

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FX 6129

CABLE CAR

SOUNDSCAPES

JED SPEARE, Director / Composer / Recordist PETER MXCANDLESS, Producer SHOSHANA WECHSLER, Writer / Interviewer CHRIS JEFFERIES, Audio Consultant



COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

SIDE 1

1. Inside The Cable Car Barn 5:41
2. Riding The Tracks 11:20
3. Bellringing 6:22

SIDE 2

1. Voices 14:35
2. Mettle of Metal 11:31

The cable car, as we've known it, is nearly extinct.

San Francisco's fabled mechanical icon, which remains resolutely charming, balky and unreconstructed after a century and a decade's span, has almost disappeared several times, threatening to take with it vivid traces of a recent and poorly remembered past. The cable car still lumbers on as a throwback. This gentle anachronism buffaloes through over-trafficked city streets, spilling its dangling human contents over rickety platform edges; it is a dense acoustic thunderhead of rumbling importance, a moving symphony composed with the harmonics of an earlier industrial era. It makes a happy and optimistic racket, a cheerful sound of human progress as it crawls patiently up the steep San Francisco hills.

The cable car is a sonic artifact, a living sound relic. The urban soundscape in which it operates is filled with the noise of super-sonic jets, ghetto blasters and video games: a high frequency/high stress environment propped up by the ubiquitous bass undercurrent of the internal combustion engine, the primary sound of modern civilization. Enter the cable car, playfully scattering a cluster of perfect bell tones through the frantic downtown streets. It is an object of delight.

CABLE CAR SOUNDSCAPES reveals the "Cable Car experience" primarily as a sonic one. At the Cable Car Barn, the hub of all arrivals and departures for cable cars and operators, the thundering steady-state rumble suggests that the whole cable car system is a lingering and present nightmare from the industrial revolution. The bellringing, the mechanical groan of the grip and brakes, wheels clattering on tracks and cables winding on pulleys form a four-part harmony and figure/ground relationship which together compose the fundamental soundscape of a cable car ride. These acoustic dimensions have taken on over the years the nostalgia and affection that, say, those living by the sea feel for the sound patterns and community signals of an active harbor.

The recordings were made over a four-month period beginning in May and concluding in August, 1982. The September 22nd system shutdown was imminent, and the operators were signing up to transfer to another MUNI division (buses and streetcars) for the two-year reconstruction period. In this sense, CABLE CAR SOUNDSCAPES documents the objective/subjective aspects of a system reaching "the end of an era." In the midst of this sadness, there is a tempered optimism linking the past with an uncertain future. The sounds of a cable car are awesome, even mythical, and without a myth a city dies. The sounds on this album memorialize the present; they also preserve the future.

Jed Speare—Director/Composer/Recordist
 Peter Mxcandless—Producer
 Shoshana Wechsler—Writer/Interviewer
 Chris Jefferies—Audio Consultant

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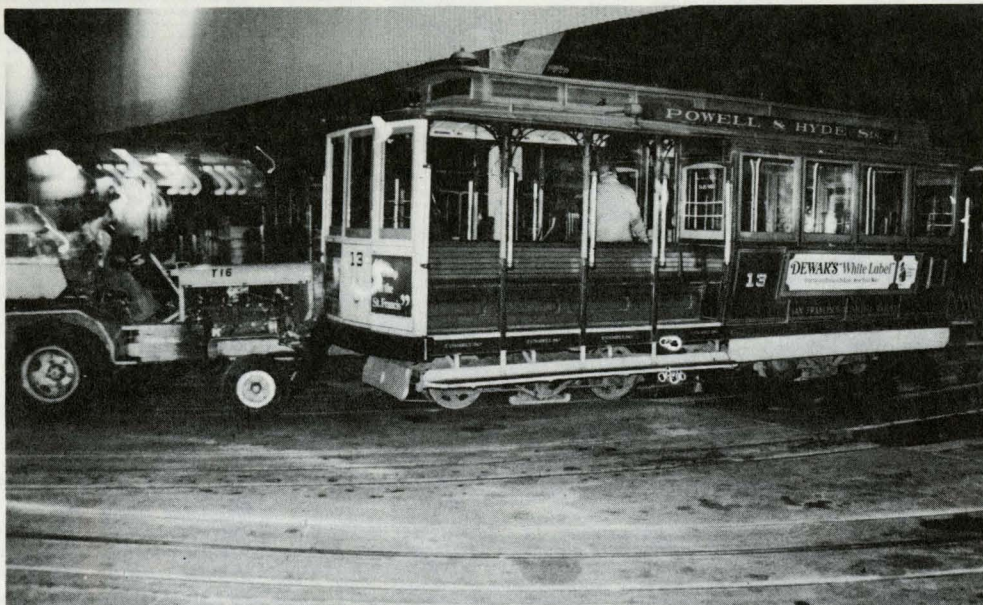
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SOUNDSCAPES

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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Magnetic reading of the cable. The broken area in the graph represents the cable splice from cable end to cable end. Total length of splice 70 ft.

