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Sound Collectors:

Sound Hunters and the Cataloguing of the Sonic Milieu

Sound hunting, sound hunters, and the “Echo of the World”

Sound hunting was the hobby of recording sound, indoor or outdoor, human-made or not. Nowadays, it would be called field recording. It has existed since the advent of sound recording technologies, but rose to a large scale with the commercialisation of the tape recorder in the 1950s. In Europe, tape recording clubs then flourished, specialised magazines were published, dedicated radio programmes produced, national and international contests organised. Sound hunters engaged in diverse practices, from family recordings to sound letters, from musique concrète to recording local musicians, or to capturing interviews with local personalities¹. To give an idea of the extent of sound hunting, in the beginning of the 1960s, there were more than 140 tape recording clubs throughout Britain, and the print-run of the British magazine Amateur Tape Recording was 60,000 copies per month. In France, Jean Thévenot, the producer of the main French radio programme dedicated to sound hunting, calculated in 1976 that he had received² more than 10,000 hours of material since the beginning of his programme in 1948, with a ratio of one hour of recording broadcast per ten hours received. If niche, the practice was certainly real.

Using the slogan of the French company Pyral, which manufactured instantaneous discs and then magnetic tapes, we could say that sound hunters were chasing the “Echo of the World” (Figure 1).

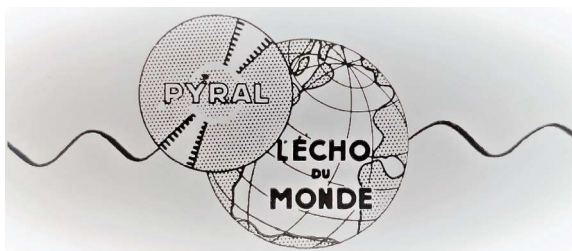


Figure 1: Pyral's logo and slogan. “L'Écho du monde” is French for “The Echo of the World.” *Le Magnétophone*, July-August 1959, 33.

Pyral was one of the few companies, with Marguerite Sound Studios in Britain, and Presto Recording in the United States, which released instantaneous discs in the early 1930s³. This new medium was an important step for sound hunters. While cylinder phonograph allowed for recording as well as playback, the possibility of recording disappeared with the gramophone. Unlike the double usage for recording and play-back with the cylinder phonograph, with the gramophone, the recorder and the player were two different devices, and the medium on which the recording was made (a zinc-etched disc) was not the one used for playback (a shellac disc). To go from the former to the latter required an acid bath (for zinc-etched disc) or an electroplating process (for wax disc), to obtain a negative, followed by the production of several generations of intermediary discs to finally get a listenable item. This accounts for a gap in sound hunting sources in the 1910s and 1920s, when fewer home recordings were produced. With the invention of instantaneous discs, sound recording hobbyists again had the possibility to easily record and to listen directly to the recording. The disc had an aluminium core framed on its two sides by nitrocellulose lacquer, with acetone for the varnish. Despite being highly inflammable, the cellulose nitrate had the right texture to cut at ambient temperature and was solid enough to allow multiple play-backs directly after the recording. Depending on the disc recorder model, recording and playback could be done on the same device (Figure 2). If not, instantaneous discs were readable on a regular turntable with a light pickup. With the advent of microgroove discs, turning at 33 1/3 rpm, disc recorders were equipped to cut at either 78 rpm, or at 33 1/3 rpm. Instantaneous discs allowed the sound hunters' activity to resume, and they started again to chase the echo of the world. Portable disc-recorders, in the form of a little suitcase, were rapidly developed, allowing mobile recording – if one was able to power the recorder with batteries.

Thus, in 1954, the sound hunter Tartarin brought such a portable disc recorder for his motorcycle road trip from Paris to Tokyo. On the road, he recorded a number of monologues and “discs of atmospheres.”⁴

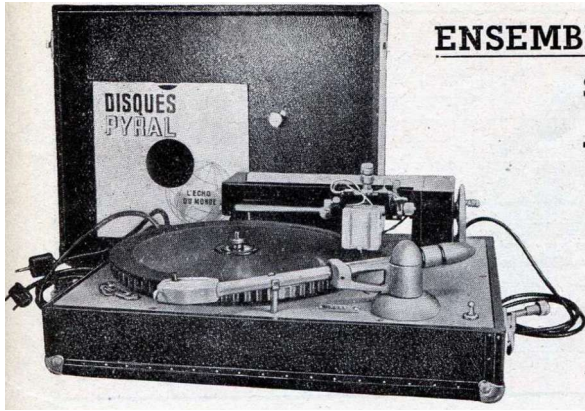


Figure 2: A Dual Carobronze portable disc recorder. Recordings were made with a microphone directly on the disc. A blank disc from Pyral is visible. This model could both record and read. The recording head is the squared one, the playback head is the one in the front. The Dual Carobronze could cut and read at 78 rpm and 33 1/3 rpm. *Toute la radio*, January 1955, 29.

