshasa musicians, praising the "unique patina" of their "patched-up" instruments; "even the distortions of the guitars," he claims, "were natural." "'Kinshasa Succursale': The sorcerer of words returns," listed under "Bio" on [www.baloji.com/index2.html#](http://www.baloji.com/index2.html#).

At the threshold of technological access, distortion became world music's creativity-by-accident. It allows listeners to distinguish agency somewhere between the unintended (but uniquely creative) limitations of local voices and the global transformations of sound. For the creators of lo-fi world music, distortion may have a very different provenance. Far from being a marker of local limitations, distortion can represent entry into a global sphere of modern production. Among contemporary Javanese listeners, as R. Anderson Sutton tells us, distorted timbres fluidly integrate regional aesthetics with technological power. "If a 'poorly tuned gong' serves as an effective icon for nature," he asks, "might not an electronically distorted singing voice serve as an icon for the condition of progress and modernity?" (Sutton 1996: 255). But in circulation, these distorted voices are folded into new layers of distortion, feeding back into one another.

### **A Noisy Wake-Up Call for Global Media**

In the Sublime Frequencies DVD *Jemaa El Fna: Morocco's Rendezvous of the Dead*, shot among folk performers in a Marrakesh night market, the camera lingers at a small stall that plays seven-inch 45 rpm records for spare change. The records are almost unplayable, half-destroyed by dirt, age, and abuse. For several minutes, the camera holds on a badly focused shot of various records spinning on the platter, alternating with blurry shots of the battered cardboard sleeve. At one point, the proprietor attempts to play a record that was originally recorded at a slower format. But because the tiny plastic record player cannot switch speeds, the proprietor attempts to slow down the record by hand. He presses his finger against the side of the disc and then directly on the grooves, causing the recording to fluctuate and warble on top of the already distorted sound issuing scratchily from the tinny speaker. Although we witness the image of the record spinning around the turntable next to its dusty slipcover, our focus is on the noise of the medium itself.

World Music 2.0 signals a sea change in the way we document the world of music. This is a world formed in the margins of global exchange, which takes shape in our recognition of its limits. Sublime Frequencies mediates the loss of analog underground culture for North American listeners by discovering its own nostalgic distortions elsewhere in the world. But this does not simply reduce to a polemic of gonzo ethnography against the artificiality of corporate and academic production. And although World Music 2.0 stresses the effects of disappearance and loss, this is not a Lomaxian moment of cultural preservation. If it documents a shifting world of music, it also records its mash-ups and overlaps, degraded

sources and untraceable short-circuits. This sound, to revise Feld's phrase, is less "a sweet lullaby for world music" than a noisy wake-up call for global media.

Distortion has become part of how world music should sound. It marks the limits of a free media circulation, but it also promises creative possibilities that can only unfold at its anonymous thresholds. "Sound fidelity," Jonathan Sterne (2003: 219) reminds us, is "more about faith in the social function and organization of machines than it is about the relation of a sound to its 'source.'" For experimental listeners, the presence of original sound is proven by the *infidelity* of the machine, in its partiality, imbalance, and lack of ability to faithfully represent the original. In recognizing the failure of recordings to transmit the sources of musical culture, they tune in to distortion as a new cultural form.

To appreciate distortion, of course, means recognizing that there may be, somewhere, something different from what we hear. Distortion evokes the transformations of sound in circulation. It conjures the survival of an undistorted expression separate from the technological context of mediation. But we can't begin to imagine that magical unreproducible original until we have learned to recognize the differences of distortion—to perceive its qualities and thereby remediate its effects. If we listen to a distorted sound, a world of music may lie beneath. The way in, though, is a mystery, and all we have to guide us is the noise.

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