

From Analog to Digital

The Story of the *UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music*

by Anthony Seeger and Joan Hua

Recordings often change lives.

A 2014 French radio documentary captures eighty-two-year-old Colette Bertin as she eagerly shares radio segments that she has recorded on cassettes from programs over the years.¹ One of her favorite *merveilles sonores* (audio marvels) is a recording of [Aka Pygmy](#) music. Their extraordinary singing had a similar effect on New Jersey–born Louis Sarno. Nearly thirty years ago, a pygmy recording he heard on the radio drew him to the central African rainforest. He stayed and recorded 1,000 hours' worth of Bayaka music.² In the same vein, sound recordist Jim Metzner reveals the profound impact Georgian and pygmy polyphonies have had on his career in "[You Are What You Hear](#)" in this magazine issue.

Many recordings in the [UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music](#) unveiled an unfamiliar and sometimes mystifying world of sound for many in the Western world. The discoveries it inspired were astonishing, showing up even in the music of mainstream artists like Herbie Hancock.³

How did it all begin?

In 1961, [Alain Daniélou](#) (1907–1994), a French historian and musicologist, produced five groundbreaking Long Play (LP) vinyl records of music of Laos, Cambodia, Afghanistan, and Iran (two volumes) on Bärenreiter-Musicaphon. These LPs were multimedia productions, combining text, diagrams, photographs, and sound. The annotations were presented in English, French, and German. Albeit brief, they served as informative introductions to these countries' musical traditions for a Western audience. The representative modes and melodic ranges are notated in Western staff notation. Large black-and-white images illustrate the instruments and the musicians playing on location in their original context. Recordings from India, Tunisia, Tibet, Japan, and

elsewhere soon followed. Daniélou was the general editor for these recordings, and the expert knowledge involved made them extraordinary, as ethnomusicologist Robert Garfias remarked. Even in areas where Daniélou was not an expert, Garfias said, “his taste and judgment make those recordings valuable and interesting. . . . He was careful to seek out the best players and to document carefully.” Garfias knew Daniélou well: “He was indeed a biased and opinionated individual.”⁴ Daniélou, who was also a Hindu philosopher and lived in India between the 1930s and ’60s,⁵ firmly believed in approaching Western and non-Western music as equally sophisticated. This was contrary to the convention at the time that marginalized non-Western music as ethnic or exotic.

Daniélou’s first LPs were the beginning of a monumental international effort, spanning decades, to document the musics and sounds of humanity from around the world and introduce them to a global audience. This project was achieved with the sponsorship of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), together with several other organizations, academic institutions, and record companies. The resulting recordings became known as the [*UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music*](#), amounting to more than one hundred titles by the time publication ceased.

In the beginning, the International Institute for Comparative Music Studies and Documentation (IICMSD), founded and directed by Alain Daniélou, was responsible for commissioning and preparing recordings every year. The [UNESCO collection](#)’s first series was *A Musical Anthology of the Orient* on Bärenreiter-Musicaphon. More series on record labels like Philips and EMI followed, as Fred Gales writes in the [cover story](#) of this magazine issue. In the mid-1980s, while the French record company Auvidis continued publishing and distributing UNESCO’s new CD titles, it reissued some of the earlier LP records on CD. (See the [timeline list](#) of record companies in sidebar.)

In 1991, the Berlin-based IICMSD was renamed the International Institute for Traditional Music (IITM).⁶ Max Peter Baumann, the director of the institute, faced the challenge of partnering with record companies. He eventually sought support from [Smithsonian Folkways Recordings](#) and produced eight recordings, including [Song Creators in Eastern Turkey](#) (1993) and [Bunggridj-Bunggridj: Wangga Songs: Northern Australia](#) (1993). Graced with large CD booklets containing detailed descriptions and many photographs, they were, however, not considered part of the UNESCO series.⁷ Additionally, the IITM made an agreement with Rounder Records to reissue the Bärenreiter series. But the reissues, which are not identifiable as originally part of the UNESCO series, came to a halt after only a handful of recordings.