In 1948, the radio producer Jean Thévenot started a programme dedicated to amateur sound recordings. What he thought would be a one-time event became a weekly one due to the number of proposals he received. People recorded enough to sustain a thirty-minute programme each week, even before the commercialisation of tape recorders⁵. Six years before, in 1942, an article of the national French newspaper *Le Temps*, envisioned “soundscapes” [paysage sonore] for a “sonic atlas” [Atlas sonore] and wondered how the sound recording technology could contribute to a better geographical knowledge. André Siegfried, the journalist, wrote:

“I often wondered whether these soundscapes could not be the subject of a recording that would preserve all their details. I recently had the pleasure of hearing a similar suggestion from a radio specialist – without me suggesting the idea. He even contemplated the establishment of a ‘sonic atlas’ [atlas sonore] that would gather, thanks to sound recording, the most characteristic soundscapes of our country. The initiative would be important, difficult, costly, but how interesting and useful! It would deserve the sup-

port of public authorities, and notably of our universities, as it would add an important chapter to the geographical knowledge of France.”⁶

While Siegfried sought the support of public authorities, it was toward sound hunters that Jacques Landrieux, a colleague of Jean Thévenot, turned a decade later. Because they were amateurs, sound hunters had a peculiar position. They lived all over the country, they knew their environment very well, its characteristics, peculiarities, and its inhabitants – human and non-human. They were able to access specific places and people, and could capture voices and stories that were inaccessible to radio professionals or sound recordists of large music labels. Also, because of their number, sound hunters could exceed the collecting capacity of a single researcher in, for example, the music of a specific place, or the establishment of local sonic surveys. Tapping this collective expertise, in 1953, Landrieux called for a “sonic geography of France.” That call pursued a touristic appeal, with the desire to present a sonic equivalent to postal cards: “sound takes (...) that would be the sonic poster of your county”⁷. The tourist who “was charmed by the bells of herds in the mountains, the songs of the shepherds in the Landes region, the singing manner of speaking of Provençal during a boules party”⁸ should thereby bring home a sonic souvenir. In the same article, Landrieux also advocated for recording French folkloric music, noting that many discs about folklore from abroad were available, whereas only few existed about French regional music. Several amateurs were already active in this field. For instance, already at the end of the 1940s, Jean-Michel Guilcher, then an employee in a publishing house, scouted Brittany to collect folkloric songs with his Webster-Chicago wire recorder. He later became a renowned ethnomusicologist of French and Breton folklore.

If sound recording was practiced by amateurs with phonographs and disc-recorders, the availability of tape recorders after the Second World War elevated sound hunting to a new scale. The ease of use, the longer running-time, alongside the development of transportation systems, fostered the production of numerous sonic surveys. People started to extensively catalogue the sounds of the world, and this was even

more the case when autonomous portable tape recorders were released in the early 1950s.

Cataloguing the sonic milieu, unveiling its sonic dimensions

Sound hunters mapped their milieu, preserving sounds that were disappearing. They generally had an awareness of the sonic milieu⁹, and cultivated an expertise in it. Some had a sonic heritage perspective. In Britain, for instance, G. M. Carson, together with other sound hunters, undertook the recording of the sonic ambience of Derbyshire villages for future generations. Ashford-in-the-Water was recorded in 1957, followed by Holmesfield in 1958, and Calver and Curbar in 1959. The recordings were complemented by photographic surveys. Carson and his team of volunteer sound hunters covered all aspects of village life, gathering material from inns, churches, chapels, local industries, organisations, and individuals. For Holmesfield, the work took six months and the finished production was 2 hours and 30 minutes long, accompanied by 125 pictures. Carson's aim was patrimonial:

“The finished result becomes the property of the community and not of any individual. In many years to come, future generations will be able to hear and see what life in the village was like. They will be able to judge the changes and the realizations, or failures, of our present ambitions.”¹⁰

Carson had a clear wish to precisely document sonically and visually a specific place in time. This documentary approach, with its aim of collecting sounds that were changing, precedes what researchers in acoustic ecology would pursue later. It is particularly close to what Raymond Murray Schafer would undertake from the end of the 1960s with the World Soundscape Project, most notably the Five Villages Soundscapes, a series of studies in five European villages made in 1975 and published two years later. The aims were different, with the World Soundscape Project seeking to discern causal dynamics – that is, the relationship between sound and the everyday life of these villages –, but both projects sought to document the ‘sonic system’ or ‘sonic ecosystem’ of specific localities. Unfortunately, little remains of Carson's work, and

it is unclear if he continued such sonic surveys in other localities¹¹.

