

Listen, that's us! – A sound ethnography on the local reception of the Paul Bowles collection of Moroccan traditional music

Abstract

In 1959, the American writer and composer Paul Bowles spent four months in Morocco recording traditional music performances all over the country. The resultant «Paul Bowles collection of Moroccan traditional music» was an early attempt at cultural preservation by means of modern audio technology. The goal of this project is to conduct an artistic and cultural re-interpretation of the Bowles collection as a complex configuration of listening and recording practices. Our main research questions are: How can the Bowles collection be described as a specific case in the history of listening and recording practices? What can be learned about traditional, transcultural and aesthetic listening practices by researching with this collection in Morocco today?

Im Jahr 1959 verbrachte der amerikanische Schriftsteller und Komponist Paul Bowles vier Monate in Marokko, um an verschiedenen Orten traditionelle Musik aufzunehmen. Die resultierende «Paul Bowles collection of Moroccan traditional music» gilt als ein früher Versuch kultureller Pflege durch den Einsatz von Audiotechnik. Das Ziel des vorliegenden Forschungsprojekts ist eine künstlerische und kulturelle Neuinterpretation der Sammlung, in der sich ein komplexes Geflecht aus Hör- und Aufnahmepraktiken niederschlägt. Unsere Hauptfragen lauten: Wie kann die Bowles-Kollektion als spezifischer Fall in der Geschichte von Hör- und Aufnahmepraktiken beschrieben werden? Was lässt sich mithilfe dieser Kollektion über traditionelle, transkulturelle und ästhetische Hörpraktiken im heutigen Marokko lernen?

Introduction

In 2010, the «Paul Bowles collection» was digitized and repatriated from the Library of Congress in Washington to the American Legation in Tangier (TALIM), where it is now accessible for consultation. Bowles was not an ethnographer, but an established writer and composer with an expressed interest in sound aesthetics and avant-garde music practices. As an American expatriate living in Tangier since 1947, he had long experience with Morocco and a clear opinion about Moroccan music and society. Such ideas had an impact on Bowles's recording practices and are thus also present in the collection.

By returning the recordings to their places of origin and discussing them with local musicians, we want to explore modes of transcultural and aesthetic listening, whose significance applies to current debates in the broader field of sound studies. Our main research questions are: How can the Bowles collection be described as a specific case in the history of listening and recording practices? What can be learned about traditional, transcultural and aesthetic listening practices by researching with this collection in Morocco today?

Methods

The research is designed in three stages. The first research stage is concerned with an analysis of Bowles's listening and recording practices that were involved in the realization of his preservation project. This includes tracing back the recording process via the study of Bowles's notes in the collection, followed by a comparison of his recordings with others using similar technology within the broader field of scientific, commercial and artistic recordings of his time. This stage will result in a historico-cultural interpretation of the Bowles collection in terms of specific listening modes.

The second stage is interested in the memories and responses which can be elicited today by returning some of the Bowles recordings to their original recording locations in the Amazigh regions of Morocco. Loble's method of «sound elicitation» will be applied in order to evoke such responses with local traditional musicians and contemporary witnesses from 1959. The listening sessions will also be an occasion to explore with the participants the possibility of transcultural listening experiences.

The third and last stage of the research will consist of a series of artistic sound experiments, to be made in collaboration with three selected Moroccan artists, together with local participants. Based on field recordings of traditional music performances and other situations related to social aspects of traditional cultures, this approach will be an attempt to enact, render and externalize specific aspects of the traditional and transcultural listening cultures explored during stage two. This additional method of sound elicitation will lead to the collaborative realization of a number of short artistic productions which will be further interpreted in terms of collaborative knowledge-production.



Soundscapes of cultural conservation – an artistic investigation of «Paul Bowles collection of Moroccan traditional music» (Image: Gilles Aubry)