

Making a Film about a Sound

The Steel Guitar from Hawaii to the Honky-Tonk

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This essay refers to the author's eight-and-a-half-minute film sample at www.princeton.edu/~jhimpele/steelmovie/anthronews.html.

Starting Points

The fluid twang of the steel guitar sound: You have heard it in music ranging from Hawaiian to swing, from folk to 1960s and 1970s pop, from country to rock, and in TV cartoons from Looney Tunes to *SpongeBob Squarepants*. Named for the steel bar that slides across the horizontal electric guitar's strings, the steel guitar is most recognizable in leisurely Hawaiian music, where it originated, and in its melancholy cry that defines country music. Just as many traditional country songs begin with a solo steel guitar riff, the film I am making with Marty Muse, a well-known steel player from Austin, takes the sound waves of the steel guitar as a point of departure for an anthropological and cinematic ride. The scene I discuss here lands where intermeshed cultural, military and economic machinery bent the iconic sound of tropical Hawaii into the sincere interior voice that defines country music.

As an anthropological filmmaker, I seek (with Henley 2007) to expand the aural possibilities for film and compare its multilayered compositional techniques alongside a range of representational forms. Among anthropologists specifically working on sound, written ethnographies succeed in charting how musical soundscapes define localities and identities and in analyzing acoustic ways of knowing, or what Feld calls acoustemology. Yet if writing weakly conveys the experience of multilayered and overlapping auditory domains, a number of "acoustic ethnographies" (eg, CDs and online sound files) isolate sound to represent auditory complexity and sensations that are otherwise studied as written texts or visual scenes. Even while these are often marginal supplements to verbal arguments and contain standard audio quality, as Feld (Feld and Brenneis 2004) notes, they do enhance our awareness of sound. Nevertheless, sound, language and visual images are difficult to perceptually isolate in a sustained way, if at all, before they begin to conjure each other. Historically, the isolation of listening as a private domain with a singular point of audition coincided with forms of graphic visualization that enabled sound to be framed as its own

discrete object of modern contemplation, abstraction, replication and commodification (Sterne 2003). Across the increasingly insulated "soundscape of modernity" from built spaces to individual listening, sound isolation diminishes exterior noise and interior reverberations to enable capitalist production and consumption to be carried out more efficiently (Thompson 2002). Rather than replicating or excluding these powerful forces and domains, our project situates the steel guitar within them by using film as a single, but multisensory and compound, representational form to index

country music honky-tonks, the steel guitar is both an electro-mechanical and sign-producing machine. This duality corresponds to the iconic and indexical forms of musical signification that Feld describes: "Music is the most stylized social form *iconically* linked to cultural production of local identity, and *indexically* linked to contexts and occasions of community participation" (1995). Emphasizing Bosavi soundscapes, he analyzes how resemblances between sound icons and their referents enable a "non-arbitrary" affiliation between them to be naturalized, in both senses (1994). In Hawaiian soundscapes, the fluid and undulating sounds of steel guitars summon images of tropical beaches, leisure, tranquility and hula dancing. In country music, the pedal steel evokes rural landscapes where the steel guitar cries with a singer's loneliness or exhilaration. This perceptual isomorphism between the steel's sound and vocalicity makes sense in the "voice-centered orality" of country music culture (Fox 2004). Indeed, signature "licks" begin country songs and many players describe their playing as conversational, although their music originates in pre-linguistic feelings. If the idea of an original, interior and authentic voice emerges with the reproduction and transmission of sound, as Sterne and Kittler argue (1999), then what forms of detachment enabled the Hawaiian steel guitar sound to take on new iconic meanings in country music? Through what channels did it move from the hands of native Hawaiians to the cowboy musicians of country music? To pursue these questions, our film also explores Feld's second aspect of sound images—their *indexicality*, that is, the links from the guitar's electro-mechanical sound to its material circumstances in the world-historical forces, technoscapes and cultural movements that resonate from it.

The larger film project (tentatively titled *Men of Steel*) compounds the iconic visual imagery and vocal attributes of country steel guitar and indexes the circumstances into which it came ashore from Hawaii. Following the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco and post-World War II Hawaiian tourism and enthusiasm, steel guitarist Jerry Byrd made Hawaiian guitar a household name on popular radio on the US mainland and a number of music publishing companies were selling Hawaiian sheet music, guitars and lessons with door-to-door sales throughout the Midwest, which is where and how a striking number of country music's steel pioneers first learned to play. The film sequence indexed here is narrated by these "men of steel" who brought the steel into country music and



An icon of country steel guitar: Ralph Mooney's guitar and hat, signed by some of his colleagues. Photo courtesy Jeff Himpele



The underside of Marty Muse's Sho-Bud steel guitar. The metal array where pedal and knee levers connect to changers, which raise and lower strings, shift the sound's pitch and index the guitar's origins in parts from aerospace and defense industries. Photo courtesy Jeff Himpele

the steel sound's surprising world-historical conditions as well as connect its sounds to the iconic visual and verbal music worlds it conjures.