Such private initiatives ran in parallel with institutional ones. Indeed, UNESCO wanted to build a sound library that could be used by radio and television stations of countries that were either lacking audiovisual collections or were in the process of developing them. Here again, sound hunters participated, thanks to the knowledge they had of their local environments. Two contracts were signed between UNESCO and the Fédération Internationale des Chasseurs de Son [International Federation of Sound Hunters], first in 1959 for the supply of 200 minutes of sound of typical interest – sounds that would characterise a specific place. The second contract was signed in 1961, for sounds coming from Europe, Asia and Africa¹². Collaborations also existed between radio institutions and sound hunters. Writing on nature recordings, Joeri Bruyninckx has insightfully described how the BBC worked with sound hunters for the cataloguing of wild-life sounds¹³.

In the field of traditional music, cooperations also existed between sound hunters and folkloric institutions and associations. From the late 1960s, the “Opération Folklore” coordinated activities across France. A calendar of folkloric events throughout France was published in the magazine *Le Magnétophone*. From the May 1970 issue onwards, it was extended to also cover Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy. The magazine moreover provided advice on what to collect and how: the recording alone was not enough; rather, it should be supplemented by details on the dance steps, lyrics, and the people involved. Sound hunters were also encouraged to record and collect tales. Tales and legends had already been collected and were presented in books, but sound hunters could add the sonic level, with the sound of different dialects. In light of the ageing of knowledgeable individuals, with only few young people attracted to folkloric dance and music, this project also became one of heritage preservation. The *Phonothèque Nationale* expressed an interest in the “Opération Folklore”, and welcomed the integration of selected recordings in its collection¹⁴.

The work of sound hunters is characterised by diverse interests. Besides traditional music and nature sounds, a lot of them were attracted by the sounds

and noises of the contemporary world. David Anthony Peart, for example, a train and bus enthusiast from Yorkshire, used an Uher portable reel-to-reel recorder to document the sounds of every model of bus and coach used in Yorkshire, before extending his work to the whole of Britain. A patient collector, he accumulated 1600 reels of transport recordings over forty years¹⁵. All the content is precisely indicated on the boxes, with the vehicle model, the motorisation, the transmission, the line on which the trip was made, and the date (Figure 3). The main focus of Peart was buses and coaches but some reels are also dedicated to trains, and a few to bird songs.



Figure 3: Back of some boxes containing quarter-inch tapes of David Anthony Peart's buses and coaches recordings. British Library. (Peart collection is not yet catalogued, hence the absence of a catalogue number)

In transport, trains were another focus of interest. Here, the main character was Peter Handford, who sought to save the sound of the steam age (Figure 4). Handford was a sound engineer working in the cinema industry¹⁶, but his true passion was recording trains. He started to record them in 1953, first with a disc-recorder, then on tape. He recorded them mainly in Britain, but also took advantage of his work in cinema to record trains in different countries of Europe and Africa. Documenting the end of the steam age in Britain, Handford's records are an homage to the machines and the men who operated these emotive engines. As he said, "I have a great admiration for all railwaymen, particularly rivers and firemen: my work is in a way a kind of memorial to them."¹⁷ Handford created a poetization of locomotives which were personalised and staged in each of his pieces. The choice of the recording location was paramount. Handford did not simply record passing trains. He searched for specific

sounds, which could express a situation, suggest a scene and foster the imagination of the listeners. Slopes that locomotives had difficulties passing were a privileged location, as were settings with hills and tunnels that could provide interesting sonic ambiances. Stations were also privileged sites, with their multiple trains departing, some slipping because of their weight, while others arrived, braking with loud grindings, all these sounds being reverberated by the hall in which announcements were made, while passengers departing and arriving walked and ran for their trains. As the critic Nigel Harris put in the magazine *Steam Classic*: "The key to the success of Peter Handford's recordings was that he didn't simply record a locomotive's passing. He 'painted' the whole scene in sounds, always endeavouring to create an individual atmosphere"¹⁸. Through the years, Handford built a precise and important collection, most of which has been published through his own company, Transacord.



Figure 4: Peter Handford recording a locomotive near Gailenkirchen, Germany, in 1972. Peter Handford Collection, National Railway Museum, HAN3/1.

Handford's collection shows clearly that collections could be built with an aesthetic perspective. As mentioned, the choice of the setting was primordial and involved a careful scouting of the location in order to pinpoint the right recording spot. When done right, the sound take made in the field could capture a scene so well as to directly become a track on a disc. This is the case for instance for the piece 'B.R. Class 4 on the Somerset and Dorset Line', from the disc *Trains in Trouble*, published in 1966:

