

## Film, Video, and Multimedia Reviews

### *Reviews of Short Films*

This issue exclusively features reviews of short films (under thirty minutes). Because of the primacy given to feature films in both reviews and distribution, shorts often fly under our radar. Shorts offer a few benefits for ethnomusicologists. Due to their length, they may be more feasibly used in a classroom. They can offer a concise audiovisual complement to text-based scholarship. Shorts are also a promising format for ethnomusicologists moving into film-based scholarship or film analysis. (Consider the differences of complexity and effort between a monograph and an essay.) Shorts are also more at home on the internet and at film festivals. They are generally accessible by contacting the filmmakers themselves.

Benjamin Harbert, Review Editor,  
Film, Video, and Multimedia Reviews

**Worth repeating!** Produced, directed, filmed, and edited by Miranda Van der Spek. Sound recording by Miranda Van der Spek and Robert Bosch. Sound mixing by Robert Bosch. Stichting CineMusica in collaboration with Mirandas filmproducties. French with English subtitles. Digital download, color, 28 mins., 2011. Contact: [mirandasfilmproducties@gmail.com](mailto:mirandasfilmproducties@gmail.com).

*Worth repeating!* (2011) by Dutch filmmaker and visual anthropologist Miranda Van der Spek, has been screened recently at the last symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Audiovisual Ethnomusicology in Lisbon and the Ethnomusicological Film Festival in Florence. This short documentary focuses on the instrumental music of the Ouldémé, an agricultural ethnic group living in the Mandara Mountains, in the north of Cameroon, and in particular on the panpipes and their relation with daily life, especially the production of millet.

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One of the characteristics of the Ouldémé music is the cyclic repetition of the polyphonic structures in hocket style, which are mainly played on pan flutes. The film's title seems to refer both to the iterative form of Ouldémé music—indeed, a common feature of most of Sub-Saharan traditional music—and to the idea (expressed by the author in the film's synopsis) of the interconnectedness of their music with agricultural life. As the filmmaker states, “The Ouldémé's worldview is reinforced by building the film as a cycle and an organic whole.”

The style of filming and editing emphasizes this congruency. The camerawork is sober, mostly filmed on a tripod, with many close-ups, long takes, and slow pacing. The editing's pace is based on rhythm, not only the rhythm of the music but also following the rhythm of movements in nature and people's daily routine. There is no voice-over narration. Rather, the film is structured by captions and interviews in observational style. It is in three parts, according to the calendrical and agricultural cycle: the rainy season, the dry season, and the festival of the new year.

The film starts with a performance of a group of men playing a one-note flute (*aziwili*). The flutes are played in sets of nine, only by men, when the first drops of rain fall. We are informed by a caption and an informant—who appears only later on the screen and whose name and role are not mentioned—that flutes are used to call for rain to make the millet grow. The propitiatory rite involves a door-to-door collecting procession in which the hosts offer the “pilgrims” a drink based on millet. It is pointed out that the communitarian feature of pan-pipe flute music is based on the fact that this ritual music cannot be performed by only one performer but needs at least two interlocking flutes to be effective.

In the next performance, young women constitute an ensemble of two-note panpipes (*ázhèlèh*) used for the millet-growing cycle. This performance practice also has a courtship function, allowing the girls a way of finding partners through the “catchy” sound of the panpipes. To a degree, the panpipes become instruments of seduction. In the part related to the celebration of the new harvest, we see a group of three men playing a transverse flute (*mezlezle*) while some old women are dancing and shaking ankle rattles, as well as singing in response to the flutes in a call-and-response pattern.

In the second part of the documentary, related to the dry season, the filmmaker focuses on the Ouldémé arched harp (*kurndù*). It is worth mentioning that this instrument was also the primary focus of another short film, *Une harpe ouldémé* (1999), by Nathalie Fernando and Fabrice Marandola. During Van der Spek's film we are informed that while the flutes of the rainy season are played to stimulate the growth of millet, the harps are played after the harvest to celebrate the storage of the millet at home. This is a strict rule; in fact, if this musical practice were to be inverted, the harvest would be compromised. In a few frames, the filmmaker shows the making of three-holes flutes with a beveled

embouchure (*dènènà*) and their performance by three men, but it is not clear their context of use.

The final part of the film is focused on Walamataya, the festival of the new year, which coincides with the start of the wedding season. A ritual of divination involving the sacrifice of a chicken will indicate if the marriage festival will be successful or not. To celebrate this festival, only drums are used to accompany the women's chant: small and large barrel drums (*àtim* and *wari tim*), cylindrical drums (*gwàndàràyà*), and hourglass drums (*déwdéw*). The interviewee informs us that "if you are not married when the moon of the new year festival appears, you are not allowed to marry anymore. You have to wait till next year. The man who has not found a woman plays the *ambelén gwara*, the flute of the unlucky."

