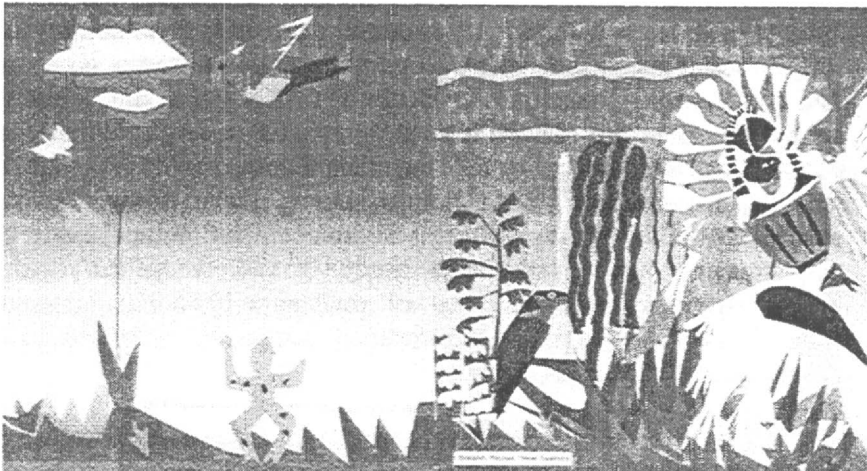


## VOICES OF THE RAINFOREST

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STEVEN FELD



PUBLIC CULTURE's current cover is also the cover of a CD/cassette recording of music and environmental sounds from Bosavi, Papua New Guinea, commercially released by the Rykodisc label in April of 1991. What motivates this linkage across media and genres? Where might a journal that explores the politics and aesthetics of transnational cultural flows share common concerns with a commercial recording of "tribal" music published in a series called "The World?" Two responses will be briefly

explored here. One involves ways the local and global intersect in new forms of cultural production; another involves ways “world music” embodies and provokes various anxieties about the politics of cultural representation.



Surely it's a mark of the contemporary moment that the collision of forces responsible for **VOICES OF THE RAINFOREST** presents little surprise or sense of improbability. But substantial disjunctions are embedded in this particular cultural production. For example, there is the contrast of recording in Papua New Guinea, “the last unknown” (a phrase originated by a book title and still in popular circulation), where people of the highland interior have come into contact with outsiders only in the last fifty years, and making a commercial high-tech CD with portable state-of-the-art equipment and experimental, even pioneering field recording techniques. Or, the contrast of recording the sounds of birds and music among a small group of isolated people, the Kaluli, whose rainforest environment and cultural future are now threatened by — in addition to twenty years of evangelical missionization — recent oil exploration that will yield multibillion-dollar profits for American, British, Australian, and Japanese companies, as well as for the government of Papua New Guinea.

Then there is the contrast of an academic anthropologist and ethnomusicologist (me) who has studied Kaluli language, music, and culture over the course of fifteen years, working with a rock-and-roll drummer, Mickey Hart of the Grateful Dead, active in the preservation of musical diversity through educational funding, concert promotion (the Gyuto Monks tours of America), books, (*Drumming at the Edge of Magic*, 1990, and *Planet Drum*, 1991, both HarperCollins/ San Francisco), and recordings. And the contrast in the final product: my previous two LP recordings were published in academic series, one by the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, another by Bärenreiter in their Music of Oceania series. Most people have heard of neither disc nor series, while Mickey produces a successful and well-known series, *The World*, licensed to Rykodisc, a major independent

label whose catalog ranges from popular world musics to some of the more esoteric (Frank Zappa) and more glittery (David Bowie) rock artists known today.

There are parallel contrasts in the realm of promotion too. The events that launched VOICES are extraordinary when compared to those typically surrounding the release of an academic product. The Earth Day weekend opening gala for the recording began at the very plush and very private high-technology screening room of George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch, where Randy Hayes, Executive Director of Rainforest Action Network, and Mickey Hart spoke on the intertwined topics of rainforest destruction and musical survival, and I presented a surround-sound CD preview and synchronous computerized slide show for members of the audio, radio, and record industry. The next evening the three of us presented the show again at San Francisco's Greens Restaurant and hosted a \$100-a-plate fund-raiser to benefit the Bosavi People's Fund, the trust established to receive royalties from VOICES, and Rainforest Action Network's campaign against logging in Papua New Guinea. Then during the next two months I traveled across the country with the slide-show preview to venues ranging from classrooms to zoos to nightclubs to malls. Free presentations were coordinated with radio and popular press interviews, release parties, and appearances at book and record shops. The coordination of these activities required constant effort from the management and technical staff of Mickey's company, 360° Productions, as well as from the marketing and publicity staff of Rykodisc. The scale of these activities provides a major contrast to both the material wealth of the Kaluli and to the typical funding or promotion for most academic research and publication.