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The cable car is the only National Historic Landmark in existence that moves (at a rapid rate of 9.5 miles per hour). However, its preservation depends upon technological upgrading. It will survive, but in a modernized and less authentic form which its enthusiasts (many of them conductors and gripmen) accept with the greatest reluctance.

During the one hundred and nine year interim between August 1st, 1873, when engineer Alexander Hallidie successfully launched his invention down the roller coaster incline of the Clay Street hill, and September 22nd, 1982, when the entire system shut down for a massive two year overhaul, the operating methods have remained remarkably unchanged. In 1982, cable cars run "halfway to the stars" exactly as they did in 1873. The cars carry both front and rear brakes and a lever, or grip, which actually moves it forward on the tracks. The grip drops through a slot between the rails, reaches down under the street and grabs hold of the cable; there are ten miles of steadily moving steel cables buried below the asphalt. Enormous pulleys housed inside the Barn keep the cables winding in and out. These subterranean ropes hold the cars within the firm clutches of gravity. The threat of mechanical failure is still always present. The men who work the cars know their brains and muscles are matched in a constant struggle with brute machinery.

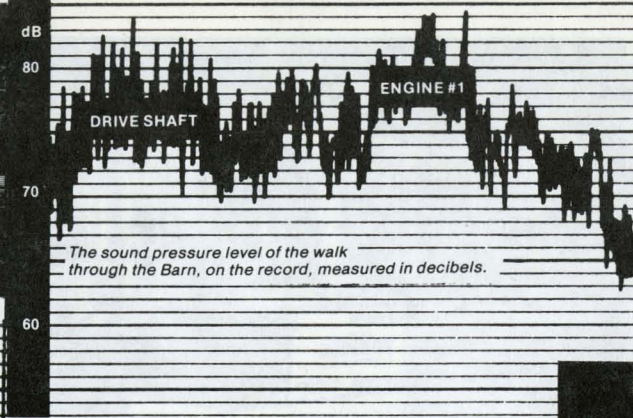
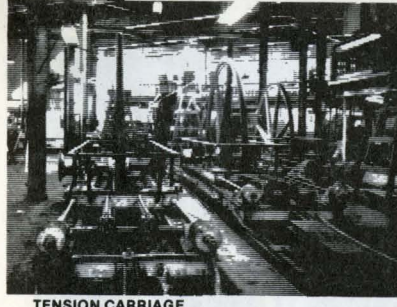
The San Francisco cable car system is the last remaining one in the world today. The sound environment it creates is an important historical artifact in its own right, a result of the unique interplay between engineering design, materials, local geography and community requirements, and the people who repair, operate and ride the cars. A change in any one technical variable, such as the installation of disc brakes instead of the traditional wheel brakes, the addition of new switches and beams or the use of four separate cables instead of the one cable currently in use, would significantly alter the acoustic track presented here.

Documentation of these sounds was inspired by an interest in soundscape research. **INSIDE THE CABLE CAR BARN (Side A, 1)** is a sudden descent into a mechanical inferno—the massive churning of metal parts, whirring generators and the furious passage of floating cable over vibrating guide-wheels. During our first visit to this awesome place, supervisor Brian Jennings gave us permission to record and photograph. Then he returned to his office overlooking the running cable to resume a guitar duo with Peter Conidi, a splicer—an amazing display of grace under fire. **RIDING THE TRACKS (Side A, 2)** is the sound of a cable car ride. The back cover graph shows that the loudness and dynamic curve probably haven't changed since its inception. There is no other acoustic experience as varied and with as wide a curve, except perhaps a piece of orchestral music. **BELLRINGING (Side A, 3)** is introduced with remarks by Arnie Faerber and 1982 Bellringing Champion Albert Quintana, and features solos by gripmen Faerber, Quintana (both recorded live on the line), Luigi Collins and Mike McClure. Dave Brubeck once remarked that he always came back to San Francisco to compose music because the sound of the cable car bells never failed to inspire him. This sampling of the bellringers' art should show us why.