“On board a five coach Templecombe-Bath (Green Park) train on the Somerset and Dorset line; an unedited extract from a recording made in October 1960. Soon after leaving Evercreech New, on the 2½ mile 1 in 50 climb toward Shepton Mallet, it had become obvious that all was far from well with the engine, a ‘Standard Class 4’ 4-6-0 No. 75073. Passing Mile Post 22¾ speed has dropped to about 13½ mph and the engine is labouring horribly; there is an ominous clatter as the fireman, obviously intent on doing all he can, lifts the long fire irons from the side of the tender; it has now taken about 4½ minutes to cover one mile of the uphill journey towards Cannard’s Grave, a place which has seldom seemed to be so aptly named. Now approaching the summit, speed drops even lower, though the engine’s exhaust beat strengthens a little as the driver makes an almost desperate effort to prevent the brakes from finally leaking on; just saved by the summit, No. 75073 drifts downhill towards Shepton Mallet Station where, for some twenty minutes, a much needed rest will be taken before tackling the next climb, to Windsor Hill Tunnel and Masbury summit. Unfortunately, despite the valiant effort of the crew, the climb to Masbury proved to be almost as funeral as the journey from Evercreech and the eventual arrival at bath was somewhat behind schedule.”¹⁹

I cited the liner notes in their entirety, to give a glimpse of Handford’s feeling while he witnessed and recorded, and to better explain his aesthetics. This commentary is not recorded, it only appears in the liner notes. This allows to focus only on the sounds of the trains: They are personalised, and there is a real dramatization of the everyday, a dramatization that opens up the imagination of the listener. Stories are told, in which trains are the main actors. In order to better tell that story, Handford sometimes seamlessly edited his pieces to recompose events in durations compatible with the disc format. Very few editing plans are preserved in his archive, but there are some notes in which sections of recordings are marked for future use: “side 0, 1m15sec, must use,” “side 3½ (sic) 1min 15sec, use if possible,” “add whistle at end side 4 as

train goes away”²⁰. These examples make clear the portraiture of locomotive that Handford was after. The fascination with the train, seen as an almost mythological object, is present throughout Handford’s work. Because of their size, noisiness, steam, their sheer mechanical dimension and power, steam trains and their sounds evoked a feeling of the sublime that prompted their depiction in sound.

For sure, Handford was an experienced sound engineer, as he maintained a career in cinema to sustain his train recording passion. But such an attention to the setting of the recording is a recurrent theme in sound hunting magazines, alongside patience and perseverance²¹. The artistic quality of Handford’s work is not isolated. Take for instance the album produced by the Chasseurs de Sons de Lausanne [Lausanne Sound Hunters] during the National Switzerland Exhibition in 1964²². The album catalogues the sonic ambience of the different areas of the Exhibition. 56 field recordings are presented in the form of a 26 minutes soundwalk, without any commentary. If voices are heard, they are from the public or from exhibitors present during the recording, or from PA speakers present in the Exhibition spaces. Each stop is carefully chosen, sometimes for typical sounds (machine sounds, birds, presenters speaking in German, French, Italian, sounds of unknown origin), sometimes for the general atmosphere without a precise focal listening point (machine recordings, the photography stand where different languages are overlaid). The transition between the field recordings on this disc is curated with the Allegro of the Divertimento in B-Flat Major K.270 of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, a few bars each time. Such an organisation is highly reminiscent of the *Pictures at an Exhibition* by Modest Mussorgsky where a musical theme serves as an introduction and link between all the pieces, which are musical depictions of drawings and watercolours by Victor Hartmann. Here, in *Souvenirs de l’Expo*, it is Mozart’s Allegro that serves as the personification of the visitor, who wanders through the Exhibition. The signature tune from the Exhibition opens the piece, followed by an arrival by train at the North entry of the Exhibition. The conclusion is made by the closing of the doors of the East exit. The 26 minutes flow as one piece thanks to a very fluid editing, and because the Mozart diverti-

mento, at each occurrence, resumes from where it previously stopped rather than starting over from its beginning. Therefore, as the walk progresses through the Exhibition, the listener also progresses through the divertimento, which gives the impression of a stroll with different stopovers that offers sonic contemplations of the different spaces of the Exhibition.

These two examples – Peter Handford and the Chasseurs de Sons de Lausanne – make clear that sound collections were, and still are, meant to be listened and appreciated by the ears. Each recording is an object of wonder, each collection exhibits a peculiar art of noticing, a peculiar art of listening²³. In that respect, sound hunters could be seen as sound botanists, or sound entomologists, collecting and studying sounds.

Collections, and sharing them

Sound hunters collected sounds in a wide range of fields. However, a central question when dealing with amateurs is: to what extent were their works accessible? Was their collection done at an individual level, or was there a desire of sharing them on a collective level? As we have seen, sound hunters had a perspective towards cultural preservation. But one can wonder to what extent the preservation exists if the collection remains inaccessible. So, to what extent were contemporaries aware of sound hunters' work? A lead to answer these questions is to search for distribution channels, or listening channels.

Sound hunters had different socialities in which they shared their recordings and collections: tape recording club meetings, which were often weekly or bi-weekly, specialised magazines, contests (at clubs' level, national and international levels), and radio programmes. The other clubs and societies in which the recordists participated were also places to share sound pieces: societies for nature, railway, or old craft, as well as camera clubs, to name only a few.

