

THE STARR COLLECTION OF RECORDINGS FROM THE CONGO (1906)
IN THE ARCHIVES OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC, INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Frank J. Gillis

The Collector

Frederick A. Starr was born in Auburn, New York, on September 2, 1858. He graduated from Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania, and in 1885 he received his Ph.D. from that institution. He was professor of biology at Coe College, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, from 1883-1887; registrar and professor of geography at Chautauqua University, Chautauqua, New York, from 1888-1889; ethnologist at the American Museum of Natural History from 1889-1891; and professor of geology and anthropology and dean of the science department at Pomona College, Claremont, California, from 1891-1892. In 1892 he was chosen to organize anthropological teaching at the then new University of Chicago. In this institution he served successively as assistant and associate professor and also as curator of the Walker Museum until his retirement in 1923 at the age of 65.

Field studies took him to various Indian groups in the U.S., and, from 1894, he made numerous trips to Mexico, Guatemala, the Congo, Japan, Korea, the Philippine Islands, Cuba, and Liberia, where he continually sought to identify himself with the indigenous population. His strong friendship for the people and countries visited, his ability to interpret the lives and customs of other peoples, and his enthusiasm led to crowded classrooms and many requests for him to appear in lectures. During the height of his career he enjoyed a wide notariety in the press, owing to the sensational character of many of his interests and opinions.

Starr was an enthusiastic student of every branch of science from his earliest school years; geology, archaeology, and physiology were subjects upon which he wrote articles and gave public lectures for many years. He was noted for the wide interest he created in the field of anthropology and the appreciation and understanding for other peoples which he engendered in his students.

He was an avid collector whose philosophy of collecting was to concentrate on the small items and aspects of daily life. He believed that someone would always save the more obviously valuable historical materials, but that

there was the danger that the evanescent, seemingly peripheral items would be lost or forgotten. His interests were wide and he was a perceptive observer who recorded in great detail the circumstances and situations encountered in his many field trips. He has thus left us a large body of significant historical materials pertaining to each of the geographical-cultural areas he visited.

Starr was the author of many books, articles, and reviews in various fields, and a number of foreign nations, recognizing the service he was performing in bringing about better understanding among the peoples of the world, conferred on him many honors.

He died in Tokyo, Japan, on August 14, 1933, at the age of seventy-four.

The Congo Trip

Starr conceived the idea for the Congo expedition after visiting a group of nine Africans—Baluba, Bakuba, and Batua—who had been brought to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, held at St. Louis in 1904, by S. P. Verner. It was thus natural that Starr would set up his first base of operation in Africa in the Kasai District, the home of the Africans he had met and studied in St. Louis.

Starr left New York on September 23, 1905, sailing first to Europe, where he visited various individuals and museum collections which would be helpful on his trip to the Congo. He departed from Brussels on October 19, and after stops at Tenerife, Dakar, Freetown, Accra, and other African coastal cities, he arrived at Leopoldville on about November 12. From Leopoldville Starr journeyed up the Congo, then down the Kasai River, arriving on December 29 near Ndombe (Figure 1), close to Wissman Falls, where he maintained a base camp for twelve weeks. Leaving Ndombe on March 22, 1906, he returned to Leopoldville, traveled up the Congo past Stanleyville, and went by rail to Ponthierville. On his return trip he journeyed up the Aruwimi River to Yambuya. Starr made many side trips up the Sankuru, the Lomami, and other rivers, into Lake Tumba, to Wissman and Stanley Falls, and canoed up many small streams during the 53 weeks he spent in Africa, traveling some 8000 miles and visiting 28 different groups of Congolese. He sailed from Boma, at the mouth of the Congo, on November 12 and, after visiting Antwerp, Brussels and other European cities, landed in New York on about January 1, 1907.

The Starr expedition was well equipped for anthropological fieldwork, carrying various measuring tools, material for making casts and impressions, camera equipment, and a cylinder phonograph machine which he used for playing cylinders and for recording purposes. He returned with much anthropological data, many photos and museum objects, and, as far as we can ascertain, twenty-four phonorecordings.



COPYRIGHTED 1907, UNDERWOOD AND UNDERWOOD, NEW YORK

Figure 1. Chief Ndombe with Family Group, in His Town. (From Starr 1907: opposite title page.)