The looming otherworldly textures of **METTLE OF METAL (Side B, 2)** are a rearrangement of pure cable car sounds. The compositional approach belongs to Musique Concrete—raw sounds were edited in order to make more audible what is organically present. What emerged is a fantastic and almost hallucinatory landscape, the secret life of machines, all the more amazing because it is not the synthetic petri dish creation of a sound lab. Great are the musical possibilities contained within the acoustic dimensions of our daily environment. Says soundscape theorist R. Murray Schafer, "Behold the new orchestra: the sonic universe!" How unfortunate that our usual awareness of the sound around us is a sense of being under attack; hence the mass retreat behind headphones and muzak. Cable cars contribute far more to the city of San Francisco than tourist dollars and quick public transport to Fisherman's Wharf. The cable cars offer a sacred noise to the urban sound environment. They voice a *clamorous* urge, first expressed in chanting and rattling (the human need to get boisterous, to call down the attention of the Divine), and later by the public ringing of bells.

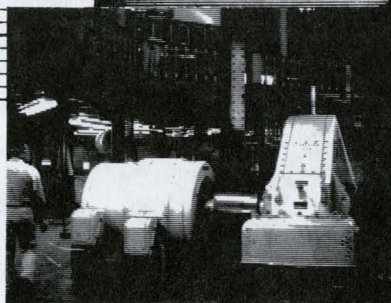
The distinctive sound of the cable car bell conjures up a wealth of shared images. Bells are attached to wandering animals, or to the lead animals in a herd; village church bells assemble the community or warn of danger. Ship's bells ring sailors home through the fog. The nautical analogy is a fitting one: the rhythmic pounding lull of a cable car moving full speed down the rails, the heavy swaying, the full heady effect of wind and fog in one's face. Curiously, a good number of cable car operators and splicers have spent time at sea before they enlisted for duty with the S.F. Municipal Railway.

Disregarding the romantic atmospheric of the cold and damp, the vibratory effects of high-intensity, low frequency noise (which a cable car generously cranks out) literally has the power to "touch" listeners. Tactile vibrations are measured at a frequency of 20 HZ, which is at the bottom end of the lower frequencies of audible sound. Below 20 HZ, our sense of hearing merges with that of touch. For both passengers and operators, a ride on the cars is an intensely physical, and pleasurable experience.



Witness Andy, a 15 year old self-professed cable car groupie. He's been riding the cars casually since he was a little kid, and for the last 1½ years he's been crewing five days a week, eight hours a day, just like a regular worker, soaking up everything he can. "I feel everything on these cars: happy, impulsive, everything. Six women I kissed off of impulse tonight. Six women! Just for no reason." Andy says his cable car buddies are helping him learn how to operate, do small repairs and deal with most emergency situations. "Mechanical failures, it happens. It's real life out here, it's human. There's nothing else like this anywhere." He claims he's the only civilian or 'cable car nut' who's ever been able to grip a car for a full trip, which according to those who should know these things, is not an easy job. Mascots and apprentice gripmen are decidedly against company regulations, but the men who run the cable cars are an independent and resourceful lot, the kind who don't seem adverse to bending the rules a bit.

Last Halloween he wore a cable car man's full dress uniform lent to him by a conductor he used to ride around with. His grandfather was a conductor on the old California Cable Company's Hyde St. line. When Andy turns eighteen, he says he's going to apply for a job with Muni. As it's an obligatory couple of years on the buses before he can take the qualifying tests for training on the cable cars, he hopes they're still going to be around by the time he's ready. The two year shutdown's got him worried, too.