In 1994, after the IITM dissolved, the editorial responsibilities for the series went to the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM), an international NGO with a consultative relationship to UNESCO, then headquartered in New York City. Under the editorship of its secretary general, Dieter Christensen, the ICTM released about four new recordings every year through 2003, including [*Norway: Fiddle and Hardanger Fiddle Music from Agder*](#) (1996), [*Uzbekistan: Music of Khorezm*](#) (1996), [*Peru: Music of the Indigenous Communities of Cuzco*](#) (1997), and [*Afghanistan: Female Musicians of Herat*](#) (2002).

At this time, even though UNESCO continued its support for this ambitious international, multi-organizational recording project, both the commercial market for “world music” and the intellectual climate for on-location study of traditional music had evolved. Interest in the unmodified sound of field recordings subsided in favor of single-artist recordings of global popular music. Many of these “world music” recordings were characterized by slick production values (they were frequently recorded in studios in Paris, London, or New York) and danceable rhythms. Perhaps the best known of these genres was called Afro-Pop. This shifting climate was among the challenges Anthony Seeger (one of the two authors here) faced when he assumed the UNESCO series’ editorial responsibility from 2000 through 2001. He recalls his experience editing and reviewing the UNESCO recordings.

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After my (Seeger’s) term as ICTM President (1997–1999), Dieter Christensen asked me if I would be willing to take over the UNESCO series from him.

How hard could it be? I had just finished twelve years as founding director of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings and curator of the Folkways Collection, where I was responsible for selecting, preparing, releasing, as well as marketing and paying royalties for over twenty releases a year. I really liked the idea of a series of recordings recorded and annotated by scholars from many countries. Four or five a year should be a piece of cake, I thought. I was very wrong. Changing audiences and an inefficient distribution system led the new French company, Naïve, to cease releasing new UNESCO projects, even though the ICTM was approving new ones under its agreement with UNESCO. A large and intractable backlog of projects was caught in limbo between their ICTM approval, UNESCO contract, and the inability of the record company to release them. Most of the projects I approved, edited, and forwarded to Paris nearly fifteen years ago have only appeared in the past year, when Smithsonian Folkways Recordings began to

release them. It was very difficult to explain to colleagues why their recordings had not yet appeared and very discouraging to the artists who had been recorded and promised publication in the series.

To a certain extent the UNESCO series was a victim of its own success. Having brought high-quality sound recordings of music from many parts of the world to an interested general public for decades, it was being left behind by institutions like the ICTM and various museums and ministries of culture worldwide that produced traditional music recordings with more extensive liner notes, as well as by well-funded commercial record labels distributing the popular genres of world music on a much larger scale than ever before.

In the 2000s I participated in the meeting in Paris that made the recommendation to end the series. The failure to publish approved recordings had become a deep embarrassment to the ICTM, since both compilers and artists were upset that their recordings had not been released. The series was also no longer a trailblazing publication of UNESCO, whose Intangible Heritage Office was then deeply engaged in the 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. And it was no longer the source of the best recorded and best documented ethnographic recordings.

One of the topics of the meeting was what UNESCO might do, other than a record series, to promote musical diversity around the world through audio recordings. I suggested that instead of producing its own recordings, UNESCO could put the UNESCO stamp of approval on well-documented ethnographic recordings produced anywhere in the world and then assist with their distribution—a “UNESCO Series” that was not contracted and produced by ICTM or UNESCO, but by cultural organizations anywhere. Unfortunately, that never happened. But UNESCO’s selected lists and requirements of the 2003 Convention⁸ celebrate cultural diversity and contribute to sustaining local cultural forms more extensively than the recordings had done. Instead, the existing UNESCO CD series was acquired by [Smithsonian Folkways Recordings](#).

When I was asked after the meeting what organizations might take over the manufacturing and distribution of the UNESCO series, I felt a conflict of interest between my certainty that Smithsonian Folkways Recordings would be the right choice and the impartiality required of a secretary general of ICTM. Smithsonian Folkways would be a good partner because it specialized in releasing and distributing historical recordings, was committed to good documentation and ethical practices, and had a large

catalog of published field recordings made available by mail order and a growing Internet presence. After a bit of discreet lobbying and a long negotiating process spearheaded by Atesh Sonneborn, associate director for programs and acquisitions at Smithsonian Folkways, the collection finally did come to the Smithsonian for distribution. My co-author, Joan Hua, worked under Sonneborn starting in 2012 to manage this acquisition.