Starr kept excellent field notes in which he recorded, in diary form, day by day events, lists of museum specimens acquired (including many musical instruments), photographs taken, recordings made, and other miscellaneous data. His field notes made during the Congo expedition are contained in twelve notebooks held by the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Library. The Library also holds his scrapbooks, letters, and other miscellaneous papers. The more extensive collection of his various notebooks, letters, papers, and other documents is held by the Newberry Library. The museum objects were purchased by the American Museum of Natural History. The photographic prints and negatives pertaining to his Congo trip, over 1000 in number, have not been located as of this date.

The Archives of Traditional Music received the Starr collection of African recordings in July of 1963 as a gift from the late Ralph C. Altman, formerly curator of the Ethnic Museum at the University of California at Los Angeles, and his wife, Mrs. Patricia B. Altman. Many of Starr's historical materials had been stored at the Los Angeles County Museum since *circa* 1925. The Altmans acquired the cylinder recordings through Starr's estate in about 1952. The collection was deposited in the Archives of Traditional Music through arrangements made with Alan P. Merriam, professor of anthropology at Indiana University. It is accessioned in the Archives under the number 69-15-F, with public listening copies bearing the numbers ATL 3617-3618 and 3645-3646. Included in the collection are sixteen original cylinders and eighteen commercially produced cylinders copied from the originals.

The Recordings

We do not know at this time what type or make of recorder Starr used on his African expedition. He did, however, keep detailed notes on all of his travels and thus this information may be available in the manuscript material held by the archives of various libraries and museums. The phonograph might perhaps have been shipped at a later date, as Starr's list of stereoscopic negatives gives, under item #29: "Arrival of graphophone: Mt. Washington [near Ndombe, the base camp]" (Notebook V: page 45). We also know that Starr was not a novice at collecting field recordings since he had been collecting recordings before he left for the Congo. Among his papers at the Newberry Library there is a letter from a patent attorney, dated May 12, 1904, which states:

I have been advised that the fire at the works of the Victor Talking Machine Company at Camden has not seriously interfered with the making of records and I have therefore forwarded your letter to Mr. [Eldridge R.] Johnson asking him to advise you when he would be ready to have your Indian Song Records made.

(signed) Ernest Howard Hunter

In his field notes (III:7) Starr gives "50 phonograph records" as the "results hoped for from trip." From the cylinders in the possession of the Archives and from references made to recordings in his notes we can ascertain that he collected at least twenty-four recordings.

From an examination of his notebooks it is apparent that Starr's interest in making phonograph records waned as his expedition progressed. Perhaps this was because he was not satisfied with the quality of the recordings produced; perhaps he was concentrating on other aspects of his investigations and time did not permit him to describe all of the recordings made. At any rate we find excellent, detailed notes on the earlier recordings, brief descriptions of following sessions, and no mention of the later recordings. Our study shows that he made some sixteen records during his stay of twelve weeks in the Kasai District and only eight records in the remaining thirty-seven weeks spent on the Congo and Aruwimi rivers.

On his return to New York, Starr made arrangements with Columbia to have them manufacture permanent cylinder copies of the African records. This was done in about 1908. Columbia evidently felt that the quality of the Starr recordings was not very high and thus they did not issue them commercially but made Starr's permanent copies through a new process which produced "indestructible cylinders." The cylinders thus produced were less breakable than those made under previous processes, but they were excessively noisy. The original cylinders thus give us a better quality of sound than do the Columbia copies.

From Starr's own list of records made (Figure 2), which gives information on the records numbered from 1 to 10, from references to the recordings in his notebooks, and from notations on the cylinder record containers we can enumerate the recordings collected by Starr (Table 1). The Columbia copies do not add to the existing documentation inasmuch as the Columbia staff, working independently of Starr, printed numbers and/or titles on the rims of the cylinders based on Starr's notations on the original cylinder containers. They often misread and misinterpreted the notations they used as a guide. There are, however, two commercially produced cylinder copies available for which we do not have the Starr originals.