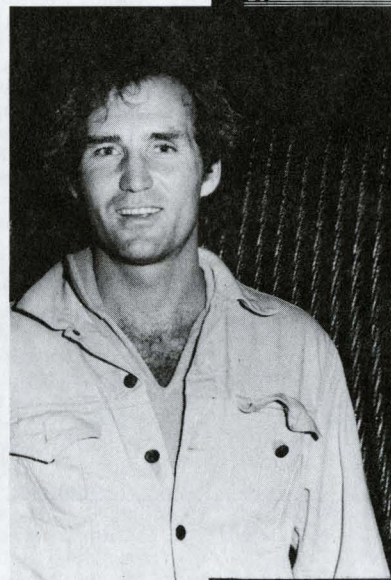
#1 ENGINE 750 HP AND REDUCTION GEAR



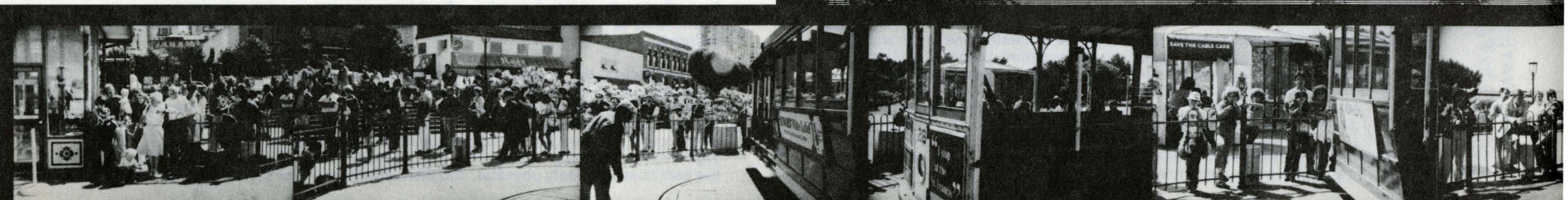
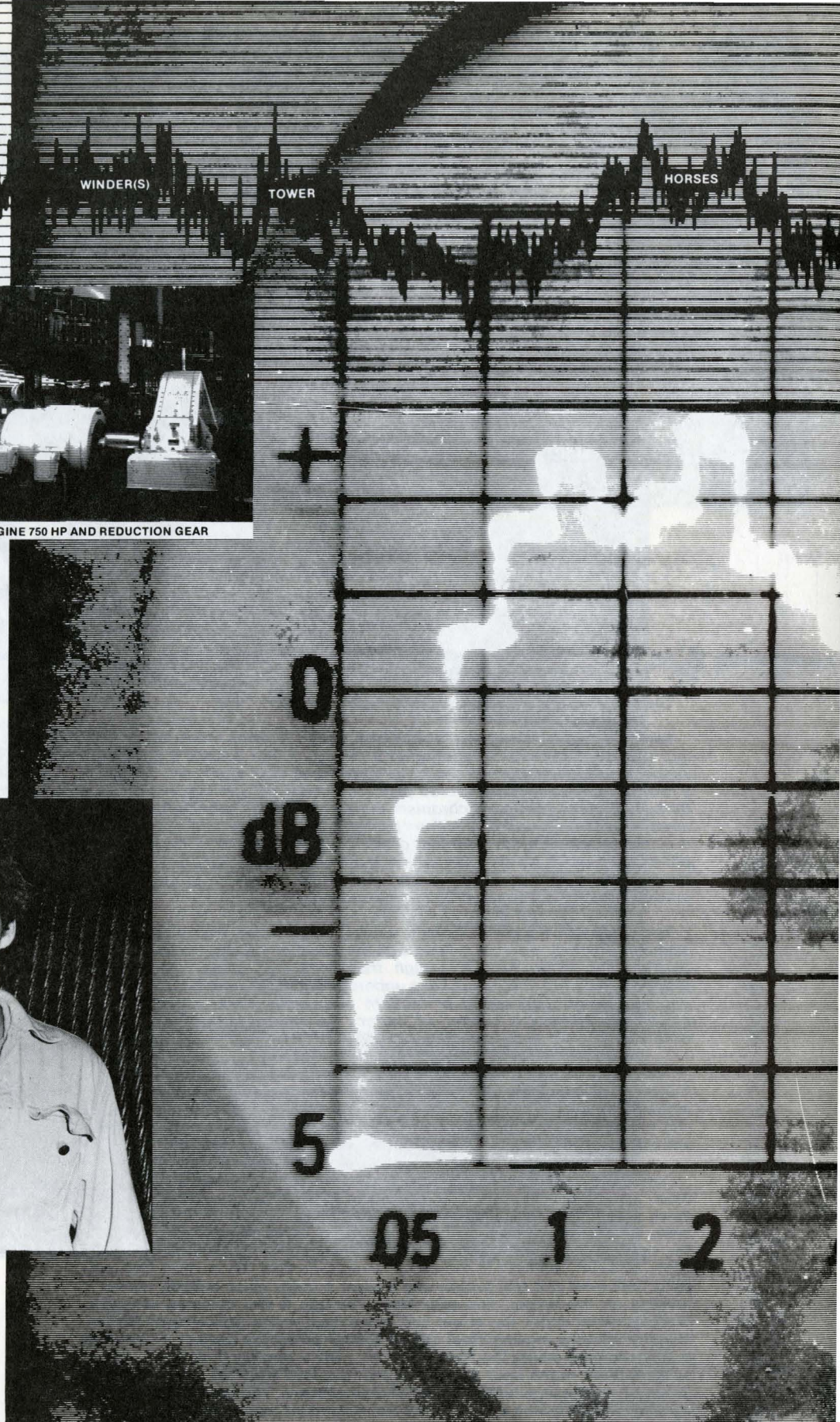
Arnie Faerber, grip (l), and Mike Shapiro, conductor (r)

