

On Listening
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Edited by Angus Carlyle & Cathy Lane

On Listening is a unique collection of forty multi-disciplinary perspectives drawn from anthropology, bioacoustics, geography, literature, community activism, sociology, religion, philosophy, art history, conflict mediation and the sonic arts including music, ethnomusicology and field recording. These specially commissioned contributions explore the many ways in which skilled listening can mediate new relationships with our physical environment and the people and other species that we share it with.

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On Listening

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The pictures are spread before us like disjointed tiles—photographs from our long and entwined journey through music in Bengal. It's two of us; one singer and writer, the other sound recordist and sound artist. We have been travelling together, sometimes also with friends, in this eastern part of the Indian subcontinent for almost a decade, recording music that comes out of people's lives; in sound, image and text.

Images of Listening: Word-Pictures from a Journey Through Music

On a cold and dry afternoon in January 2005, Golam Shah Fokir was playing music in his house in Shaspur village in Birbhum and we were recording him. "Take what you can", he said to the camera, "these might well be the last pictures". Also the last songs, as it turned out within a couple of months of our field trip.

Golam Shah Fokir used to sing songs about the mysteries of the universe and the divine experience of love—they are called *fokiri* and *murshidi gaan*. For decades he had sung in shrines and festivals, gathering communities of listeners around him. The singer is also the teacher, imparting lessons to those who listen in faith, the insiders. Our presence was for a different purpose, hence our listening was also different; we knew Golam Shah would soon be gone and with him, a time in history. It is difficult to know how old he was then. Time can both weather, as well as make wiser. But Golam Shah seemed to have a premonition of death and on this day he played it out almost with a sense of humour. Totally photogenic, he posed for the camera, singing, talking, instructing, smoking; conscious of all the attention he was drawing and the recording equipment that surrounded him in that passing moment. He knew the value of being recorded, he knew in his own way about the power of recordings to preserve time, for he kept instructing his sons Salam and Jamir to sing their best. We took pictures of him playing with his sons, alone with his old violin, with his wife, daughters, sons, their families, children, villagers, with his followers and friends and also with us. He had full sway over his domain that day, almost pushing his frail body, voice and breath beyond their

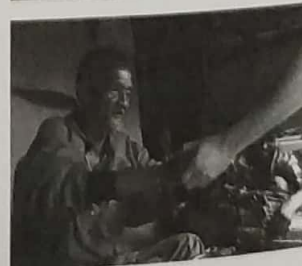
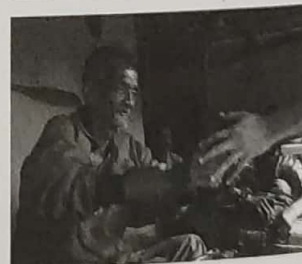
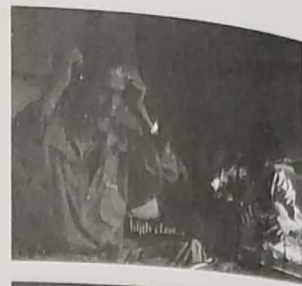


limits. We captured his image as he listened to our recording of his songs; then returned the headphones satisfied, saying, "Khub high class!"

First there is the performance, the moment of the making of the music, which is also the moment of recording, as well as the moment of experiencing the music live; then follows the ritual of listening to the recording. Sometimes we have conversation with the players, then we too—mostly Moushumi—become players. Sukanta silently records. He passes around the headphones after the recording is over, some listen, others look on. Later we look at photographs of singers and audiences caught in the act of listening. Words emanate from the images—words, the sound of the words, word-pictures, evoking memory and desire.

There are different ways of listening and different expectations written on these varied faces. Chandrabati Mashima, who was about 78 when we first recorded her in her home in Sylhet town in 2006, had appeared totally self-conscious from the beginning. She would stop us in the middle of the song if she felt she had made a mistake. Erase that bit, she said to Sukanta. Then when she listened to the recording, it seemed as if she was intently examining her reflection in the mirror. A smile of contentment lit up her face from time to time.

At the other end of the spectrum, far from this personal response, would be an obscure village by the Surma river called Shadhusree, also in the Sylhet region, where both singer and audience had collectively made music all through a night in the spring of 2008. Such is the nature of this music—it is ritualistic and communal. At the break of dawn they listened together to their songs.



It is such an absorbing image! One listens, others watch, but somehow their faces are as animated, as if they can gauge the sound from the expression on the listener's face, who is actually listening alone, through the headphones. In our heads, their last song ushering in a new day, the *probhati* keeps playing, long after it is over. *Probhato samay kale, Shachiro angina majhe/ Gourchand nachiya beray re*. The mad poet sings and dances at dawn, touching his listeners with the spirit of love.



We talk about ourselves. Sometimes I think I miss the touch of the skin of the sound. My listening is mediated by the machine, filtered through the microphone, recorder and headphones. I also miss seeing all the things going on around me.

I feel inadequate in other ways. I am too focused on the immediate and obvious to hear anything else. Sometimes the visual distracts me. Often it is only in your recording that I hear the details. Think how Hajera Bibi of Faridpur was talking about another time in her life which was filled with people. She kept saying, my voice wasn't like this, this is no song that I am singing, remember?

Yes, the dog barked and there was the prayer call of nightfall in the distance. Isha'a. Someone was drawing water from the screeching hand pump in the courtyard. A child was crying, her grandniece's I think. Hajera Bibi was trying to recall names and words of songs.

I know. I've heard that fading light in your recording.