Miranda Van der Spek proves to be familiar with cinematographic language. The editing and camerawork in these sequences are excellent, attuned to the music, and rarely intrusive. The film flows well, with no dead time in its twenty-eight-minute length. The pictures are pleasing, well exposed, and well framed, with a variety in camera angles. The sound recording is very good. According to the author's visual anthropological background, *Worth repeating!* privileges a culturalist approach, emphasizing the connection between music and culture and the music contextualization at the expense of further ethnomusicological information related to musical forms and structures, as well as musical instrument making and performance practice or even issues connected to musical changes and musical borrowings (such is the case of the *dènènà* end-blown flute, borrowed from the Muyang).

One of the primary strengths of the film is pointing out the intrinsic relationship between Ouldémé music and the agrarian cycle and showing how each step in the cultivation of millet corresponds to a specific instrumental set. It also clearly shows the gender distinction between musical instruments belonging to the male domain and those related to the female domain in Ouldémé society. Well suited to classroom use and appropriate for both scholarly and general audiences, *Worth repeating!* should be informative and compelling for anyone interested in African music.

## Reference

Fernando, Nathalie, and Fabrice Marandola. 1999. *Une harpe ouldémé (An Uldeme harp)*. Video, color, CNRS, 16 mins.

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**Music Man Murray.** Produced, directed, filmed, and edited by Richard Parks. Original music by Van Dyke Parks. In English. Web, color, 22 mins. 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXTPJekfBOM>. Contact: [hellothisis-richard@gmail.com](mailto:hellothisis-richard@gmail.com).

Shot, directed, edited, and produced by filmmaker Richard Parks, *Music Man Murray* is a short documentary film about an eighty-eight-year-old man, his hundreds of thousands of vinyl records, and his desire for his collection of carefully curated recorded sound to live beyond his years. The film introduces viewers to Murray, the founder and owner of Music Man Murray, a vinyl record store located in Los Angeles, California. While the film focuses on an older man's relationship to his enormous record collection, it also portrays a rich snapshot of midcentury Jewish Los Angeles, a mix of Canters Deli, Hollywood cameos, and Jewish cultural brokers like Murray whose iconic shops served as multicultural meeting points in the diverse LA landscape. The film is also an audiovisual essay that invites reflection about the preservation of the material objects of recorded sound in the face of rapidly changing entertainment technologies.

While not made by a music scholar, *Music Man Murray* connects with ethnomusicology in important ways. It is a powerful testimony to the way that mediated sound objects are made meaningful by the people who make, sell, and buy them. Far from a cold economic analysis of the changing nature of music industries, the film shows us how records accumulate layers of meaning as they are curated into collections and enthusiastically bought and sold by people who cherish not only the records but also the places where records can be found. The film also serves as an evocative point of entry from which to jump into more nuanced conversations about the social actors who populated the local economies of mediated music in Los Angeles over the past century. From another angle, *Music Man Murray* contributes to conversations about music and aging by emphasizing not only what younger generations gain from the wisdom and life stories of older adults but also what older adults gain from engaging in creative activities that allow them to stay engaged and connected to their communities. In a scene between Murray and a young aspiring opera singer, we see Murray's joy passing on cultural knowledge about a particular album filtered through his own autobiographical anecdotes while they actively listen together.

The narrative structure of the film is built around filmed interviews of Murray and his son, Irving, leaving viewers at the end with the kind of knowledge they might gain from having wandered into Murray's shop one afternoon. Each man takes turns speaking uninterrupted, creating an intergenerational back-and-forth between father and son as they independently reflect on Murray's relationship to the thousands of records covering every visible surface in his store. While Murray charismatically talks about his life story and his search to find a buyer for his entire collection, Irving speaks of his admiration for his father

and the humanity present in the fact that his father handpicked and carefully curated every object in his store. Rich with expressive gestures and dramatic pauses, these interviews illustrate film's ability to document sensory knowledge embodied in ethnographic interviews.

*Music Man Murray* opens with a striking high-angle wide shot of Murray sitting on a small chair in a narrow aisle in his store. He is surrounded by towering shelves of records, which fill the majority of the frame. The shot sets the tone for the film, in which Parks paints an intimate portrait of a man whose life has been definitively shaped by his massive record collection. As Irving says, "There is no separation between the store and my father." Throughout the film, Parks cuts between these carefully staged and lit interviews of Murray and Irving; to B-roll montages of fixed-frame close-ups and pans of different angles of the store; to scenes of the protagonists listening to music, sifting through records, attending to office work, and conversing with friends and store customers. Parks also edits archival footage and home movies over Murray's recollections of his younger life. In what is perhaps an unintentional but clever juxtaposition to the home movies of his past, some of the candid footage shot of Murray in his current neighborhood is filmed with handheld camerawork, giving the viewer a home-movie feel that adds intimacy to this personal family portrait.