Table 1. List of Starr's Recordings

Item no.	Starr orig. no.	Comm. cyl. no.	Place	Date (1906)	Title and/or description	Archives ATL no.	Quality**	Duration (@ 60 rpm)
1	I	1	Ndombe (Lower Kasai)	Feb. 6	Lushiba = whistle a. Lulua. 1. b. Bakuba c. Lulua. 2. d. Bakuba	3617.1/3645.1	VG	2'10"
2	Ia	IA	"	Feb. 5	[whistles]	3617.2/3645.2	G	2'17"
3	Ib	IB	"	Feb. 6	[whistles]	3617.3/3645.3	G	2'2"
4	IIa	2A	"	Feb. 6	Musical bow [recorded outside]	3617.4/3645.4	P	2'17"
5	II*		"	Feb. 6	Musical bow [recorded in house]			
6	III	No.3	"	Feb.14	Baluba song Chicama's Sons [solo/chorus]	3617.5/3645.5	F	2'18"
7	IV	IV	"	Feb.14	Baluba song Chicama's Sons [solo/chorus]	3617.6/3645.6	G	2'13"
8	V 2b	V26	"	Feb.15	Musical bow Baluba Zap. performer	3617.7/3645.7	P	2'18"
9	Va	VA	"	Feb.15	Musical bow Baluba	3617.8/3645.8	F	2'17"
10	VI*		"	Feb.15	Bakuba song Mianye			
11	VII	VII	"	Feb.15	Chimbundu Baluba Biombi Chibwaba [solo song]	3618.1/3646.1	P	2'6"
12	VIII	VIII	"	Feb.15	Chimbundu Baluba Dibeya [solo song]	3618.2/3646.2	VG	2 2'16"

13	IX*		"	?	Baluba song Old Chicoma's Crowd [solo/chorus]			
14	X	No.10	"	Mar.4	Lualusambo Old Chicoma Crowd [solo/chorus]	3618.3/3646.3	G-	2'14"
15		X No.1	"	Mar.4	[as above, but different version]	3646.4	F-	2'19"
16		X No.2	"	Mar.18	Baluba song: chifulu milembu ilembu Tumba, Tomosuka, Mufandi, Mwela	3646.5	P	2'20"
17	XI*							
18	XII*							
19	XIII 2B	No.2B12	Bolobo (Middle Congo)	May 27	Ocarina-Moie	3618.4/3646.6	VG	2'17"
20	XIIIA	No.13	"	May 27	Bobangi Ocarina	3618.5/3646.7	VG	2'15"
21	not numb.	not numb.	Ikoko (Lake Tumba)	July 16	Notched Rattle Ikoki	3618.6/3646.8	P	2'10"
22	no identif.	No.18	?	?	[solo/chorus]	3618.7/3646.9	P	2'19"
23	see descrip.	No.19	?	?	Dumba [?] Noimba [?] Nbombo [?] Chic. nijocopis [?] [solo/chorus]	3618.8/3646.10	G	1'55"
24			Yakusu (Upper Congo)	Sep.26	[vocal]			

*The recordings were probably made by Starr but are missing from the Archives collection.

**The evaluation of the tonal quality of the cylinder recordings, given as Very Good (VG), Good (G), Fair (F), and Poor (P), is based on the audibility of the musical performance over the surface noise.

Graphophone Records: list

1. Whistles
a. b
2. Musical bow: Jap. style
a
3. Baluba Song. Chicoma's sons
4. " "
5. Musical bow: Baluba style.
a
6. Baluba Song. Mianye
7. Baluba Song: (Chimbundu) Biombo
8. " " Vibeya
9. " old Chicoma's crowd.
10. " Chipulu mulembu ilembu
Lumba, Tomosuka, Mufandi, Muela

Figure 2. List of early recordings made as given in Starr notebook V, page 49.

Notes to the Recordings (see Table 1)

Starr describes the circumstances which prevailed during the making of the recordings as follows:

1-3 (I-IB)

"We also made our first record—on whistles [*lushiba*], not quite satisfactory, but with the suggestion for perfecting in the morning. And in fact the first work we did in the morning (Feb. 6) was to make a good whistle record; the performers were Mufandi and Tomosuka; three instruments were used:

- a) Lulua *lushiba* [whistle], bought from Meiyela's son, #233
- b) Babuba *lushiba*, #438
- c) Lulua *lushiba*, bought from Mufandi, #470 (whistle of wood)
- d) Bakuba *lushiba*, #438

[numbers represent museum objects purchased]

I was well satisfied with the record, I. We made two others (one last night) too good to pare [i.e., too good to shave the surface of the cylinder for re-use], which are numbered Ia. Ib." (Notebook V, page 21.)

