

## The Gift of Music: A Tribute to Paul Shepard

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### Bernie Krause

Since 1968, Dr. Krause has traveled the world capturing sounds of creatures and environments large and small. He earned his PhD in the field of bioacoustics in 1981 and has worked at the research sites of Jane Goodall (Gombe, Tanzania), Birute Galdikas (Camp Leakey, Borneo), and Dian Fossey (Karisoke, Rwanda), as well as others recording and evaluating the manner in which soundscapes (consisting of the biophony, geophony, and anthrophony) convey meaning to the biotic world.

Dr. Krause also has an extensive professional music background. After playing guitar for Motown Records, he replaced Pete Seeger in the folk group, The Weavers (1963), introduced the synthesizer to the fields of pop music and film and, contributed performances to over 135 films including *Apocalypse Now*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Castaway*, and *Shipping News*, and over 250 recordings with major recording artists and acts. Krause has recorded 55 environmental soundscape CDs and creates interactive environmental sound sculptures for museums, zoos, aquaria, and other public spaces. His environmental sound sculptures can be found at the Smithsonian, the American Museum of Natural History, and can be heard on CBC/Galaxie broadcast. His most recent books include *Into A Wild Sanctuary: A Life in Music and Natural Sound* (1998) and *Wild Soundscapes: Discovering the Voice of the Natural World* (2002) a book and audio CD. Krause lives in Glen Ellen, California with his wife, Katherine, and cats.

Who speaks of victory? To endure is everything.  
Rilke

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The clipping arrived in the mail with a note scrawled at the top: “You’ll like this,” my then 83-year-old father-in-law wrote in large letters. As I scanned the headline and introduction to the article from the Salt Lake Tribune, two words immediately caught my attention: “controversial,” and “cancer.” That was my introduction to Paul Shepard and one of those curious moments that shapes lives.

The subject was Shepard's last book, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*, published just before his death. Peppered with a vague tone of journalistic skepticism and references to colleagues who found his views of the natural world threatening to their long-held positions, the article hooked my interest enough that I felt compelled to buy the book. I was not disappointed. Each sentence revealed a holographic world-view that compelled me to look deeper and wider into issues of the wild and the meaning of "humanness;" subjects I had thought I understood. His solicitous narrative raised questions where there previously had been certainty. The words clarified concepts that had been ambiguous. The concepts challenged long-held views and shook them up like a fine dry martini. By the time I finished the first read (I've read it once almost every year since 1996), I could well understand how Shepard's efforts could induce skepticism. His densely packed narrative is not an easy read and obliges initiates to think with very great care. While gentle and passionate, at the same time he cajoles and challenges and prods one to contemplate the world in new light. The result was and is luminous, revealing, and timeless. The Sherpas in the Himalayas will often stop and sit mid-trek seemingly for no reason. When asked why, their answer will be "We're waiting for our souls to catch up." Shepard asks the same of us.

My path to Paul Shepard was oblique. Always drawn to the world of sound (I don't see very well), I was a successful professional musician until, in my late 30s, I grew quite agitated and stressed. Deeply held fears of the wild natural instilled by my family while growing up in the midwest did nothing to quell my cryptic longing to be outdoors rather than confined to windowless air-conditioned studios. Ultimately, I recognized my conflict as a profound case of "nature deficit disorder." The called-for remedy was swift and permanent. Dropping music and all the surrounding "noise," I returned mid-life to academia and earned a graduate degree with an internship in bioacoustics. I wanted to re-energize my life fueled by the harmonious and resonant critter voices I constantly dreamt of. I sought a different relationship with the world into which I was born. Like Ulysses, I was drawn to a different song.

Aside from a few hints from fine writers like Loren Eiseley, Farley Mowat, and Arne Naess, I quickly learned that there was not much literature that explored the natural world from the combined perspectives of science, history, philosophy, sensibility, and experience, leaving the impression that there was so much more of the story that needed to be told. From any perspective, including that of the deep ecology movement, most writing avoided the subject of sound as a part of the natural experience. It was a void I hoped would be replenished. But how to do it? Since bioacoustics, the recording of creature voices,

was an altogether new field introduced in the late 1960s—the time when I actually began recording in the wild—I navigated those waters completely without a compass or “guide.” There was no support.

Alone and without direction, I knew fundamentally that I wanted to capture the sound of entire landscapes. This approach was not an obvious concept in the beginning and it met with no little resistance. Taught for years that the sounds of the natural world needed to be deconstructed, abstracted, and singled out in order to be analyzed and understood, I endured the gnawing feeling that we had only looked at the tip of the iceberg. The old model felt to me like separating the first principal violin part from Beethoven’s Fifth, recording it solo, and then attempting to grasp the entire symphonic experience from that single voice as if the rest of the orchestral parts were composed of unwanted “noise.” That thought, alone, propelled me in another direction: collecting an entire body of natural sounds in the context of time, place, location. I had the strong sense of the existence of far greater significance inherent in natural soundscapes on a much larger scale: recordings that would later become known as entire *biophonies*. The focus of this holistic approach seemed to me more calibrated to the ways in which the wild natural expressed itself. The method was more intuitively aligned with the spirit of life—the collective voice of still wild habitats—and the result was much more engaging to the human ear. The effect was the equivalent of adding a well-synchronized sound track to an otherwise vast collection of silent images. But as Loren Eiseley discovered and forewarned, and as Shepard found out, one does not risk of coloring outside the lines of established thought without some peril.