Generally, radios were important partners for sound hobbyists. In Europe, several stations had programmes dedicated to sound hunting. Their form could vary: in France and Switzerland, sound hunters were invited to the studio to speak and broadcast their work, while in Britain, it was usually experts – most of the time from the BBC itself – that offered lectures, record-

ings from sound hunters being broadcast only during episodes dedicated to national and international contests. Besides providing airing times, radios could also ask sound hunters to share their collections, or elements of them, in order to complete their own sound libraries. This was the case with BBC Natural History Unit, as I mentioned. In Alemannic Switzerland and Belgium, radios stations tended to recruit amateurs as collaborators or correspondents, and in Switzerland in general, there was the clear orientation toward a decentralised teamwork between radio stations and amateurs, who were recruited because of their distributed location across the country²⁴. Thus, the most active sound hobbyists moved freely between the amateur and professional domains, with professionals practicing as amateurs, and amateurs practicing as professionals. It should be remembered that all this happened in the context of the organisation and professionalisation of the sound recording field²⁵.

There were also more confidential networks where recordings circulated, such as trusts and societies interested in vintage vehicles. While, as I presented above, I haven't yet found any traces that the work of David Anthony Peart was actually distributed, recordings by other enthusiasts for buses and coaches were released as discs or cassettes. The work of Richard S. Smith is an example (Figure 5).

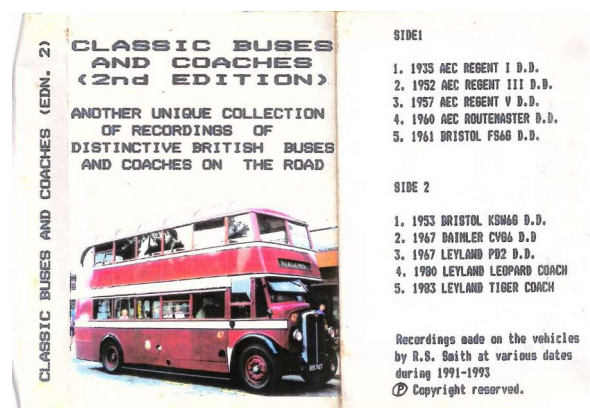


Figure 5: Richard S. Smith, Buses and Coaches (2nd edition), cassette sleeve.

Looking at the sleeve, one can see that this particular cassette is the second edition, which means that a first one went sufficiently well to motivate a second batch. There is also the indication of a “copyright reserved”,

indicating that, if self-released (as no label appears anywhere), the cassette was nonetheless distributed. That distribution occurred within the network of buses and transport enthusiasts, probably railway societies, too. It remained invisible and inaccessible, however, for people outside that pursuit. A final point to notice is that Smith made his recordings in the 1990s, when the buses and coaches recorded had long been discontinued. The recordings were possible thanks to vintage vehicles trusts and societies that restored and maintained the vehicles in working order.

Tape recording clubs were another network. Recordings could be commented and shared during the regular meetings (rhythm varied depending on the club, from weekly to monthly). Moreover, clubs themselves often had a sound library for their members. Sometimes, the content of these collections was widely shared. For instance, *Le Magnétophone*, the main French sound hunting magazine, published during several months the complete sound collection of the national club Association Française des Chasseurs de Son [French Association of Sound Hunters], which was free to use for its members²⁶. Generally, these club collections were used in the soundtracks of amateur films and slideshows, or to complete individual collections on specific subjects.

It should be noted that these networks could help sound hobbyists to make a living out of their recordings, or at least to earn an additional income. For instance, it was through classified advertisements in railway magazines that Peter Handford started his Transacord company through which he sold his recordings of trains. Through the years, he was able to make several thousands of pounds each year with them, and a compilation of his recordings released by Decca, *The World of Steam*, sold more copies than *The World of Tchaikovsky*, a similar compilation with the music of Piotr Ilitch Tchaikovsky, equally by Decca. In the year 1978 alone, Handford sold more than 30,000 copies²⁷. Even on niche subjects, like steam trains, sound hunters were part of active communities and therefore able to reach a listenership. Sometimes, these communities of like-minded people were able to sustain their activities. Interviews with sound hunters also show that they were well-known on

the local level and beyond, with people turning to them for sound works²⁸.

Schools were another network of distribution and listening, notably in France, thanks to teachers who followed the Freinet pedagogy. Developed by Célestin Freinet in the late 1940s, the pedagogy was based on enquiry-based and cooperative learning, and on fostering children's free expression through artistic and manual activities. Sound recording, as soon as tape recorders became available, was regarded an important component. To disseminate the method, the Institut Coopératif de l'École Moderne (ICEM) was created by Freinet in 1947. The audio-visual activities of the Institut were led and organised by Pierre Guérin. A sound hobbyist himself, Guérin was active in promoting sound hunting within schools, and became a regular supplier of recordings for *Aux quatre vents*, the main French sound hunting radio programme produced by Jean Thévenot. From all these contributions, eight cassettes were released in 1982 by Guérin and Gilbert Paris, with recordings dating from 1953 to 1982: interviews and sound ambiances of personalities visiting the school, of people whose craft was disappearing, or of elderly people who grew up in the nineteenth century²⁹. The ICEM built a sound library for the use of teachers, who could order specific recordings by mail order. Recordings were often made by pupils themselves³⁰.

