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“The Sublime Frequencies releases embrace the world of feeling, injecting mystery and sensuality — the qualities that drew us all to music and film in the first place — back into ethnography” (Veal and Kim 2016: 19).

The introduction’s final remarks in *Punk Ethnography: Artists & Scholars Listen to Sublime Frequencies* synthesize well the key elements of this 2016 collection of essays edited by Michael E. Veal (musician and professor of ethnomusicology at Yale University) and E. Tammy Kim (writer and editorial member of the *New Yorker*): music, film, and ethnography at the Seattle-based record label Sublime Frequencies. The essays collectively address the label’s history in sound, evoking and problematizing its musical production and *modus operandi*. The editors’ different backgrounds form a basis for a large multivocal work that hosts the contributions of 20 different authors from a range of disciplines, including ethnomusicologists and popular music scholars (David Novak, Andrew C. McGraw, Shayna Silverstein, Julie Strand, Stanley Scott, Lynda Paul, Joseph Salem, André Redwood, Cristina Cruz-Uribe); musicians and DJs (Chris Becker, Gonçalo F. Cardoso, David Font-Navarrete, Ethan Holtzman); journalists, independent writers, and bloggers (Wills

Glasspiegel, Jonathan Andrews, Marc Masters, Brian Shimkovitz, Andrew R. Tonry); and visual artists (Robert Hardin, Rachel Lears). The crossover approach of the book mirrors the history of the label itself, situated at the intersection of music, film, and ethnography. The book’s most significant achievement is in representing the many sounds and voices that comprise the past and present core of the label’s life.

Sublime Frequencies was founded in 2003 by brothers Alan and Richard Bishop (previously bandmates in the art-punk band Sun City Girls) together with their friend Hisham Mayet, a passionate traveller and amateur filmmaker. From its foundation, Sublime Frequencies (henceforth SF) has directed its attention to soundworlds far from the United States, such as Mali, Haiti, Thailand, Iraq, and Java to name a few. The label has focused particularly on the vernacular and popular musics of traditional musicians and rock’n’roll bands, but also on recordings of rituals, animals, urban and rural soundscapes, commercials, and news broadcasts. This kaleidoscopic set of sounds was collected by SF’s field recordists and archival researchers in libraries, dusty markets, thrift shops, and local radio stations, with recordings released as monographic collections, compilations, and radio-collages dedicated to individual countries and cities. Sublime Frequencies has always stood out for a production ethos and aesthetics rooted in the Do It Yourself movement (Holtzman and Hughes 2005), especially in relation to the lo-fi techniques used for the productions of records and video clips.

Punk Ethnography is divided into three major parts with brief interludes. Part One considers the context of the label’s founding and mission. It presents

interviews with the label's founders, a retrospective on the Bishop brothers' band, Sun City Girls, and a final contribution related to issues of copyright and intellectual property associated with the work of the label. Within this first section is David Novak's chapter, "The Sublime Frequencies of New Old Media," which considers SF's works dedicated to individual countries and cities, which are produced in a way that maintains the rawness of the original recordings, including their volume levels and consequent distortions. The author analyzes these distortions as a quality that connects the records with the North American alternative rock and punk scene which can discover "its nostalgic distortions elsewhere in the world" (45). Moreover, SF, with "its mashups and overlaps, degraded sources and untraceable short-circuits," documents musics that normally do not find a place within the "world music" record industry (45). For these reasons, Novak, drawing on Feld's article "A Sweet Lullaby for World Music" (2000), refers to SF releases as "a noisy wake-up call for global media" (45) which have allowed the record label to create a personal aesthetic and a musical manifesto founded in the "distorted rawness" of its recordings.

A brief interlude featuring interviews with two label listeners prepares the reader for Part Two, "Visual and Sonic Culture," where the focus becomes the sound and the audio-visual representation of cultures made by the label over the years. A second interlude follows presenting another two interviews with SF listeners. The book's final and longest section, "Local Forays," explores the different regions represented by the label's releases (Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and South America), mainly

referring to the radio-collages issued by SF that have been realized through the audio patchwork obtained by the mixing together of different radio programs from a city or country. For example, the chapter written by Joseph Salem about SF's Radio Palestine release deconstructs the collage in a table illustrating the different sound sources that compose the record. The radio composition is broken down into categories (narration, music, western pop, ceremonial, various) and annotated following their appearance in time.

