



P.O.V.'s "THE TALENDERS"

By Adele Horne

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Filmmaker's Statement

I became aware of the recordings and unusual audio players that Global Recordings Network produces because I grew up in an evangelical Christian family. One day in the mid-1970s we received a package in the mail from a missionary friend. It contained a record player made out of a piece of cardboard folded into a triangle. A small phonograph needle protruded from one edge of the cardboard. The 78-rpm record that came with it had a hole drilled near the center, so that you could stick a pencil in and turn it by hand. The record played the story of Noah on one side and a message about "Christ Our Savior" on the other. The simplicity of this device, which worked without speakers or electric power, made a lasting impression on me. Twenty years later I decided to learn more about the organization that made it.

I became completely fascinated by the story of how Global Recordings Network makes and distributes recordings of Bible stories in indigenous languages. A missionary named Joy Ridderhof founded the organization in 1939 in Los Angeles, a few miles away from famous radio evangelists Aimee Semple MacPherson and Charles Fuller. Like them, Ridderhof believed in the power of media and entertainment to spread the gospel message. She remembered how crowds had gathered around gramophones in the Honduran villages where had worked as a missionary, and decided that rather than compete with this burgeoning medium, she would use it to preach.

What interested me most about this story was the encounter between missionaries from a globally dominant culture and indigenous people in remote locations, who are experiencing a variety of threats to their local resources. It struck me that the audio recordings were the point of contact, the thing that constituted and mediated the encounter between the missionaries and indigenous people. I knew early on in making the film that I wanted to explore the nature of this encounter and that I wanted to do so by looking very closely at the recordings and players as material objects. I wanted to show how the recordings were physically made and edited. This led me into an exploration of the physical properties of sound. I visited the UCLA physics department where I filmed a ripple tank and a chladni plate, two devices that appear in the film and show how sound waves work.

I learned that sound actually moves matter; it physically touches us. You can see this in the chladni plate: sound waves cause the grains of salt to vibrate and dance. I learned that sound is transmitted through space in something like a game of telephone. When you speak, your larynx vibrates, which displaces air molecules and sets them vibrating. One air molecule pushes the next all the way to the ear of the listener, where the vibration is passed through the bones of the ear, to nerves and then to the brain. This struck me as very similar to the process of translation that the missionaries use to make recordings. The missionary might speak a line of a script in English, then a local person translates it into, say, Hindi, and then a speaker of a smaller indigenous language translates the Hindi into their own language. Another game of telephone!

As words are made physical through sound and transmitted through space, their meaning changes, just as meaning changes through translation. This seemed to be a useful way to think about the recordings. It isn't simply a one-way communication from the missionaries to the indigenous people. Sociologist Fernando Ortiz introduced the term "transculturation" in the 1940s to talk about the active role played by the colonized in interpreting, selecting, modifying, and making use of the cultural objects imposed upon them by colonizers. It's important to consider how the media devices and the religion itself are used and changed by the indigenous communities in surprising ways. I wanted the film to raise the question, What do the recordings mean to the people who receive them? The answer is complex and varies from place to place. Ultimately, the film is about the power of media and the power of people as consumers of media to make their own meanings of it.

The film is a hybrid between essay filmmaking and a more observational, direct-cinema style. I really love both of these forms. I like how essay filmmaking can create a complex web of ideas, and I love the experience of creating scenes that are observations from life. Making the film often placed me in contexts where I wouldn't otherwise find myself. I spent a week traveling and living with the missionaries on the bus in Mexico. Although I grew up in an evangelical family, I hadn't been this immersed in an evangelical community for many years. I felt privileged to be invited into a world of experiences quite different from my own.

I also spent two weeks traveling by boat to remote islands in the Solomon Islands with a group of Australian missionaries. At the end of that trip I realized that I hadn't spent any money for two weeks: there was nothing to buy in these villages, where people lived by subsistence farming and fishing. It was an incredibly beautiful place, and quite devastating to feel that I might be seeing it at the moment before a cataclysmic change due to irresponsible logging practices.

A challenge in making this kind of film is how to position oneself as a filmmaker. When I traveled with the missionaries, I often felt that local people categorized me as one of the missionaries, even though I explained that I was not a missionary, but rather an outsider filming them. It helped to go back later and have conversations without the missionaries present, as I did in Mexico. It was also important to me that the missionaries understood that I was an outsider looking in.

When you travel with a group, sharing food and lodging, a certain camaraderie is developed. This was great and allowed for getting to know people on a personal level, but I also tried to be clear about our differences. When the group of Australian missionaries presented my sound recordist and me with red t-shirts with the mission's logo, we decided it wasn't appropriate to wear them because it might create confusion about our status.

I felt incredibly lucky to make this film. It fascinated me for the four years it took to make it. My hope is that people come away from watching it with a lot of questions. I've found that interesting discussions usually follow screenings of the film. It's important at this time in history to think deeply about encounters between people of different cultures and religions and to understand these encounters in all their complexity.

- Adele Horne

