



[\*On Record: Audio Recording, Mediation, and Citizenship in Newfoundland and Labrador\*](#) by Beverley Diamond. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2021. 434 pp. ISBN: 9780228006558.

**Reviewed by Elsa Marshall**

*On Record* is a rich ethnography of audio recording in Newfoundland and Labrador from the early twentieth century to the present day. This meticulously researched text is a scholarly tour de force, full of the voices and sounds of Newfoundland's many communities and the diversity and complexity of this reluctant Canadian province. Diamond's nuanced analysis, which draws on her own alliance studies model as well as Bruno Latour's actor network theory, brings together threads from the many areas with which she has engaged across her career, including Indigenous musics and modernities, gender, technological production and mediation, and various settler musics in Canada. This is a local study with far-reaching implications and promises to be widely applicable across the fields of ethnomusicology, musicology, and folklore, as well as Newfoundland and Labrador studies.

The introductory chapter details Diamond's source materials, including access to an impressive discography of over 3,000 recordings made in Newfoundland and Labrador, and presents key themes and historical contexts. Notable is the discussion of citizenship, understood here not only as relations between people and the state but also as those between individuals. By connecting citizenship to the mediation of sound, *On Record* argues that audio recording has shaped the fabric of civil society in Newfoundland and Labrador. The following three chapters are roughly chronological. Chapter 2, "The Lure of Audio Recording," discusses the use and impact of early recording technologies and radio, and considers how access to those technologies intersects with gender and social class. Of particular interest is Diamond's retelling of the story of early folklore collecting in Newfoundland and Labrador from the perspective of locals who assisted "come from away" folklorists. By focusing on those who provided housing to folklorists, directed them to singers, and, as informants, curated their own musical offerings, Diamond reinscribes this narrative with local agency. Diamond also reminds the reader that Newfoundland and Labrador in the early-



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and mid-twentieth century were anything but isolated, with silent films arriving via boat almost immediately after their release and radio airwaves transmitting tunes from West Virginia.

Chapter 3 profiles four musicians—Wilf Doyle, Dick Nolan, Joan Morrissey, Harry Hibbs—who established recording and performing careers in the 1950s to 1970s. The narratives presented herein are wide-ranging, engaging with repertoire selection, intended audience and reception, the availability and affordances of recording technologies, and the impact of gender as it shaped the career of Morrissey vs. her male peers. Diamond is particularly attentive to the dynamics of home and away—both Nolan and Hibbs lived away from the province for much of their careers and all four of these artists were signed with mainland companies—and, following alliance studies, the means by which these musicians positioned themselves as simultaneously mainstream and regionally distinctive. The introduction of recording studios and labels to Newfoundland and Labrador is the subject of Chapter 4, “A Unique Music Industry.” Diamond deftly connects larger social issues, including resettlement and the cod moratorium, to recording as a site of documentation and an outlet for individual and community voices. This chapter also expands the alliance studies model to include a continuum from professionalization to democratization. Sound is at the forefront and differences in recordings produced by different studios are described in engaging detail: one studio’s recordings are “brighter, with shimmering percussion and with the accordion forward in the mix” while those of another are “intentionally softer and more blended” (p. 98).

Chapter 5 is organized as a series of “troubles with genre,” and offers a sharp examination of the dissonance between genre labels and musical practice in Newfoundland and Labrador. Referencing recent scholarship on genre and the categorization of recorded sound, notably in North American popular music, Diamond documents the many difficulties of assigning genre labels to music and musicians in Newfoundland and Labrador. These range from the practical—in small communities, the ability to play in multiple genres is often essential to making a living—to the ideological: what repertoire and performance/recording practices, for instance, count as “traditional”? This chapter closes with a set of particularly “troubled” genre labels, notably choral music, Indigenous musics, and “other linguistically or ethnically distinct music” (p. 167), including music from francophone communities. This is followed by a chapter on the specificities of recorded sound itself, or “Sonic Signatures.” Decisions made in the recording process shape listeners’ perception of the sonic space: instruments step to the center to take the lead or move to the side; microphone placement makes the labour of playing more or less audible. Diamond profiles the varied sonic signatures of the accordion, an instrument closely associated with Newfoundland and Labrador, and asks, “How has studio production created and re-created its sounds and social imaginaries?” (p. 181). She then analyzes multiple recordings of the Newfoundland hit “Sonny’s Dream” and closes with a discussion of the use of sonic signatures to evoke place.

Chapter 7, “Audio Recording and/as Action,” shifts away from production to intended output and reception. Diamond examines the use of recordings to sustain public memory, to memorialize loss

and disaster, and as forms of political action, including through parody. She ties these seemingly disparate threads together through a discussion of vulnerability, arguing that, in Newfoundland and Labrador, vulnerability is often recognized and expressed through music rather than hidden away (p. 205). This chapter has particularly powerful sections on both Indigenous and settler “lineages and generations”: that is, how music has been used to trace and maintain connections between generations in spite of, or in response to, displacement, resettlement, and, for Indigenous communities, residential schools.

For the final chapter of *On Record*, Diamond invites guest author Mathias Kom to reflect on the RPM Challenge—a call to make and record an album of original music in under a month—as it plays out in St. John’s. This is a largely celebratory chapter focusing on the participatory nature of this challenge, notably the intentional decentering of technical musical competencies, and the way that its fleeting nature generates a sense of nostalgia for the present. Kom also touches on efforts to make the challenge more accessible, noting a gender divide between those with the equipment and skills to record themselves and those without.

*On Record* will easily find its place on seminar reading lists in ethnomusicology, musicology, folklore, popular music studies, and area studies. If, as Diamond asserts, the recording studio is a microcosm of society, then this monograph is a new history of Newfoundland and Labrador, one shaped in sound, engraved on vinyl and tape, and now shared via digital formats.