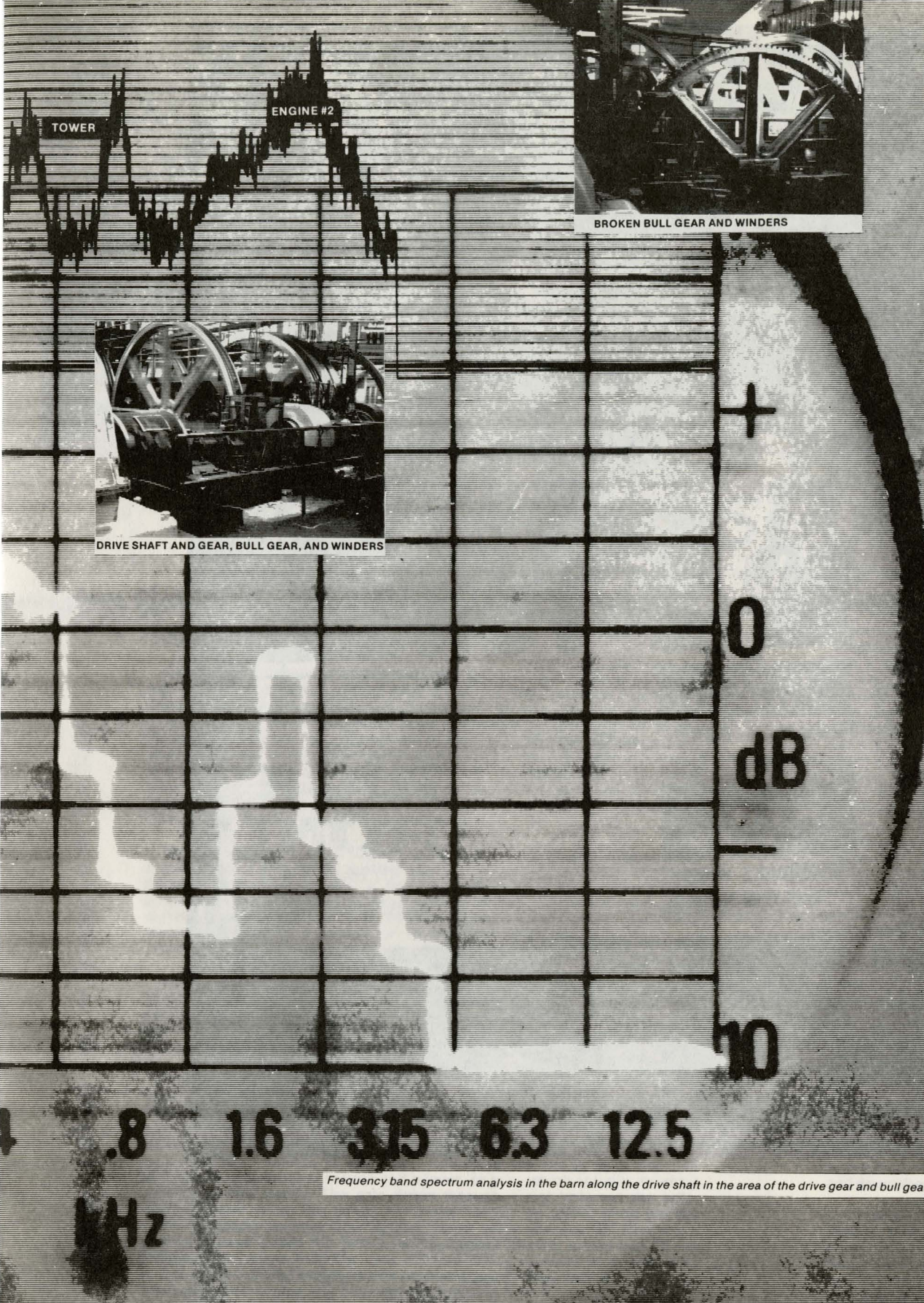


Bill Wearin (upper left), John Hourigan (right), and system analysts inspect a new depression beam.

