

African music goes digital

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Recordings of rarely heard traditional African music collected over a period of 50 years by music historian Hugh Tracey are now available to anyone on earth via the internet. The International Library of African Music (Ilam), based at Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape, is in the process of digitising the music, which Tracey recorded in the southern, eastern and central regions of Africa.



Hugh Tracey in an undated picture with Pygmies of Central Africa.

Established in 1954 by Tracey, Ilam has digitised 20,000 songs, of which 14,000 are now available online from the organisation's archives.

The process of digitising the music has been a collective team effort. The team consists of sound technicians - engineer Elijah Madiba and his assistant Hilton Borerwe. To give the project chronological order and historical context, ethnomusicologist Dr Lee Watkins and cataloguing librarian, Michelle Boysen, were brought in to complete the digitising process undertaken by the technicians. Eight Rhodes University final year students who had been trained in data and sound capturing were also recruited to participate.

Tracey had been collecting music in remote parts of Africa for 25 years when he established the music library.

According to Ilam, "From its inception, Hugh Tracey's vision for Ilam was to encourage respect for African music and perpetuation of its traditional styles."

Discovering African sounds

Tracey's journey began in 1920, when the 17-year-old arrived in Africa from England.

He arrived in southern Rhodesia (modern day Zimbabwe) with his brother, who had been given a piece of land to farm.

Soon after their arrival, Tracey quickly picked up the Karanga dialect of the Shona language by working alongside the Karanga farm workers in the fields.

It was during this time, whilst listening to the farm workers singing, that he was introduced to African music.

His love for the art form grew, and it became his lifelong passion.

Tracey started recording singles with some of the farm workers in Johannesburg, and these were distributed across the world, with some of the music played as far as New York.

In the early 1930s, Tracey made contact with composers from the Royal College of Music in London, who encouraged him to continue with his musical research.

In 1973, when he released his biggest LP recording of the indigenous music collection he had amassed, he wrote in the introduction, "The history of this collection of authentic African music, songs, legends and stories is in many ways a personal one.

"It dates back to the early 1920s when I first sang and wrote down the words of African songs I heard in the tobacco fields of southern Rhodesia."

Despite the inroads Tracey was making in recording African music, he faced an uphill battle within his own community who could not understand his fascination with African music.

According to Ilam, Tracey "almost immediately became aware of the resistance of the colonial community, in particular those in education, the church and government, to any suggestion that Africans had any culture or music that was worthwhile."

But this did not stop Tracey from pursuing his passion even further.

He left southern Rhodesia and his travels took him to Angola, Zambia, Rwanda, Malawi, South Africa, the Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), Tanzania, and Mozambique, where he partook in various traditional ceremonies and interacted with various tribes to capture their sound.

When his travels brought Tracey to South Africa, he quickly learned that the tribes' music could be divided largely into the music of the Sotho and Tswana people, and those of the Nguni - which includes the Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele and Swati people.

It wasn't just the singing that fascinated Tracey; instrumentation used to make the music was also of great interest to him.

In some of his recordings, like a 1950 release entitled, *Tanzania Instruments*, Tracey focused on the instruments in particular.

As such, records made in South Africa were divided into the different tribal groups.

As the influences of jazz started to dominate secular music, Tracey also augmented his recordings to reflect this.

In 1950, and again in 1952, the music historian recorded the new contemporary sounds of jazz and this resulted in the albums, *Bulawayo Jazz from Zimbabwe* and *Colonial Dance Bands* which consisted of jazz music he had recorded in eastern and southern countries.

As he was one of the very few ethnomusicologists of his time actively in the field, Tracey gained recognition for his work and was duly appointed to a number of influential positions.

From 1936 to 1947, Tracey promoted African music as the head of the KwaZulu-Natal studios of the South African Broadcasting Corporation.

He also worked for Gallo as their head of African Music Research Unit.

He also published two critically acclaimed books, *Chopi Musicians* (1948) and *African Dances of the Witwatersrand Gold Mines* (1952).

Preserving Tracey's legacy

When Hugh Tracey died in 1977, his son Andrew became the new director of Ilam.

The institute originally operated as an independent body of archiving, research and a sound library with international funding.

When, in 1978 funding was cut in protest against the apartheid regime, Andrew needed a new home for the institute.

Rhodes University came to the party and Ilam moved to Grahamstown, where it still is today.

Now a retired academic, Tracey says his father's passion for African music was passed on to him.

Speaking to Eastern Cape based newspaper *The Herald*, Tracey says he immersed himself deeply into the music. "My approach was different from my father's. He did most of the recording. I spent time with the musicians to learn more about the music and to play the different instruments."

Current Ilam director and ethnomusicologist Prof. Diane Thram, says on Ilam's website that once the digitisation process is complete, the entire collection will be available internationally. "When the Ilam archive is professionally catalogued and digitised, its holdings will be accessible to the world-at-large through this website linked to the Rhodes University library on-line catalogue (Opac) and an e-commerce website currently under development."

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