4.5 (II, IIa)

"We had an interesting time with the musical bow. A Zappo Zap [ironworkers in the Kasai District] came in during the afternoon with one which he insists is tribally characteristic. It consisted of a simple bow to which was attached a calabash sounder looped into a loop of rattan which could slip tightening the bowstring—shortening it and giving it the desired tones. It was held with the opening of the gourd next [to] the body and the string was struck by a light and slender splinter of wood. There was some damping ? and modification of the bowstring with the hand that I did not exactly get. We made pictures of him and bought his instrument. We also tried to make a record. This was difficult as the sound made by the instrument though fairly high is not loud. Our first attempt was a complete failure; our second was clear but not loud; we then moved over to Gonzales's [Starr's photographer assistant] house where we made a louder record though it seemed to me really no better than the preceding. These are numbered II (IIa—made outside) and plan to keep. This instrument seems to me fundamentally different from the one most used here by the Baluba. This is a simple bow, the cord of which is struck with a slender stick; there is no gourd but the instrument is so held in part of the mouth that this serves as a sounding box; it is more or less manipulated to vary the sound. There is no difference in any part of the bowstring, which is similar to that used in the hunters' bow. A piece of stick held transversely in contact with bow and string and entirely free in the hand, is moved along to give the desired tone. . . . The Zappo who sold us the musical bow yesterday was in in the afternoon with a regular Zappo bow and three arrows; the bow is unlike those here (Bakuba) in having great wooden knobs instead of the wicker ones" (V:22-24).*

6, 7 (III, IV)

"A group of Chicoma's sons [Chicoma was the chief of a Baluba town near Ndombe]—large and small—were here in the afternoon and after making some photographs of them, we brought out the graphophone to amuse them [Starr had transported some commercial cylinder recordings of band and vocal music]—with no ulterior motive. We found, however, that they became greatly interested and excited and we organized them into a vocal group and took some records of songs. The songs were partly solo and partly chorus: we set one of the larger ones at the horn and grouped the others effectively behind. He sang part loudly; then some low, then the chorus. There seemed to be really considerable composition to them, tho, of course, much repetition. While far from perfect, the records were not bad" (V:35).

8, 9 (*V, Va*)

"A fellow who has been a veritable nuisance. . . appeared today with a musical bow of the Baluba type. As I saw him in the distance my first impulse was to hurl a board at him, my second to flee. When, however, he was near, I saw that his instrument was vastly better than we had seen before, less amateurish and boyish, more of an instrument. And he knew how to play it too: so we took him in hand and photographed him, made two *good* records of his music and bought his instrument at the same time ordering five more! While we were making preparation for all this Manuel told me he knew a new instrument, which I had not seen, and on my demanding its production he brought out Bomashuba with a third type of musical bow—the simplest yet. It has a simple thin bow of palm or bambu; it was cut away for one third of its length to $\frac{1}{2}$ or less its normal width and was strung with a thin strong vegetable fiber, thin and slender. The broader part of the bow is held before the mouth, the narrower part supplying the hand-hold; the hand alone is used to shorten the string and the fingers are only used to vibrate it; in other words there is neither stick nor sliding cord to vary the strings length, there is no gourd resonator, and there is no striking stick to produce the vibration. It is the simplest we have seen—an almost unmodified bow, the mouth, the fingers, that is all. Its musical quality is not bad but the sound is rather faint for a record, so we contented ourselves with a photo and instrument, ordering four others which the little rascal had all made within an hour" (V:36-37).

10-12 (*VI-VIII*)

". . . three new men, Balubas, came from Chimbundu, and stopped to see and be seen as they passed. We had already gone through all of our program, but at Mianye's [Chief Ndombe's eldest son] pressing request we went over it again and worked up so great enthusiasm that first Mianye in Bakuba, and then two of the Chimbundu men sang songs for records. We made three fair ones—I think the third of them most entitled to define as a song" (V:38).