The film's soundtrack shifts across the voices of the protagonists, the sounds of vinyl records, and a film score written by Van Dyke Parks, father of Richard Parks. The addition of a film score adds a noticeable layer to the emotional subtext of the film—a mix of nostalgia and sentimentalism that carries us through the past, present, and future of Murray's life's work. While the use of a musical score is a departure from standard practice in ethnomusicological filmmaking, Parks demonstrates how creative use of sound can enhance the emotional character of a film without detracting from its ethnographic legitimacy.

*Music Man Murray* is the kind of film you can watch and appreciate on a Sunday afternoon in your living room or within the context of a variety of university classrooms involving but not limited to studies of music and media, music and aging, music and film, and the musical cultures of Los Angeles. Its relatively short length allows viewers just enough time to be engrossed in the subject matter yet not enough time to be saturated by the characters or the story. The film does what great short films often do: it leaves us with an interest to learn more, more about Murray and his collection and more about other people like Murray and their carefully curated time capsules of commercially recorded sound.

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**These C\*cksucking Tears.** Directed by Dan Taberski. Produced by Dan Taberski and Christy Lamb. Cinematography by Damon Hoydysh. Edited by David Mehlman. Music by Patrick Haggerty. In English. Web, color, 15 mins. 2016. <https://vimeo.com/186421525>.

Filmmaker and storyteller Dan Taberski is best known for *Missing Richard Simmons*, his riveting (and in many ways invasive and voyeuristic) podcast series about the disappearance of the flamboyant fitness legend. *These C\*cksucking Tears* is Taberski's documentary short film about Patrick Haggerty, an activist and singer/songwriter who recorded the first album of openly gay country music in 1973 with his band, Lavender Country. Through a series of interviews with Haggerty, a pair of music journalists, and Haggerty's current drummer, as well as some present-day performance footage, this fifteen-minute (profanity-laced) film is at once a touching exploration of a working-class gay man's experience in a homophobic world and a nuanced take on some not-so-nuanced songs that speak truth to power.

More music and more discussion of the music would have augmented the film. Taberski includes a music journalist noting that *Lavender Country*, the eponymous 1973 album, was not intended to be a gag or a novelty album but rather a political statement and a sensitive act of self-expression. Yet his most extensive exploration of Haggerty's songwriting involves the song "Cryin' These Cocksucking Tears," as if Taberski can't help but find the title amusing (he named his film after it, after all). We hear two other songs from the album: "I Can't Shake the Stranger Out of You," a song about the alienation of anonymous sex, which Taberski uses to frame Haggerty's discussion of sexuality and homophobia, and a short snippet of "Back in the Closet Again," a rendition of "Back in the Saddle Again" that closes the film. We don't get to hear that song's pessimistic lyrics, which mention the Black Panthers, women's liberation, and class struggle alongside "them campy Gay guerillas":

That was the end of the revolution, my friend  
 'Cause all of us are going to the pen  
 They're rounding up the Blacks  
 Then they're after gay folks next  
 So I'm back in the closet again.

Other songs on the album are similarly poignant, angry, and startlingly fresh today. Indeed, with a few exceptions, much of Haggerty's righteous fury is missing from the film. Also missing is any discussion of the surprising and interesting arrangements on *Lavender Country*, which include a piano that sounds more inspired by Joni Mitchell or James Taylor than by honkytonk. There is also no investigation into the album's reception at the time of its release; all we're told is that the album's limited run sold out. Those who study material culture,

mediation, and reception might wonder who bought the album and what it meant to them.

Instead of rage, politics, and sex—the matters seemingly on Haggerty’s mind when he recorded his album—Taberski treats us to the self-reflection of a septuagenarian and to a taste of camp. We see childhood photos, including one of Haggerty onstage in drag as a boy, as well as photos of him as a young activist. In a series of charming segments, we see him perform “old songs for old people,” as Haggerty says, live with his band in a nursing home, in a clearing staged for the documentary, and later at a rock venue following a punk act with which he shares an ethos. With a hand-held shaky camera, Taberski walks us through the woods to Haggerty’s mobile home, parked under a metal awning, and he brings us inside Haggerty’s now-abandoned childhood home. If viewers second-guess Haggerty’s working-class country realness as a gay man in Washington state, Taberski removes all doubt.

This sharply produced film is at its best when it lets Haggerty speak for himself. Taberski seems to be interested in the stories of white American queer men that subvert reality TV narratives about wealth and interior design. Instead, his storytelling introduces us to complex individuals with difficult upbringings and radical politics. And it is Haggerty, droll and thoughtful, who best explains his own experiences, his music, and his beliefs. Lamenting his limited access to Nashville, he says: “Yeah, I’d love to be a popular, fabulous, rich, famous country music singer. But to do that, to get there—no, Mary, I don’t think so.” On his father’s advice to be proud of who he is: “Don’t sneak, or you’ll ruin your immortal soul.” And on his own advice to other musicians to sing their truth: “Well, if you’re gay, sing it!”

I can imagine ethnomusicologists showing this engaging film, which won awards at SXSW, Outfest, and the Seattle International Film Festival, in courses on musician biographies, gender and sexuality, class, American music, country music, music and politics, and music and film.

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