The use and meaning of sound hunters' collections

From the previous sections, we see that sound hunters produced many sound collections. But to exist and express its specificity, a collection needs to be accessible. However, with the exception of a few personal libraries that made it to local archives, the recordings of sound hunters often remained (and still remain) in private circles. While sound hunting magazines and radio programmes give a glance into their practice, only a fraction of it remains accessible. Because technology has evolved dramatically, moreover, the family of deceased sound hunters often disperse or discard the recordings accumulated through decades of hobby practice. And because it was a hobby practice, the value of the recordings and of the collection was not necessarily recognised.

Accessing the sonic sources thus remains a challenge. The picture is not different for clubs. Most of their archives have been discarded or are still stored away in unknown basements. Some resurfaced by chance, such as the Derby Tape Recording Club, the Leicester Tape Recording Club, or the East Midland Tape Recording Club, all salvaged at different car-boot sales by the sound artist Mark Vernon. But huge collections have disappeared. For instance, at the moment, it seems that nothing remains of the work of Carson on the villages of England, or of the work of Father Garnier, who recorded during decades the people of Trouhans, the village where his church was, and where he invited traditional musicians from all over the world³¹.

While some sound hunters have given their collection to public archives (David Anthony Peart to the British Library for instance), or released on discs (like Peter Handford), the majority of sound hunters' work remains unknown. And even when given to a public archive, the timeline to using the material is very long. For instance, the David Anthony Peart collection, acquired by the British Library in 2007, is still not catalogued and is even farther from being digitised and made accessible.

Another difficulty when dealing with amateur material is that tapes are rarely accompanied by precise description of the content and of the author(s). With the format of tape, the collections contain different material elements that should be kept together: the tape, the box on which information about the content could be written, and the potential card-index that serves to catalogue the recordings. Indeed, one can write a number of things on the box, but space is limited and there is always the risk to put the tape in the wrong box. The card-index serves to precisely link a tape to a description of its content. However, because there are several elements to keep together, it also multiplies the risk of losing or dispersing items. For instance, when Keith Upton, the keeper of the Brighton Tape Recording Club archive, moved, the card-index got lost³². All the tapes are preserved, but the knowledge of what is on them is, at the moment, lost. When collections are extensive and specific – such as of steam trains, buses, or insects – it can be very hard if not impossible to identify what the recordings are. A whole

part of the collection becomes missing. This shows that a sound collection is not only made of sound: an essential part of it consists of writings, and possibly images as well. If the recordist has not provided information about what is being recorded at the beginning of their recording, or during it, a non-sonic element is needed to inform the recording. But such paratext is often missing from amateur collections.

Still, despite these challenges, sound hunters' collections are of great historical interest. Because they were often passionate about specific themes, their collections are typically very distinctive and extensive – such as the ones of Peart and Handford. At the moment of the recording, their interest could be seen as banal, but it is exactly that relation to the banal that brings a voice rarely heard. Through them, it is often a history of the ordinary that can be accessed – the preservation of the ordinary before it became exceptional. This is where the value of the collection as such becomes apparent. Taken in isolation, the individual recordings would be curiosities, but taken together, a new dimension emerges: relations between elements, chronology, possibility of mapping the elements, possibility of an overall view, evolution of single elements, evolution of whole ensembles, etc. Moreover, sound hunters' collections are at the crossroads of different fields, and are characterized by their multidimensionality, comprising aesthetic, sociological, and anthropological perspectives. If sound is only the medium through which what is saved appears, the recordings reveal much more: elements of social status and dynamics, of the history of technology, and possibly details about the recordists themselves.

External observers were aware early on of this work and its importance and praised sound hunters for it. The journalist E. Dana, for instance, wrote in 1955:

“Unlike official historians who are the radio professionals, these amateurs are memorialists. (...) Besides the university scholars that we hear all year long, there are those amateurs, the isolated researchers. What would be our archives, our National Museum of great voices if these obscure, low-ranking, these nobodies were not here?”³³

Dana had the general conservation of radio archives in

mind (hence the reference to the great voices of the past), but his remark could well be applied to the sound hunters I named above. In Britain too, sound hunters were invited “to join the hunt for Britain’s vanishing sounds”³⁴ in an article of the magazine *Amateur Tape Recording*. The (unnamed) author urged sound hobbyists to turn into “sound preservers” in order to save the typical sounds of their hometowns, the voices and memories of the elderly, the local folkloric music, the street sounds of transportation in decline such as cart horses and steam trains. The author also mentioned that all these “sound records of local history” could be turned into valuable material for the local radio³⁵. Sound hobbyists were documenting what was usually not documented but what – until its disappearance – was part of everyday life. These examples demonstrate an attention toward the sonic milieu, and how the sounds inhabiting the everyday became a source of interest and contemplation. They also show the relevance and historical significance that these recordings now have.