VOICES OF THE RAINFOREST is being marketed as "world music," a term of multiple significances. What "world music" signifies for many is, quite simply, musical diversity — the idea that musics originate from all world regions, cultures, and historical formations. Here the term "world music" circulates in a liberal and relativist field of discourse. In a more specific way, "world music" is an academic designation, the curricular

antidote to a tacit synonymy of "music" with Western European Art Music. Here the term explicitly exists as marked and oppositional in a more polemical field of discourse. But it is as a commercial marketing label that "world music" is most commonly placed. In this context the term refers to any commercially available music of non-Western origin and circulation, as well as to all musics of dominated ethnic minorities within the Western world. Here the term draws attention discursively to the dialectics of isolation and hegemony, resistance and accommodation. The commercial development of styles like reggae, blues, zydeco, conjunto, salsa, forró, as well as musics from places like Ireland or Bulgaria, is often framed by this sense of "world music." In a related fashion, "world music" also means music for/of/in a market; music *of* the world to be sold *around* the world (among other places, for example, in *The World* series). In this discourse arena, "world music" draws out senses of commodified otherness, blurred boundaries between exotic and familiar, the local and global in transnational popular culture. Here is where one often encounters names of artists like Peter Gabriel and Paul Simon, as well as Youssou N'Dour, Ravi Shankar, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Ofra Haza, Celia Cruz, Bob Marley, Los Lobos, and many others.

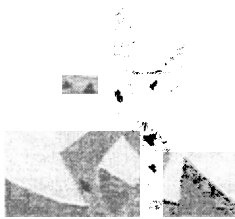
How is VOICES OF THE RAINFOREST placed vis-a-vis these dimensions of "world music?" As the very first compact disc completely devoted to indigenous music from Papua New Guinea, VOICES OF THE RAINFOREST signifies an effort to validate a specific culture and musical region otherwise generically submerged in American record stores in a bin labeled "Pacific." While the recording would not have been possible without my research background and long-term connection to Kaluli communities, VOICES is not principally a research document. Rather, it is an unabashedly commercial product meant to attract as large a listening audience as possible, through the appeal of both superb audio reproduction and extraordinary musical and natural sounds. The press, radio play, and initial distribution of 10,000 copies during the recording's first five months on the market indicate some success at this agenda.

VOICES OF THE RAINFOREST presents twenty-four hours of a day in the life of Bosavi in one continuous hour. We begin before dawn with a section titled "From Morning Night to Real Morning"; it features the

overlapping voices of birds waking up a Kaluli village. A segment of morning sago-making follows; women sing as they scrape and beat sago starch and their voices are overlapped by those of children, some responding to the song with whistled imitations of the birds whose calls are heard in the distance. Another morning work activity follows; groups of men sing, whoop and yodel in echoed polyphony as they clear trees for a banana garden. After the trees are down women clear the brush with machetes, singing as they go. This morning work section is followed by two midday tracks illustrating leisure music-making. First is a series of bamboo jew's-harp duets with birds and cicada rhythms; then a woman sings at, with, and about a waterfall. A return to ambient sounds follows this section. "From Afternoon to Afternoon Darkening" chronicles the transition from afternoon bird volleys to the dense electronic-sounding insects, and frogs of dusk. An evening rainstorm follows, with interspersed voices of frogs, insects and bats. Next is a ceremonial sequence, first with a group of drummers, and then a ritual song performance that moves an audience member to tears. The recording closes with an ambient segment, "From Night to Inside Night," where voices of frogs, owls, and night insects pulse through the hours toward dawn. In total, *Bosavi* is presented as a coordinated world of continuously overlapping and interlocking sound clocks, with ambient rhythms and cycles intermeshed with human musical invention, performance, and spontaneous interactions.

This sort of editing structure indicates that the aesthetics of *VOICES OF THE RAINFOREST* departs from the typically commercial world music CD to take a major musical risk: the recordings are equally of the natural environmental sounds and local musical expression found in *Bosavi*. All of these sounds, ambient and musical, are edited together to produce one continuous sixty-minute soundscape, a meta-composition that evokes how Kaluli hear the music of nature as the nature of music. In work, leisure, and ceremonial contexts, Kaluli musical invention is illustrated to be of a piece with the sounds of birds or waterways or the pulses of frogs and crickets. The vocal and instrumental tracks on the disc are inspired both sonically and textually by natural sounds, and the listener experiences how Kaluli appropriate these into their texts, melodies, and rhythms. Indeed, several of these pieces indicate as well that Kaluli like to sing and whistle with birds or waterfalls, or play instrumental duets with bird calls or cicada rhythms.