13 (*IX*)

Starr assigns number 9 in his list of gramophone recordings (Figure 2) to "Baluba Song, Old Chicoma Crowd." The cylinder recordings on hand do not include a number 9, and from the data available for number 10 (our Items 14-16) it would appear that Starr erred in his listing at this point. We have no information as to what was recorded as number 9. It is possible that the "Chicoma Crowd" did make a recording and Starr's *notes* are in error in describing his recording number 10.

14, 15 (*X, X No.1*)

"Three little fellows from Ndombe came over. . . . Before they left. . .eighteen boys and young men from Chicoma Ponde's came in, to give us a promised dance. . . . They sang us a couple of records. . ." (VI:3). (Starr's list of photo negatives gives #116 as "Chicoma Pinda crowd dancing" - VI:20.) The "couple of records" sung by the Chicoma group can only be X, in the original, and X No.1, in the commercial copy (for which there is no original extant). Aural evidence shows the songs and the performance in general on these two cylinders to be very closely related. One important point: of all of the Starr cylinders we can distinguish the playing of drums on only these two.

16 (*X No. 2*)

"In the evening we made a fine record of Tumba's favorite obscene song—he singing the solo and Tomosuka, Mufandi and another giving the chorus" (VI:29).

17, 18 (*XI, XII*)

There are no cylinders in the collection which are numbered XI and XII. Starr's next entry pertaining to recordings notes: "Mr. Scrivener brought in a man with an excellent *bichi* and a hand-clap accompaniment and we made an effort twice to secure a record but with no success" (VIII:13). We assume that recordings of the *bichi* were made, numbered XI and XII, and since they were of poor quality were discarded or destroyed at a later date. The *bichi* is the name by which Starr knew the *mbira* or *sansa*. In his notes he has written: "Everywhere we saw the *bichi* and heard its twang" (II:20), and, "The *bichi* is capable of playing a considerable range of tunes. . .the irons are umbrella wires, and. . .the original instrument was made with the midribs of palms" (II:16). The various types of *bichi* Starr encountered on his trip are described in X:43.

19, 20 (*XIII, XIII A*)

Immediately after Starr's reference to the session with the *bichi*, he noted: "We then made two *ocarina* records that were good" (VIII:13). Information on the ocarina appears in the notes as follows: "[The] Bobangi have a kind of clay whistle of several notes. This appears characteristic" (VII:60); "The Bobangi have the ocarina-like instrument" (VIII:1); "Our ocarina player came in with the six we ordered yesterday. These are made out of a white clay which models easily and dries into a white firm, compact mass but is not burned" (VIII:16-17).

21 (*not numbered*)

"Of two musicians one had a *bichi*, the other a rasp-rattle. We engaged them to dance in the streets. Three seated themselves on a bench, the two musicians and a third. As the music struck all three kept time to it with chest and shoulder movements; the fourth one went up and down dancing in the same curious fashion but with more vigor and amplitude and with some good stepping. After the dance, which we photographed, we took them to the house for their salt and there made a record and a picture [#254] of the rasp-rattle playing" (IX:15).

22, 23 (*No.18, No.19*)

We have no data which would give us a clue to the chronological-numerical ordering of these cylinders except for the handwritten notes on the cover of one of the original cylinder containers, of which the contents of the recording are similar to the commercial cylinder No.19, which are difficult to read. The words "Dumba, Noimba, Nbombo, Chic. nijocopis" may be references to performers, groups, or place names, but they do not appear, at least in these forms, in Starr's notebooks. One could hazard a guess that the "Chic." may be an abbreviation for Chicoma, and thus these cylinders belong to those made in the Kasai District (our Item numbers 1-16). Inasmuch as they are solo/group vocals, they may be related to the "Old Chicoma Crowd" session made on March 4 (our Item numbers 14-15).

The fact that these cylinders are so high in the order number, and that they do not sound similar to the "Chicoma Crowd" sessions, makes it possible that they could have been recorded in the Middle Congo area. At one point in Starr's notebooks (May 26, 1906, on the Congo, just before reaching Chumbiri) he wrote: "The Bobangi have a kind of clay whistle. . . . Some of the boating songs they sing may do for records. Some of these are spontaneous and improvised; others are fixed and generally known. Mr. Scrivener has written down one, probably with alteration, for use" (VII:60). Since there is extant a music transcription of "No.18"—included with some eight other music examples, none of which are transcriptions of songs collected by Starr—we might assume that Starr did record some of the Bobangi boating songs (see Figure 3).