When R. Murray Schafer, the Canadian composer, now Emeritus from Simon Fraser University, wrote his seminal book, “*Tuning of the World*,” in 1977, he introduced the concept of the soundscape. At that moment, Western languages began to incorporate words with specific meaning in the acoustic domain. And my mission took on new significance: Collecting soundscapes—natural, rural, and urban.

For many years I worked in a fragmented way, noting bits of consequence in the soundscapes I was collecting worldwide, and accumulating scraps of information from a wide range of books, articles, and input from colleagues. Little by little, the biophonic form began to take shape.

In the early 1980s, while listening and recording at a site in Africa, I experienced an evening chorus as the virtual “critter orchestra” I had imagined years earlier. But this time the chorus sounded clearly defined where insects filled certain frequency and temporal niches, and birds,

mammals, and amphibians filled others. Even though spectrogram analysis bore this out, few colleagues were ready to buy it. “Anecdotal,” was the almost universal response despite the evidence. “Nice aesthetic idea,” sniffed others. After several more years in the field and hundreds of additional hours of analysis, I tentatively introduced the concept of the “niche hypothesis” at a lecture given to an environmental studies group at the University of California in Santa Cruz in 1988. Despite slides and representative soundscapes, blank stares reflected back from faculty and students, alike. It was as if the voice of the natural world didn’t exist outside of a single birdcall or whale vocalization.

During the subsequent eight years BTO (before *The Others*) I collaborated with Louis Sarno, an anthropologist who had left the United States with a one-way ticket to the Central African Republic to live with and record the music of the Bayaka (Babenzélé) Pygmies. In addition to the idea of the critter voice niches, Sarno’s work supported another observation experienced when working with cultures that lived more closely connected to the natural world: the Bayaka were using the forest soundscapes as a natural karaoke orchestra *with* which they created their music and performed.

Yet, until I read *The Others*, none of these ideas truly coalesced in ways I could fully explain. You see, Shepard was one of the few who not only “saw,” but also “listened,” and had a grasp of the wildness that included much larger perspectives than most of his colleagues and peers. While the entire book dazzles with insight, the narrative in Chapter 12 of *The Others*, “The Gift of Music,” brought it all together for me during the summer of 1996.

Why and how did we first dance, sing, and make instrumental music? . . . When humans uttered their first words, birds, frogs, and insects were already whistling, dancing, drumming, trilling. . . Somehow, as we listened, all of this came to us as performances of rhythms in sound and motion, which we felt in ourselves as music. And some of our songs were about them, emulating their piping, treble, trumpeting, and modulation. We found that we could extend our song by blowing through their pithed wing bones and amputated horns, striking their stretched skins, plucking and scraping their dried guts, or shaking their skulls full of loose teeth. We incorporated their bodies with “singing” as part of our own.<sup>1</sup>

By completing the circle, Shepard conceived of humans in a natural world continuum not only physically and organically, but culturally through sound as well as other constituents. Chapter 12, in particular, where Shepard broke the cipher I had heard and imagined instinctively, liberated me to explore the idea of the natural soundscape well beyond the boundaries I had earlier set for myself. It was music, after all. And I finally found a colleague and friend who truly understood the essence of that “voice.” But most important, Shepard was comfortable with the

idea that we may never fully know how the natural world works. And perhaps we shouldn't. As my late colleague, Dr. Kenneth Norris (Director of the Environmental Studies program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the scientist who discovered how dolphins echolocate) once said while on a field trip to discover the secret of sand dune song: "Bernie, who cares if we learn how this system works? We're having such a great time in the field exploring, I hope we *never* find out!"

Paul Shepard died of cancer six months after I read the *Tribune* article. We never met. His publisher, reluctant to give out his contact information, acted wisely. Paul was too sick to receive visitors. I had too many questions. Nevertheless, his work continues to inspire mine almost every day. The descriptive elements of the soundscape—*biophony* (the combined creature vocalizations in a given habitat), *geophony* (the non-biological natural sounds such as the effects of weather, water, etc.), *anthrophony* (human sound—mechanical and non-mechanical) are direct results of Shepard's influence and his demand that we pay particular attention. The imprint left in the path of his many books, articles, speeches, and the few lucky students who found themselves momentarily in the light of his presence is no accident of genius. Shepard's gift was generous and intentional. Paul was not a musician. But he was a person who probably knew more about music than any teacher I've met. That is because he understood its origins: In the end, as it was in the beginning, he reminds us that it was the animals who taught us to dance and sing.

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## References

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<sup>1</sup> Shepard, 1966.

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