In addition to these aesthetic choices, the politics of *VOICES OF THE RAINFOREST* are equally atypical of the world music genre. For example, the liner notes, while extensive, are written in the form of a letter from me to Mickey. The tone there is vernacular and accessible. In addition to describing the contents and contexts of the recordings, the notes acknowledge the irony of the disc: just as the music receives international recognition as a volume in *The World*, Kaluli songs, along with most other cultural practices, are quickly disappearing and the environment is threatened by oil pipelines, roads, and logging. Drawing attention to the relationship between cultural and ecological destruction in rainforests, the notes propose the term “endangered music” to help the listener comprehend how the ravages of artistic loss are suffered by indigenous people just as species thinout is suffered by their local flora and fauna. Along these same lines, it is indicated that the royalties from the recording directly benefit Kaluli communities and organizations involved in fostering environmental and cultural survival.



The ways that the multiple dimensions of “world music” are figured in relation to *VOICES* as a commercial production are obviously connected to current debates in anthropology and other fields about the politics (read: dimensions of control, authority, ownership, “authenticity,” power relations) of cultural representation. Many anthropologists were once content to

celebrate and embrace local intellectuals and their societies (particularly the small-scale ones) for their integrity. Pleased to be inspired by myriad forms of inventiveness, by experiential design patterns that challenged conventional senses of self and other, anthropologists celebrated diversity in idealized terms. Now that it is widely assumed that there is an awful lot less cultural diversity or integrity of any inspirational sort left on the planet, many anthropologists have become critics of state-indigene relations, resistance cheerleaders, or cultural survival advocates, inspired in their own vision or alienation or need to struggle by the intensity of chaos and harm so mightily and recklessly visited upon the others they care to chronicle. The politics of being an engaged and responsible researcher are now deeply

giving voice to people whose validity is denied and silenced by the dominant. Because the practices of anthropology are so firmly located within this discursive side-taking, the field's intellectual products — talk, books, articles, recordings, films, etc.— are now increasingly subjected to intensified scrutiny from inside and outside both the community that actually undertakes and the community that is the subject of research.

How then might one scrutinize the representational politics of VOICES OF THE RAINFOREST simultaneously as commercially avant-garde cultural production, and as “world music”? One way is to acknowledge that VOICES OF THE RAINFOREST presents a unique soundscape day in Bosavi, one without the motor sounds of tractors cutting the lawn at the mission airstrip, without the whirring rhythms of mission station generator, washing machine, or sawmill. Without the airplanes taking off and landing, without the mission station or village church bells, Bible readings, prayers and hymns. Without the voices of teachers and students at an airstrip English-only school, or the few local radios straining to tune in Radio Southern Highlands, or cassette players with run-down batteries grinding through well-worn tapes of string bands from Central Province or Rabaul. Without the voices of young men singing pidgin songs while strumming an occasional guitar or ukulele at the local airstrip store. And without the recently intensified and almost daily overhead buzz of helicopters and light planes on runs to and from oil drilling areas ranging over thirty miles to the northeast.

Does this mean that VOICES is a falsely idealized portrait of Bosavi's current acoustic ecology, romantic at best, deceptive at worst? Certain critical viewpoints could position it that way. And an honest response could only accept why those concerns are voiced, yet insist that the recording is a highly specific portrayal, one of an increasingly submerged and subverted world of the Bosavi soundscape. Clearly, it is a soundscape world that some Kaluli care little about, a world that other Kaluli momentarily choose to forget, a world that some Kaluli are increasingly nostalgic and uneasy about, a world that other Kaluli are still living and creating and listening to. It is a sound world that increasingly fewer Kaluli will actively know about and value, but one that increasingly more Kaluli will only hear on cassette and sentimentally wonder about.

Lest it seem that there is still some hedging here, the stakes can be stated more bluntly. The sound world in Bosavi is one that I hear as powerful and unsettling, and, more importantly, one that can still be heard. Because I am equal parts researcher and artist I feel a need to make that world more hearable, to amplify it unashamedly in the hope that its audition might inspire and move others as it has inspired and moved me. VOICES then is no illusory denial that both nature and culture in Bosavi are increasingly drowned out by “development,” the apologist euphemism for extraction and erasure. Rather it is an affirmative counter-drowning of “development” noise with a reminder of what a co-evolved ecology and aesthetics sounds like. As a celebration that is also an alarm, my representational re-erasing is motivated equally by affection and by outrage.

