

The Earliest Sound Recordings among North American Inuit

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On 7 November 1903, Captain George Comer of the American whaling schooner *Era* recorded on a phonograph a few songs of the Aivilingmiut and Qaernermiut in northwestern Hudson Bay (Ross, 1984:73). These appear to have been the earliest sound recordings ever made among the Inuit of Canada and Alaska. The recordings made by Diamond Jenness among the Copper Eskimos (1914-1916) and those made by Christian Leden among the Padlimiut (1914-1916) have hitherto been considered as the earliest, but Comer's first recording preceded these by more than a decade and his pioneering work should be recognized.

Earlier recording ventures had been undertaken among Eskimo people in eastern Siberia and Greenland. During extensive phonorecording among several native groups in north-eastern Siberia, the Russian anthropologist Waldemar Bogoras, working for the Jesup North Pacific Expedition of the American Museum of Natural History, obtained several cylinders of songs from the Aivan Eskimos. These were recorded at Indian Point on the Bering Sea coast, probably during May and June 1901 (Boas, 1903:115).

Shortly thereafter, at the opposite extremity of the Eskimo domain, a Danish botanist, Christian Kruuse, used a phonograph to record six songs and five incantations in a camp near Angmagsalik on the east coast of Greenland. This occurred sometime during the winter of 1901-02; the precise recording dates are unknown (Kruuse, 1902, 1912).

The American explorer Robert Stein, who between 1899 and 1901 studied the music of the Polar Eskimos of Northwest Greenland using the oral or direct-dictation method, remarked that a certain song had "already been recorded by means of the graphophone" (Stein, 1902:345). Regrettably, he gave no details. It is not clear whether he was referring to one of Kruuse's recordings or to another early undocumented ethnomusicological achievement.

When Comer first recorded the songs at Hudson Bay in November 1903, the *Era* was in winter quarters at Fullerton Harbour, N.W.T. (Fig. 1). The vessel was visited frequently by "ship's natives" and their families, who had completed the autumn caribou hunt and settled at the whaling harbour for the winter to work as hunters for Captain Comer and his crew.

On earlier voyages to the region Comer had developed a profound interest in the life of the Inuit, had observed aspects of their material and intellectual culture, and collected samples of their implements and clothing. In this work he had been encouraged by various scientists, notably Franz Boas. Before Comer's 1903-1905 voyage, Boas, then curator of ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, had

supplied him with a phonograph and 50 blank wax cylinders for recording songs and stories. The machine used by Comer was evidently an Edison Standard Phonograph, on which a metal stylus cut grooves on a wax cylinder. He used it on a number of occasions during the winters of 1903-1905, and again during his voyages of 1907-1909 and 1910-1912. All the cylinders he obtained — a total of 64 — were deposited in the American Museum of Natural History. The Comer collection of Eskimo music then sank into obscurity.

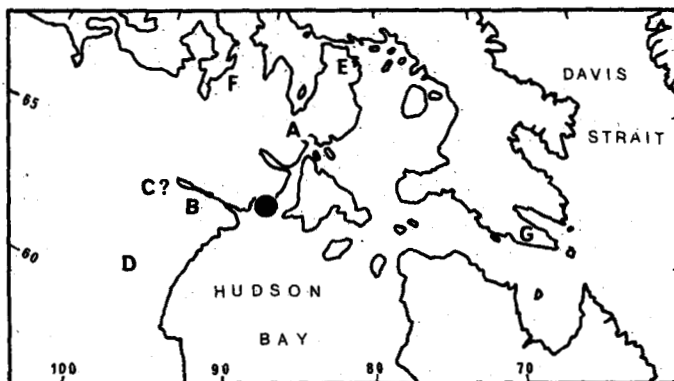


FIG. 1. Origin of the Comer collection. The groups represented are: Aivilingmiut (A); Qaernermiut (B); Shovocktownmiut (C); Padlimiut (D); Iglulingmiut (E); Netsilingmiut (F); and the inhabitants of the Savage Islands, who were probably the Qaumauangmiut of Boas (G). Most of the records were obtained on board ship during winters spent at Fullerton Harbour (circle), from "ship's natives" and visitors from distant regions.