Steel Sound as Icon and Index

With music that conjures Hawaiian beaches and

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Aural Map
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the same tune, but the timbre is also already changing within each word. Singing, though familiar, turned out to be an unclear way to exemplify timbre, and I ultimately found it more fruitful to talk about differences in timbre with respect to different instruments.

Challenges and Rewards

Coming from two different backgrounds, we quickly realized the importance of establishing shared conversational space. Achieving that space has been—and remains—incredibly hard to find and maintain. Achterberg is trained as both a biological anthropologist and an epidemiologist; her simulation work is usually considered interdisciplinary. One recognized challenge of approaching public health questions from an explicitly evolutionary perspective is that the two fields often have different aims and methods that are usually assumed to be the main source of tension between Achterberg's two fields of training. In our project, we learned that shared, communal aims may still be insufficient to establish real common ground for research. The single greatest challenge is finding meaningful terminology that we can each recognize and utilize, while effectively communicating with our respective disciplines. We strongly recommend that other interdisciplinary work in aural studies plan time for, and commitment to, this process.

Nonetheless, we each appreciate that the act of explaining your work and disciplinary subculture to an outsider can be illuminating. In the sciences, data are presented almost exclusively visually. Though these visual depictions rely on relating numeric quantities to measured distance in an image, it is rare that we explicitly discuss these methods and options. Musicians are required to process aural information and use that information immediately, as when performers adjust their pitch to match fellow musicians. Our disciplines have trained us respectively to use and process different types of information as a means of communication, but our emphasis on different types of communication also reflects our personal strengths. Indeed, given the diverse ways that individuals process and understand information, auditory graphs may be more useful for some audiences and contexts than visual graphs when presented in an effective manner. We hope that our transparency revealing attendant challenges in interdisciplinary work in the anthropology of sound will help other researchers advance the practical utility of aural studies.

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Anthony J Pierce is a musician specializing in viola and saxophone performance. His disciplinary interests include post-tonal and common practice era theory and he is interested in cross-cultural musical expression. Anthony has performed across North America and Japan and currently plays in a Seattle Klezmer band. 

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played with numerous legendary singers from Hank Williams, Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard to Paul McCartney, Linda Ronstadt and Elton John.

The scene begins with Don Helms (Hank Williams) who defines the vocalicity of his steel playing and then turns to the moment in which a pedal was first added to a steel guitar in "Slowly," a 1954 number-one country song. Bud Isaac's pedal-equipped guitar uniquely kicked off "Slowly" with a lick that changed his guitar's pitch as he played it, and with it, country music. Guitar players and music producers in southern California immediately hit the surrounding US defense contractors, as well as their own vehicles and closet hangers, to obtain mechanical airplane parts to produce the new bended sounds of "pedal steel." The new steel sound would define country music from LA, among the Dust Bowl migrants working in the region's defense industries, to the emerging music industry in Nashville. To exhibit the juxtapositions in this historical moment, a steel guitar builder turns over a wooden guitar console, which conjures the rustic iconography of country music, to reveal metal machinery underneath that points to its material origins of its unique sound in the military and aerospace industries. Finally, the scene rides the "rocket science" embodied in the steel guitar toward a logical yet surprising conclusion.

Embodying the forms of cinematic montage that

Marcus (1990) proposed for ethnographic writing, the scene draws together disparate ethnographic contexts. Made with the sequential and multi-track compositional techniques of film itself, however, this scene enacts and represents the steel's wide-ranging material heterogeneity by juxtaposing rustic country steel sounds with indexical images of its high-tech material origins. Similarly, it juxtaposes the steel's Hawaiian origins with its eventual trajectory into earth's orbit. And by assembling an oral history from the men of steel and simultaneously portraying the images they conjure, the scene traces the resemblances between country music's thematic imagery and its sounds. Filmmaking offers a vehicle for doing anthropology in a representational and experiential form that does not isolate sound to study it, but one that heightens auditory perception by tracing how iconic sounds and cultural images conjure each other as well as by revealing the social processes that articulate them. Finally, if this cinematic assemblage is analogous to the compositional heterogeneity of the steel guitar, this "complicity of style" (MacDougall 1998) indicates how the composition and techniques of filmmaking reflect and interact with the performative techniques of producing and playing music.

Jeff Himpele is author of Circuits of Culture: Media, Politics, and Indigenous Identity in the Andes (2008) and the maker of a number of anthropological films including Taypi Kala: Six Visions of Tiwanaku (1994) and the award-winning Incidents of Travel in Chichen Itza (1997). 

AN Call for Proposals

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Upcoming thematic series are:

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Guidelines

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Early submissions are encouraged.

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