

Sound, Echology & Cosmology: Charlie Keil asks Steve Feld about his Bell Quest

CK: So you're off to Japan to hear the seventy-four ton bell, tell me about it.

SF: The seventy-four ton bell rings on new year's eve at the Chion-in Temple in Kyoto. It's the largest bell in Japan, and this is the lead temple for Jodo Buddhists in Japan, so many thousands of people will be there to hear it on new year's eve. It takes seventeen monks an hour and fifty minutes to ring the bell 108 times, representing the 108 desires that Jodo Buddhists are meant to eliminate as the new years comes. The bell is about ten feet high and five feet in diameter and is struck by a long swinging pole; the monks need to use their body momentum to swing the pole, the whole event is also quite athletic, a sort-of martial art bell ringing.

CK: So when did this bell quest begin for you?

SF: You were there at the inception! In 2000, turn of the millennium, in Greece, we were standing in the hills above Dorkas and we heard all those bells ringing without seeing any sheep. You were talking about the landscape and living in these kinds of places..

CK: Hearing the bells before seeing the animals is really important...

SF: exactly. . . we were standing in this huge place and I had an epiphany. People always said the only place to do my kind of thing, on the relationship of sound, echology, and cosmology, was in the rainforest. So here we were standing in this place, and we heard the goat bells and in those weeks we were watching people with animal skins dancing around with bells, listening to instruments made out of these animals, and listening to animals walking through the land. I realized these animals are ringing the land and making a map of the land. The animals are a ringing map, drawing the relationship of the public and private land, they're walking the commons.

That moment set off four or five questions to me. The first one being: are bells to the history of pastoral Europe what birds are to the history of the rainforest? Are bells a technology for producing a consciousness of pastoral space and time, the way rainforest birds are

technology for doing the same? I started to think, is this really about the same acoustemological triangle that connects sound, echology and cosmology? You know you have the spirit world, you have the environmental world, and you have sound making the connection. Whether its church bells, religious bells or anti religious festival bells, or animal bells, there's a whole kind of echology. Goats with the higher and sheep with the lower sounding bells. Why do they seem tuned so that you can hear all these distinctive timbres? Like real attention is being paid to these bells playing the roles of different voices for different animals. So all of these questions about how bells are tuned, how bells connect animals and shepherds, sounds and community space and time, all this stuff came over me. Like, what is this belling of the churches and town halls? Who owns time anyway? The church or the state? Even without knowing any of the details, it seemed like on the surface of it, there must be a big bell story about authority and power, the struggle of the church and state, the struggle between animals and people, the struggle between music and noise.

That's when I realized there was a second CD project beyond what we had come for - the Bright Balkan Morning soundscape. So I began thinking the CD that became Bells and Winter Festivals of Greek Macedonia. And that CD, in its own subversive way, was like Voices of the Rainforest in the way that it suggested a serious connective tissue between goats and their bells, sheep and their bells, churches and their bells, people wearing the bells and wiping out the church bells with their noise, and the connection of all this to the world of the Romani instrumentalists.

CK: Certainly the content of that one festival we saw with the pope and Dionysius, that was sort of an annual comedic psychodrama, full of fun, a take down of the church. It's a take down of marriage, patriarchy, as church, state and nuclear family. Something like that is going on.

SF: Maybe the thing about bells that makes them so unique as a technology of sound consciousness, is that they are equally linked to these histories of disruption and to authority. There is no more authoritative deal to the church than those bells telling people they better show up in ten minutes. It's a social control device par excellence. But at the same time when we were in the streets in Nikisiani and Kali Vrissi we saw and heard what

people were doing with those bells for epiphany and elsewhere at carnival, we saw and heard how this is a time when turning it inside out and upside down gets done with bell sound, with noise. Somehow it is also about people connecting with animals, like wearing those big animal skins. Getting wrapped up and getting the bells out is really about the magic of going wild. I had no idea that histories of sound existed like that - most of what I knew about masking and carnivals was from pictures I had seen in European history books. I had never heard anything like that, and still haven't other than our Greek CD and the parallel one I just did in Southern Italy - Saints, Animals and Sounds, about the bell festivals for Sant Antonio Abate, patron saint of animals, the only guy who gets to be in church with a pig.

So since then I've done five years of bells, back to Greece, plus Norwegian bells, Danish bells, Finnish bells, French bells, Italian Bells, Japanese bells, Ghanaian bells. And one big theme in all of this work is bells and outdoor instruments. At the January festivals in Italy I encountered things that were so much like what we saw in Greece, but instead of zurna and dauli it was the ciaramella and zampona. These outdoor instruments do the wailing because they can cut through the bells. And the whole way that they would wipe the bells out and the bells would wipe them out, comes back to the struggle between music and noise, to make the world dance.

