

# Sonic Landscapes and Cultural Identity: The Role of Indigenous Ethnomusicology in the Modern Soundscape

## Abstract

The contemporary global soundscape is increasingly characterized by a tension between localized acoustic traditions and the homogenizing forces of digital globalization. This article utilizes R. Murray Schafer's "Soundscape" theory and Christopher Small's concept of "Musicking" to examine how indigenous acoustic practices function as vital markers of cultural identity. By interrogating the phenomenon of "schizophonia"—the digital dislocation of sound from its source—the study explores the ethical and ontological implications of recording indigenous oral histories. Through an analysis of the "Hybrid Turn," where traditional frequencies intersect with modern electronic production, this paper argues that ethnomusicology must evolve from a descriptive science into a proactive participant in the preservation of ancestral soundscapes. The article concludes by positioning the *International Journal of Creative Arts & Performance (IJCAP)* as a critical space for the amplification of marginalized sonicity.

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## Introduction: Defining the Soundscape and the Sense of Place

Sound is never a neutral occurrence; it is the architect of "place." R. Murray Schafer (1977) famously defined the **Soundscape** as the total acoustic environment in which we live. For indigenous communities, the soundscape is not merely background noise; it is a complex semiotic web consisting of "keynotes" (the fundamental sounds of a geography, such as wind or water), "soundmarks" (unique acoustic markers that function like landmarks), and "signals" (foreground sounds like bells or drums).

In these contexts, sound serves as the primary vessel for ontological security. The relationship between a community and its acoustic environment is symbiotic. When we listen to a specific indigenous rhythm, we are listening to the history of a people's relationship with their flora, fauna, and spirits. Christopher Small's (1998) concept of **Musicking** reinforces this by suggesting that music is not a "thing" or an object of art, but a verb—a social process. To "music" is to engage in a set of relationships that affirm one's place in the world. Consequently, the preservation of an indigenous soundscape is the preservation of a way of being.

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## The Threat of Schizophonia: Dislocation in the Digital Age

The advent of high-fidelity recording and digital sampling has introduced a profound rupture in the indigenous soundscape—a state Schafer termed **Schizophonia**. This refers to the split between an original sound and its electroacoustic reproduction. In the modern era, a sacred chant from the rainforest can be extracted, looped, and sold on a global marketplace, completely detached from its ritualistic and geographical origins.

## The Ethics of Extraction

While digital technology allows for the documentation of endangered languages and songs, it also facilitates a "sonic colonialism." When a sound is separated from its source:

1. **Contextual Loss:** The "musicking" aspect—the social relationship—is erased.
2. **Ontological Harm:** In many indigenous cultures, certain sounds are living entities. To record and play them out of turn can be seen as a violation of spiritual protocols.
3. **Acoustic Overcrowding:** The "lo-fi" soundscape of the modern city—characterized by a dense, uninformative wall of signal—often drowns out the "hi-fi" (high-fidelity) soundscapes where delicate indigenous signals can no longer be heard.

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## Ancestral Frequencies: Repositories of Oral History

Traditional instruments are not merely tools for making music; they are archives. The vibration of a Didgeridoo (Yidaki) or the specific tension of a Batá drum skin carries frequencies that have remained unchanged for millennia. These **Ancestral Frequencies** act as mnemonic devices for oral history.

### The Instrument as Chronotope

In many West African traditions, the *Kora* (a 21-stringed harp-lute) is played by *griots* who are the walking encyclopedias of their people. The physical act of musicking involves reciting genealogies that stretch back centuries. Here, the acoustic properties of the instrument—its timbre and resonance—are inseparable from the facts of history.

- **Sonic Mapping:** Indigenous communities often use sound to map territory. Songlines in Australia, for instance, are both musical scores and topographical maps.
- **Ecological Attunement:** Indigenous ethnomusicology reveals that traditional music often mimics the biological frequencies of the local environment, creating a "biophony" that fosters ecological balance.

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## The Hybrid Turn: Ancient Songs, Modern Beats

We are currently witnessing a "Hybrid Turn" in global music production. Contemporary indigenous artists are increasingly rejecting the "museum-piece" status of their traditions,

instead choosing to integrate ancient songs with modern electronic pulses. This is not necessarily an act of schizophonia, but rather an act of **Sonic Sovereignty**.

## Case Analysis: Global Fusion and Electronic Folk

Artists like the Colombian group *Bomba Estéreo* or the Ainu musician *Oki Kano* utilize modern synthesizers to amplify—rather than replace—their heritage.

- **The "Techno-Indigenous" Aesthetic:** By placing an ancestral flute over a four-on-the-floor beat, the artist asserts that their culture is not "of the past" but is a living, breathing participant in the present.
- **Subverting the Center:** This hybridity allows indigenous voices to penetrate the global pop-cultural centers (London, New York, Tokyo) on their own terms, using the tools of the modern soundscape to reclaim space.

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## Conclusion: Hearing the Unheard

The *International Journal of Creative Arts & Performance (IJCAP)* serves as a critical acoustic chamber for the voices that are often muffled by the "lo-fi" noise of the modern world. As scholars and sound artists, our responsibility is to move beyond the mere collection of "exotic" sounds and toward a deeper understanding of the ethics of musicking.

The modern soundscape is at a crossroads. We can either allow schizophonia to flatten the world's diverse acoustic identities into a single, marketable drone, or we can embrace a "polyphonic" future where ancestral frequencies and digital innovations coexist. By documenting these sonic landscapes, IJCAP reaffirms that every frequency has a story, and every soundscape is a home. To listen is to honor the identity of the "other."

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