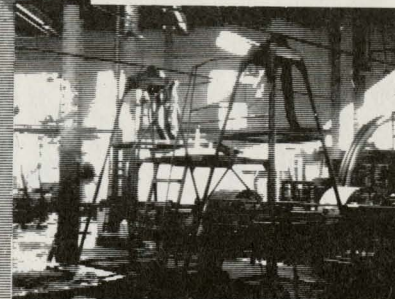


Peter Conidi, splicer.

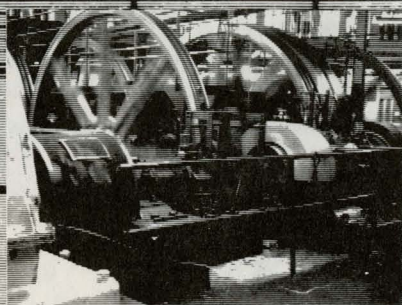




BROKEN BULL GEAR AND WINDERS



OBSERVATION TOWERS



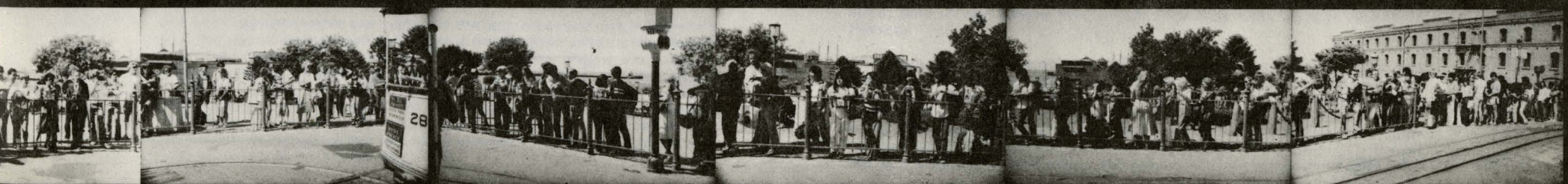
DRIVE SHAFT AND GEAR, BULL GEAR, AND WINDERS

The cable car men are a close-knit and affable bunch, and by their own telling of it, also slightly eccentric. Maybe the cable cars are a last holdout of the old Frisco. "We couldn't fit anywhere else," they explain to you when asked how they ended up on the cable cars. The pride in their craft is shrugged off with remarks about what a cushy job it is—in this day and age, to have this much fun on the job is almost immoral. Then the stories come out—about the stresses involved in dealing with the public, the machinery, which is intricate and physically demanding and sometimes unreliable, and problems with company management. And one thing becomes apparent. The amount of rapport they share and the degree to which they throw not only their shoulders, but their full character into this work, is a rare and precious thing—maybe another vanishing relic from the past. "It will never be the same again out here," they chorus one after the next, and then one begins to understand the real value of the cable cars and what has made them what they are. In *Voices* (Side B, 1) they speak for themselves.

—Shoshana Wechsler
9/1/82



Mrs. Freidel Klussman, Chairman Emeritus of the Committee to Save the Cable Cars, has led seven campaigns to save the cable cars since 1947. An indefatigable civic force.



Our deep
appreciation
to:

ANNE
CALVIN BOWSER
BILL CARMODY
AL CHANG
CHINESE MAX
PETER CONIDI
LUIGI COLLINS
MIKE DAVIS
LOUIS DeANGELIS
ARNIE FAERBER
OTIS FLEMING
GENE
AL GRIMAUD
JOHN HOURIGAN
BRIAN JENNINGS
MRS. FREIDEL KLUSMAN
MIKE MAX
MIKE McCLURE
DOUG PARR
ALBERT QUINTANA
MIKE SHAPIRO
TERRY
LOUIS TIFFER JR.
TINO
MIKE WEBER
BILL WEARIN
FLOYD WOOD

and all those
who participated
in the production
of this album

Pictured on
album cover
clockwise,
starting
lower left:

CALVIN BOWSER &
BILL CARMODY
JOHN HOURIGAN
PETER CONIDI
ALBERT QUINTANA

Engineering and
assistance on
Mettle Of Metal: DANA JON CHAPPELLE

Insert: All photos MXCANDLESS
Text SHOSHANA WECHSLER
Art Director PATRICIA FOSTAR
Graphic Designer TERRY OESTREICHER

Insert cover, (left to right): Jed Speare, Shoshana Wechsler, Mike Davis.

VALIANT PRODUCTIONS EXECUTIVE PRODUCER KEN VETTER

CABLE CAR SOUNDSCAPES