CK: Zampona? Is that the Italian word for the bagpipes? And ciaramella the double reed like zurna?

SF: Yes. I put some of the carnival Greek bagpipe and bell music on the first Time of Bells CD, and then on the second one I put some of the Italian bagpipes and bells. The story this carnival stuff tells me is that bells have been the domain of the fools, the domain of play. But bells also chase the devil and they chase the wind, since the middle ages of Europe. They were tied around the necks of prostitutes, just like stuff with irons and prison gear, there's horrible stuff there about controlling and marking people, who is on the margins and who is in the center. But when you flip back to the other side you need to ask: why does the fool always wear a bell? That's perhaps more complicated to answer than why does the goat always wear a bell? The shepherds in Crete know every animal by the sound of their distinctive bell; according to Panos (Panopoulos) this is so even with a flock of 200. We

say how bellmakers work with a shepherd to get the timbres to interact properly, so its like everyone talking. But at the base is the uniqueness of each bell, the idea that each animal has its own voice.

In Crete Dick (Blau) and I saw bells out of use and asked Panos to inquire why such a serious financial investment is just lying around. The owner replied that the animals they belonged to have passed away. So it is too sad to hear those bells because they are so identified with an animal. There's a whole way in which that bell can become the personality, the history, the whole social relationship between the shepherd and that animal.

CK: So Greece and Italy are of a piece?

SF: Greece and Italy are definitely talking to each other in terms of their bell histories of authority, and their bell histories of disruption, and their community history of animal bells marking out movement through common lands.

CK: What about Finland and Denmark and the other places up North? Do you get the same reverb that it's a male thing?

SF: In Norway, Finland and Denmark I've been listening to much more urban stuff, but I still hear that echology, cosmology, sound triangle. Like the track on the second Time of Bells CD, the track with the Finnish church. The bell rings for ten minutes to announce the service, and as the bell rings the birds get more excited. That's been going on for the 700 years of that church. You create these urban environments, put these big bells in them, and the birds co-evolve with them as sound marks. So there is a whole way of broadcasting the perimeters and boundaries of communities, and how communities got established. You've got the world of birds and bird migration interacting with the world of these church bells.

CK: The pastoral part of it, the sheep and the goats, doesn't it occur to people to talk about that these days? Or how it was before in rural Finland or rural Denmark?

SF: I don't know because I haven't done the rural thing there. But some of the histories are not quite the same, I think, owing to large expanses of land, different techniques of shepherding, different histories of domestication. There is certainly a lot to explore there; I've used the Italy, Greece, France piece of the story to

try to get into these pastoral and small community histories. But in Denmark and Finland and Norway I have explored different ecologies. Like in Oslo with the relationship of urban sounds, from brass bands to street trams to traffic patterns, and their connection to church bells. In Finland I was pursuing an interesting history in a small community with the oldest pump organ in Finland and I noticed the reverberation time of the organ was dead on similar with the reverberation of the bell. In Copenhagen I was listening to a carillon in the rain and the maze of passing bicycles and cars at rush hour. So the ecological questions there are about how these bells and other instruments got tuned together so that they have interlocking reverberation histories.

CK: Have you heard any origin myths or stories about the first bells or the first situations of putting bells on animals?

SF: People who work on histories of domestication in Europe have approached this. Then there's archeological work on this in China and elsewhere. And a big piece of it is in Africa which has to do with the history of blacksmithing connecting agriculture and rhythm, fire and power, music and poetry and history.

CK: Do people ever contact you after hearing one of your CDs to tell you that they have a bell to show you?

SF: Well I started this work basically by just asking friends, you know, "take me to your bells". The only person who came after me that way was a community foundation interested in peace bells.

CK: These peace bells tend to be huge right?

SF: In some places they are huge, like the world peace bell in Newport, KY, which is the largest swinging bell in the world, 66 tons. That's an extraordinary bell that I recorded. Rather than inspiring me in terms of peace it just really made me feel like, wow, here I was in the heart of war-inspired America, really deep in the heartland, and what was this bell doing there? So that's the bell that I took to Rahim AlHaj, wanting to put Iraq inside it. And we cooked up a composition together where he improvised on the oud to the overtones of the bell. That will be on Time of

Bells CD four, along with the sounds of the Hiroshima peace bell that rings on August 6th every year.

CK: Why do you think the Japanese are more into the echology pun, or acoustemology, or the sound quality aspect of this project? It seems more of a preoccupation with these topics in Japan than anywhere else. Am I projecting that or do you get the same sense?

SF: I don't want to essentialize anything to Japan or to Japanese acoustic sensibilities. But there is definitely something going on here that is important for us to try and sort out. There is an unquestionable attentiveness to the pleasure and power of ceremonial bells in Japan, and that is why, after that Hiroshima experience last summer, I want to go back now for new year's eve and hear the Chion-in temple bell.