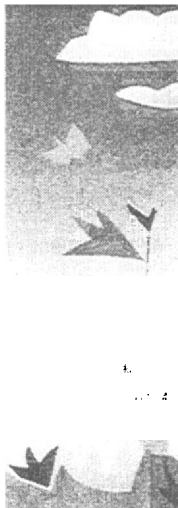
Such editorial politics and aesthetics are obviously dense and complicated. So far nobody has confused the recording with the New Age meditation tapes whose titles, while similar, indulge and seduce with promised echoes of the audio-idyllic. At the same time, I am conscious that much anthropological debate on representation is circumscribed in almost entirely realist and literalist terms. The most typical criticism addressed to VOICES OF THE RAINFOREST is framed this way, as an insistence that destruction and domination be treated in more overt, “serious” terms. That critique strikes me as equal parts sincerity and naiveté. There is only one response, and a rather old one at that: artistic projects are, for some of us, equally overt and “serious” however much more risk their subtleties bring to the realm of cultural politics.

Similar concerns can be voiced surrounding possible readings of the cover art. The images for the VOICES OF THE RAINFOREST covers were produced by Boston artist Karyl Klopp. After Rykodisc showed me examples of Karyl’s book design work I sent her some photographs and we discussed the VOICES cover concept by phone. Karyl’s final design responds to two ideas central to Kaluli aesthetics. One, concerning content, is that in ceremonial performance Kaluli dancers turn into birds singing by a forest waterfall. The other, concerning form, is that the visual and aural aesthetic of the Kaluli rainforest world is one of blended, overlapping textures and densities. Karyl’s cutout style evokes broadly layered color mon-



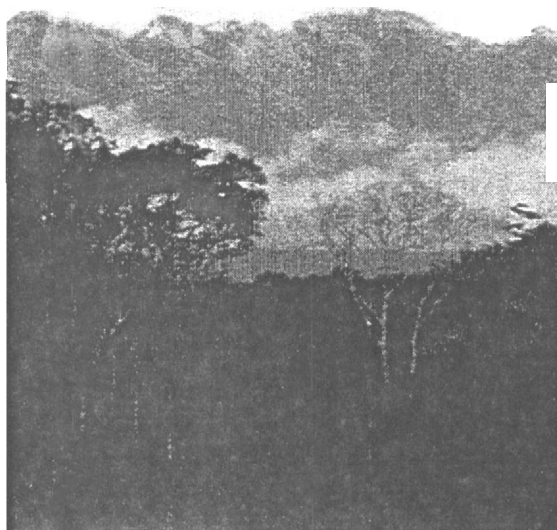
tage resonances from Matisse to Hockney. For me this works well to feelingly present Kaluli notions of content and form. Others have voiced worry over what they see as an overly romantic image of forest beauty.

Wrapping the two panels around the covers on this issue of PUBLIC CULTURE enhances the possibility for a particular reading of these images. The front panel of course is dense and its central image represents the aesthetic integration of nature and culture. The back panel is less dense, and not just because only one bird, frog, and shrub are depicted. There is an evocative gap between the clouds and the forest floor as well, making the image interpretable as a scene where the absence of culture, the lack of human presence, signals an “unnatural” world of nature, a world with a hole punched through its green layer. This was not the major intentional design concern when I asked Karyl to make a simpler, less dense second panel to wrap around to the back of the CD packaging and booklet. But now that I have begun to look at the two images this way, the difference between the front and back panels evokes for me both the memory of florescence and the sense of escalating loss.



When I read that we lose 15–20,000 species of plants and animals a year through the logging, ranching, and mining that escalates rainforest destruction, my mind immediately begins to ponder how to possibly calculate the number of songs, myths, words, ideas, artifacts, techniques — all the cultural knowledge and practices lost per year in these mega-diversity zones. Massive wisdom, variations on human being in the form of knowledge in and of place: these are co-casualties in the eco-catastrophe. Eco-thinout may proceed at a rate much slower than cultural rubout, but accomplishment of the latter is a particularly effective way to accelerate the former. The politics of rainforest ecological and aesthetic co-evolution and co-devolution are one. This is the central representational issue embodied in the content, artwork, packaging, recording, editing, marketing, and

royalty distribution of VOICES OF THE RAINFOREST, and I welcome responses from readers of PUBLIC CULTURE both to the recording and to the representational dilemmas sketched here.



Steven Feld is in the Departments of Anthropology and Music at the University of Texas at Austin.