Conclusion

If sound hunting remained a niche practice, people invested or interested in sound recording still knew about and appreciated the work and collections of sound hunters. While some collections are known today, thanks to a commercial release or to the collaboration with an institution, much still remains a challenge to access. The value of these collections, however, touches many fields. A study of sound hunters' work also illuminates that numerous themes of current sound studies were already embraced by amateurs decades ago. They show that musique concrète was practiced by isolated individuals as early as the late 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s; soundscapes recordings were produced decades before field recording started to be established as a musical genre; themes from acoustic ecologies were already explored by sound hunters when Raymond Murray Schafer and the World Soundscape Project started. The work of sound hunters thus pioneered a wealth of ideas about how sound recording could be used. This work was often done for the sake of itself, thanks to the passion of a recordist.

Endnotes

1. I detailed the history of sound hunting in France and Britain in my thesis: *Sound Hunting: The Tape Recorder and the Sonic Practices of Sound Recording Hobbyists in France and Britain, 1948-1978*, University of York, 2022: <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/32509/> (accessed 28/06/2024).
2. Introduction to the Jean Thévenot collection. Gilles Marchandou, Culture ; Radio France (1947-1986), Répertoire (19910681/1 – 19910681/35) (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine: Archives Nationales, 1991), 6.
3. Presto Recording ultimately bought a licence to manufacture and distribute Pyral's instantaneous discs.
4. Tartarin sent a collection of his recordings to the International Amateur Recording Contest but unfortunately, he did not pass the selection process. His recordings were deemed not very interesting and his commentary was “pompous”. Tartarin, *Mon raid Paris-Tokyo en cyclomoteur*. Archives JT et CdS, 19910681/18, folder 3ème CIMES – 1954, siège : Bruxelles, sub folder Notations et observations.
5. The programme, named *On grave à domicile*, was broadcast on Friday, from 22h35. The year after, it was renamed *Aux quatre vents*, shorted to 20', but with a slot on Saturday afternoon, at 16h05. For more information, see the Table 2 in Masson, op. Cit.
6. 'Revue de la presse,' *L'Écho des étudiants*, 28 November 1942, 2.
7. Jacques Landrieux, “Pour une géographie sonore de la France,” in: *Arts et techniques sonores*, March 1954, 1.
8. Ibid.
9. My use of “milieu” instead of “environment” is linked to the relational and holistic quality that I identify in listening. I also want to emphasize that sound hunters were more concerned with listening than with sound per se – sound conceived and conceptualised as an exterior element. The conceptual thinking behind the choice of the word “milieu” also comes from geography and anthropology. See Augustin Berque, *Écoumène. Introduction à l'étude des milieux humains* (Paris: Belin, 2015 [1987]); Danièle Dubois and Matt Coler, “Sounds, Languages and Meaning: Ontologies or Umwelten?” MILSON Conference: Le son pris aux mots, 20-21 November 2014; Christine Guillebaud, “Introduction: Multiple Listeners: Anthropology of Sound Worlds,” in: *Toward an Anthropology of Ambient Sound*, ed. Catherine Guillebaud (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 1-18. See also Tim Ingold, “Four objections to the concept of soundscape,” in *Being Alive*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 136-9.
10. ‘Sound Pictures of English Villages,’ *Tape Recording*, 2 December 1959.
11. Despite Carson mentioning that the British Institute of Recorded Sound showed interest in his work, I haven't been able to track down any documentation of it, nor any trace of Carson himself.
12. Masson, op. Cit., 146-8.
13. Joeri Bruyninckx, “For Science, Broadcasting, and Conservation: Wildlife Recording, the BBC, and the Consolidation of a British Library of Wildlife Sounds,” in: *Technology and Culture* 60, no. 2 (2019): 188–215; Joeri Bruyninckx, “Trading Twitter: Amateur Recorders and Economies of Scientific Exchange at the Cornell Library of Natural Sounds,” in: *Social Studies of Science* 45, no. 3 (2015): 344–70.
14. Marie-Louise Vidal de Fonséca, “L'opération folklore et les chasseurs de son,” in: *Le Magnétophone*, October 1968, 3-9. The Phonothèque Nationale was formed in 1938 from the Musée de la Parole et du Geste [Museum of Speech and Gesture] and became part of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in 1975.
15. Many thanks to Vedita Ramdoss, Sound and Vision Team Leader at the British Library, for hunting down this collection from the very few elements I had.
16. Peter Handford collaborated with David Lean on *Summertime*, with Alfred Hitchcock on *Under the Capricorn* and *Frenzy*, and won an Academy Award and a BAFTA for his work on *Out of Africa*.
17. John Gale, “Leisure for Living. The Man the Engines Talk To,” in: *The Observer*, 5 February 1961.
18. Nigel Harris, review of *Impressions of Steam, Steam Classic*. This is a press-cut without date present in the Peter Handford collection, National Railway Museum, York. HAN/1/7, Argo Transacord catalogues, publicity and material, and the ASV Transacord index compiled by Jim Palm.
19. Peter Handford, *Trains in Trouble*, Argo Transacord EAF 117, 1966.