The famous Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv built up a bank of about 11 000 phonographic cylinders and many disc records from various parts of the world between 1900 and 1940 (Reinhard, 1961:44). This institution evidently possessed some recordings of Eskimo music around 1902, which were regarded by Erich von Hornbostel and his students as "representative of the world's most elementary music" (Cowell, 1954:3). Nattiez (1980:111) suggests that this was the Comer material from Hudson Bay, which had been "published" by the American Museum of Natural History between 1901 and 1909. In fact, none of Comer's cylinders reached the American Museum until the end of October 1905; they were never published in oral or written form; and the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv claims to have no knowledge of Comer's cylinders or von Hornbostel's study of them (A. Simon, pers. comm. 1984). If there were records of Eskimo music in Berlin as early as 1902 they must have been made either by Bogoras in eastern Siberia (1901) or by Kruuse in East Greenland (1901-02).

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It is not impossible, however, that some of the music recorded by Comer was present in the Phonogramm-Archiv after 1905. In 1906 the Archiv developed a process for copying wax cylinders by using copper negatives, or "galvanos", and was subsequently involved in copying arrangements and exchanges with many foreign institutions (Reinhard, 1963:8). References to the existence of Comer recordings might have perished during World War II when, according to Reinhard (1961:44), roughly 90% of the holdings were dispersed and lost.

I know of no evidence that the music recorded by Comer over a decade, with considerable effort (and a certain amount of tolerance on the part of the Inuit), has ever been transcribed or analyzed, with the exception of one song by Hague (1915). When the large phonographic collection made by Jenness among the Copper Eskimos was published (Roberts and Jenness, 1925), there was no reference to Comer's collection. Perhaps they were unaware of its existence, and thereby missed the opportunity for an interesting regional comparison.

Aluminum disc records were made from Comer's original cylinders in 1936. The cylinders were taken on loan to the University of Indiana in 1948 by George Herzog, a former student of von Hornbostel in Berlin, and were officially accepted for deposit in the Archives of Traditional Music in Bloomington in 1961. In 1977, following my request for sample items from the collection, the Archives copied the collection onto five full-track, seven-inch tapes of 1200 ft. 7.5 ips. The 64 items amount to 2½ hours of playing time, not 4½ as stated by Lee (1979:54).

Nine of the items are speech alone. The rest are either songs and dances, or mixtures of music and narration. They include stories of personal experiences (of living and of earlier people), songs relating to shamanistic performances, songs accompanying games, and most frequently songs about hunting; almost a third of the collection consists of caribou-hunting songs. The Aivilingmiut (16 items) and Qaernermiut (12 items) are best represented, but there are also songs and stories from the Shovocktowmiut (4), Padlimiut (3), Iglulingmiut (2), Netsilingmiut (2), and the inhabitants of the Savage Islands in Hudson Strait (1). The provenance of the remaining 24 items is uncertain. Altogether seven "tribes" or groups are represented.

Wax cylinders recorded in the field seldom produced high-quality sound. Music and folklore students around 1902 "required considerable training and experience to distinguish pure noise from the recorded sound" (Cowell, 1954:3). In addition, the cylinders tended to deteriorate through desiccation, cracking, and the development of moulds. For three-quarters of a century the Comer cylinders suffered the ravages of time. Their sound quality became extremely poor, and attempts by Inuit to transcribe the words were largely frustrated. An application made in 1983 by the Archives of Traditional Music to the National Science Foundation for a grant to cover the expenses of cleaning, repairing, and copying all its cylinder holdings was successful, however, and the quality of the Comer recordings has been improved.

These recordings may offer new insights into the diffusion of Eskimo culture. Comparison with other early twentieth-

century recordings from East and West Greenland (by Thalbitzer, Thuren, and Leden), Northwest Greenland (by Stein), the southern Barren Grounds of Canada (by Leden), the central Canadian Arctic (by Jenness), and eastern Siberia (by Bogoras) could contribute to knowledge of the spatial diffusion and regional alteration of particular songs and legends before 1920. Comparison with songs written down before 1900, in the pre-phonograph era, by Parry, Kane, Boas, and others, and with post-1940 wire or tape recordings available on disc records, could reveal the degree of song and legend atrophy or persistence through time, a vital facet of cultural change during the period of Euro-American influence.

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