24 (*not in the cylinder collection*)

"We made a test of the drum language. . . . We had no success whatever with the graphophone records. . . . We had a boy sing however and badly reproduced his song to general satisfaction" (XI:35).

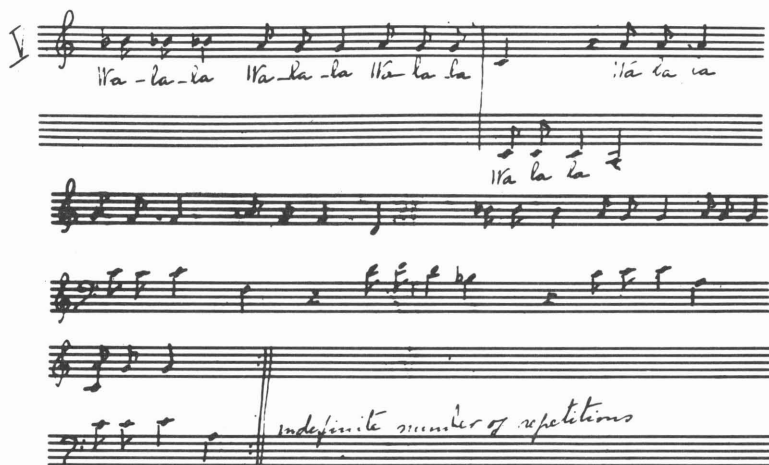


Figure 3. Music transcription (in part) of Starr recording No.18 (Item 22, Table 1).

Conclusion

The value of the Starr cylinders lies not in their being a representative collection of well recorded examples of Congo music. Field recording equipment at the time of Starr's trip did not allow for any great degree of quality in the sound engraved into the cylinder grooves. We must remember, also, that his relatively crude equipment—the recording machine and the wax cylinder blanks—would not function at peak efficiency in the hot and humid climate in which he worked. Still another point to consider is the difficulties Starr had in capturing the sounds of the various instruments which produced a light, soft sound—the musical bow and the *mbira* for example—or the loud, jarring sounds of the various drums, “which could be heard for miles [but] made not the slightest record.” There was also the difficulty, still with us, of blending the solo voice with that of the chorus or instrumental accompaniment in making field recordings.

Although the Starr recordings are not of the highest quality, the principles, techniques, and equipment used in the copying of early phonorecordings are being continually improved. We may thus expect that future researchers will be able to avail themselves of a significant body of primary source data which represents the earliest aural documentary of the music of the Congo. Starr's phonorecordings, his notebooks—which contain many descriptions of musical instruments, dances, and musical activities—and miscellaneous manuscript sources, and the photographs and musical instruments he collected, used in conjunction with other contemporary and more recently gathered materials, will be of great value in future studies concerning cultural persistence and change in African music.

SOURCES

Altman, Mrs. Ralph C. (Patricia B.)

1969 Personal communication, April 16.

Anonymous

1963 "The papers and scrapbooks of Frederick A. Starr." Chicago: The University of Chicago. 6 leaves, mimeo. Biographical brief and Index.

Cole, Fay-Cooper

1934 "Frederick Starr," *American Anthropologist* 36(1):271. Obituary.

Merriam, Alan P.

1969 Personal communication, March 6.

Rubin, Arnold

1967 Personal communication, December 8.

Scrivener, [?]

1906 "The African songs." A manuscript with transcriptions of music, texts in the
[?] original African language and English translations, to nine songs. 4 leaves.
Held by the Newberry Library, Chicago.

Starr, Frederick A.

1900- Letters and miscellaneous papers. Newberry Library, Chicago.
1933

1905- 12 Notebooks; 2 Scrapbooks. Department of Special Collections, University of
1910 Chicago Library.

1906 Original cylinder recordings, with containers, and commercial cylinder copies.
Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University.

1907 The truth about the Congo: The Chicago Tribune articles. Chicago: Forbes &
Co. viii, 129 pp., illus.

1909 "Ethnographic notes from the Congo Free State: An African miscellany," in
Proceedings of the Davenport Academy of Sciences (Davenport, Iowa) 12:96-
222, illus.