20. Peter Handford collection, National Railway Museum, York, HAN/1/5, early days of Transacord. That undated note is written at the back on an information sheet for Handford's disc The Lickey Incline, Passenger trains. I haven't found a disc with that name, but it probably refers to *Steam on the Lickey Incline* disc, published by Argo Transacord in 1959 under the reference ZTR 128.
21. See for instance B.W. Read, "Build a Library of Sound Effects," in: *Tape Recorder*, September 1959, 338-9; Eric Simms, "More Sounds from Nature's Storehouse," in: *Tape Recorder*, October 1959, 391, 393; Richard Margoschis, "Nature Notes," in: *Tape Recording*, January 1968, 27. Cyril Clouts, "Project Alpha," in: *Tape Recording*, May 1959, 162+, details specific ways of listening.
22. Chasseurs de Sons de Lausanne, Souvenirs de l'Expo, Fono Gesellschaft FG 25-4319, LP7576, 1964. This disc has been digitised by the Swiss National Sound Archives and is accessible here: https://www.fonoteca.ch/cgi-bin/oecgi4.exe/inet_fnbasedetail?REC_ID=18348.011 [consulted 17/07/2024].
23. This is not the subject of this article, but there are links between sound hunting and the art of listening developed by figures like Pierre Schaeffer and John Cage. For the art of noticing, see Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalism Ruins* (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 17-27.
24. *La Revue du Son*, January 1963, 20.
25. This structuring of the sound engineering field is also visible in the press, with the apparition of dedicated pro audio magazines, like *dB Magazine* (1967-1994), *Recording Engineer / Producer* (1970-1992), the transformation of *Tape Recorder* into *Studio Sound* (1970), *Modern Recording* (1975-1986). It is also during these years that university courses dedicated to sound recording and engineering appeared in the UK.
26. See *Le Magnétophone*, April 1967, July 1967, September 1967. Interested individuals only had to send a blank tape and a stamp for the return postage.
27. Peter Handford interviewed by David Watkins (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5iWhJxlU0> (accessed 01/07/2024)). In the Peter Handford collection held by the National Railway Museum, there are also a few accounting documents from the late 1970s (HAN/1/2). For the year 1978, the royalties amounted to £5527,51, which corresponds to around 30,000 copies of steam train recordings. £5527,51 equals to £29,321 in 2024 (<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>).
28. A good example of this is the TV documentary made in 1974 by Marianne Lamour about Georges Savy (*Georges Savy, Chasseur de son*, produced and broadcast by France 3 Toulouse on 18 May 1974). Savy worked as the chief electrician for the City Council of Carcassonne, had a home studio, and a busy sound activity after his day work.
29. *Chasseurs de son*, Radio France, collection 'Vive la Radio', SON010/080. The collection won the Grand Prix of the Académie Charles Cros, one of the main French awards for sound recording and music.
30. Some recordings of this collection have been preserved and are accessible online: <https://www.icem-pedagogie-freinet.org/mode/6618>; <http://rivaudiere.fr/BTSons/index.htm> (accessed 01/07/2024). This last link provides digitisations of "BT Son" (Bibliothèque Technique Son [Technical Library Sound]). These BT Son were albums containing slides, a disc, and a booklet.
31. Thanks to the Fêtes de la Vigne, a traditional music and dance festival held in Dijon, where he often recorded concerts. See Masson, op. Cit., 279-81.
32. Interview with Keith Upton, 2 April 2021.
33. E. Dana, "Auditeurs, à vos postes," in: *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, 7 November 1955.
34. "Sound Hunting. Capturing Britain's vanishing sounds," in: *Amateur Tape Recording*, April 1962, 26.
35. Ibid.

Abstract

In this paper, I present the work of sound hunters who, starting in the 1940s and 1950s, collected the traditional music of their region, preserved the sounds of the steam age, or set out to transmit the sonic ambience of their cities to future generations. Despite being amateurs recording on their spare time, these sound recordists anticipated current trends of sound preservation and sound studies. Because they usually recorded their local environment, these sound hobbyists had a privileged access to people and places and in-depth knowledge of specific fields. Their recordings are often unique in their precision, extent, and number. After a presentation of sound hunting and of the sound libraries built by these sound hobbyists, I give details on how their collections – most of them private – were shared, and I discuss their heritage value and significance for scholarship.

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Title

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