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Smithsonian Folkways will soon complete its year-long release of UNESCO's 127 titles. Recently, I (Hua) asked Sonneborn about the value of reissuing the collection and the mission to keep it available. He replied, "Historical memory seems to be getting shorter and shorter, and music is always in a process of change, so any moment caught well is something that will have meaningfulness down the line."⁹

The process of change in music became clearly visible to me when I worked with Smithsonian Folkways' production manager Mary Monseur to complete the previously unreleased recordings—the dozen unfinished projects that were awaiting completion when Seeger passed on the editorship in 2001. For example, from music of [Romania](#) to [Portugal](#) to [Uzbekistan](#), I recognized patterns in state-run performing arts, folklorization of music, and—in many ways—parallel changes catalyzed by the collapse of Communism. The manuscripts too reflected certain time-specific rhetoric, and revisiting these notes between 2012 and 2014, I received comments from authors who felt strongly about the need for revision—the desired way to speak of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu is different now, and so is Soviet-originated scholarship of [Karakalpak tradition](#) in Uzbekistan. Damaged in the civil war, the musical landscape in [Afghanistan](#) that was finally in recovery since 2001 has, in the recent decade, once again been threatened by the insurgency of the Taliban. The information documented in the 1990s had been untouched for over a decade. Suddenly we uncovered the files and had to fast-forward through the gradual changes in order to bring the information up to date for publication. It was also important to me to respect the existing recordings in the collection, most of them made before I was born. Some traditions captured have now become endangered; some, on the other hand, have been revitalized.

More than twenty years after Max Peter Baumann handled the UNESCO series at the IITM, he now thinks of the collection as a "groundbreaking database" for fostering a "transcultural awareness that is more and more important for the future. . . . One can discover traditional arts and at the same time see a link to a global consciousness."¹⁰ The

UNESCO recordings were important because they provided a window into the world's myriad musical traditions, and they continue to impact people's lives. Amid the process of change, these recordings endure as monuments to an important effort to document and celebrate cultural diversity. As local musical traditions evolve, the well-recorded series will enable communities where they were recorded to rediscover their pasts and build their futures.

While enduring cultural shifts, at a certain point, the UNESCO series became a casualty of the gap between the era of the LP and the era of the Internet. Today, however, the gap has been bridged, and the collection benefits from technological developments that make posting music and accompanying content to a website relatively simple and inexpensive, so that users can access a variety and depth of music unimagined thirty years ago. "You never know what the future will bring," Baumann said. Smithsonian Folkways will do its best to keep the collection alive in perpetuity.

***Anthony Seeger** is Distinguished Professor of Ethnomusicology, Emeritus, at the University of California at Los Angeles. He was the founding director of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings and previously served as director of the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University. He is the author of *Why Suyá Sing: A Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People* (Cambridge University Press, 1987) and many other publications. He was involved in the [UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music](#) after serving as President of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) and before serving as its Secretary General (2001–2005); and he facilitated the Smithsonian's acquisition of the collection.*

***Joan Hua** co-managed the production of the [UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music](#) when Smithsonian Folkways Recordings acquired the collection. She currently edits Smithsonian Folkways Magazine and has written for magazines like REORIENT, Poet Lore, and Asymptote.*

¹ "[Colette's Podcast](#)" by Charlotte Bienaimé.

² Sarno's recordings are now housed at the [Pitt Rivers Museum](#) in Oxford.

³ The opening of Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man" imitates pygmy music heard on the 1966 LP *Ba-Benzélé Pygmies*. See Steven Feld, "Pygmy POP. A Genealogy of Schizophonic Mimesis," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 28 (1996): 1–25.

⁴ Robert Garfias, email message to Joan Hua, May 1, 2015.

⁵ The first recordings Alain Daniélou made in India in 1955 are reissued on [Anthology of Indian Classical Music: A Tribute to Alain Daniélou](#), a 1997 three-CD release honoring his legacy.

⁶ Max Peter Baumann, "International Institute for Traditional Music," *Grove Music Online*, Oxford Music Online, accessed May 4, 2015.

⁷ Max Peter Baumann, interview by Joan Hua, April 23, 2015.

⁸ UNESCO's 2003 [Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage](#).

⁹ Atesh Sonneborn, in discussion with Joan Hua, April 24, 2015.

¹⁰ Max Peter Baumann, interview by Joan Hua, April 23, 2015.