The principal aim of the book's editors is to understand the ways that Sublime Frequencies represented a new concept label for so-called "world music" or "world beat" at the beginning of the new millennium. Since its inception, SF has tried to challenge such problematic labels for musics outside the Western popular and art idioms, instead proposing a DIY approach to the conceptualization, production, and promotion of its recordings. This DIY approach is positioned outside the mass marketing of world music record companies (this is particularly highlighted in David Novak's chapter) and is far distanced from academic musicology which the label's founders have condemned as colonialist and outdated. Several authors explore how SF's own idea and practice of ethnography and ethnomusicology is conveyed through album artworks that follow an abrasive style which reflects those of punk fanzines and album covers, later replicated through the production of unconventional music videos and documentaries (Lynda Paul's chapter, "Just Pure Sound and Vision: Rawness as Aesthetic-Ideological Fulcrum in Sublime Frequencies' Videos," considers SF's forays into music video production and the

broader visual representations of nations and communities).

A major strength of this volume is its polyvocality. The different voices of scholars, musicians, and the label's aficionados are engaged in a dialogue mirroring the distributed and dynamic identity of Sublime Frequencies itself. Here, the vitality of the many musics represented in SF's releases emerge as a product of the label's encounter with the public, when the social and interactive experience of music provokes differential interpretations within its listeners. In fact, the interpretations of the writers and listeners sometimes seem to overwhelm those of the label's owners, Alan Bishop and Hisham Mayet, from whom we hear in only two separate and reprinted interviews in different chapters.

The politics of representation is another touchstone issue the book addresses. How SF frames the sounds of different countries and communities through sound recording, artwork, distribution, and promotion, as well as how the label engages (or not) with issues of copyright and the ethics of intellectual property are considered. André Redwood, for example, dedicates an entire chapter to considering the activities of SF with respect to US copyright and intellectual property law (the label does not always recognize copyright on the music issued, mostly because of the difficulty in finding the effective owners of song copyrights, especially for traditional repertoires). Other authors consider broader conceptual issues. Despite situating itself radically outside (and against) the obvious politics and economics of the world beat music industry, SF's work is still never far from the implicit dangers of the de/recontextualization of musical cultures that are

often fetishized as "exotic" by Westerners. In this regard, Shayna Silverstein's chapter deals with Syrian *mutrib* (wedding singer) Omar Souleyman who gained popularity in Syria and the Arab world through his international debut record, *Highway to Hassake*, produced by SF in 2006. Outside his native Syria, his techno-*dabke*, an electric version of traditional dabke music, has also been much appreciated among Western punk, dancehall, and world beat audiences. Silverstein considers the reception of Souleyman's concerts in these latter contexts. These audiences, Silverstein suggests, are driven by "countercultural desires for authenticity, cultural tolerance, and political activism" (268) and discourses of class and race often connected with the Western reception of non-Western popular music. Silverstein notes that these audiences "consume techno-dabke" (279) while resisting any contextualization of the Arab world. Instead, Souleyman frames his sounds with aspects of Western popular music genres with which Western audiences are already familiar (for example, techno and house listeners find familiarity with his fast and repetitive rhythms, while other fans recontextualize Souleyman's distorted and low-fi releases with the aesthetics of DIY punk rock records). Silverstein's main point is that, even if their engagement with Souleyman's music is framed by anti-hegemonic, countercultural stances, their reception is still a decontextualized one "ironically reproduc[ing] the very logics of the global media commons that Sublime Frequencies originally set out to resist in its experimentalist approach" (279).

Overall, the multi-generic composition of the chapters constitutes a thorough work that not only serves as a

compendium of SF's activities, but also serves as a useful guide in understanding how the DIY practices of punk subculture can be adopted in ethnomusicology. The commingling of different points of view create a smart, careful critique of the label's actions and philosophy, one that never elevates SF founders as heroes, but tries to understand their choices and problematize their activities. *Punk Ethnography* offers a lucid and captivating written counterpart to the label's DIY ethnography of sonic and visual cultures around the globe. 🌿

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