RESOUND
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Ethnographic Cylinder Recordings of Whaling Captain George Comer

Part One

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The story of whaling captain George Comer could be the making of a novel. Probably the best-known of all Hudson Bay whalemen,[1] Comer combined the qualities of good humor, a spirit of adventure, sea-faring competence, ethnographic curiosity, and empathy for his fellow man in a manner which manifested itself most clearly during his journeys to foreboding arctic regions.

George Comer entered the whaling trade at the age of seventeen, following a childhood which had been marked by tragedy and uncertainty. Three years after his birth in April of 1858 to English parents in Quebec, Canada, his father disappeared from a ship in Cuba. The loss was both emotional and financial. Due to her impoverished condition, his mother eventually sent George to a boys' home in Hartford, Connecticut. At the age of ten he was sent off again, this time to a farm in East Haddam.[2] Seven years later, for reasons which shall remain unclear, he travelled to the port of New London and signed on to the *Nile*, a ship bound for the Arctic under the command of Captain J.O. Spicer.[3]

George seemed to take to this life of adventure. After the *Nile* returned, he set out for more travels, south to the dangerous waters near Magellan Strait and Cape Horn on the *Mary E. Wiggins*, also of New London. In 1883, he sailed to the southern Indian Ocean in search of the oil of elephant seals.[4] By 1889, Comer had spent a full decade making antarctic voyages. With these successful whaling and sealing experiences behind him, he decided to return to the Arctic. He signed up again with Captain Spicer, this time as first mate aboard a small schooner which he would later make famous, the *Era*.[5]

Three factors contributed to the valuable data that have documented George Comer's arctic explorations. First was the nature of the journeys themselves; trips to the Hudson Bay required that the whaling crew spend as many as eight or nine months "wintering." Between the years 1893 and 1902, Comer made four Hudson Bay voyages, two of which included two successive winters, prolonged idle periods of unusually intense contact between the whalemen and the local Eskimo people.[6] It was during these winterings that Comer carried out detailed ethnographic research. Second, Comer assumed positions of greater leadership for the *Era*'s arctic explorations at a time well past the heyday of Hudson Bay whaling. He thus had more free time for his own ethnographic interests—and the authority to carry out those interests.[7] Third, George Comer kept journals of his sea-going experiences. These first-hand documents, begun at the age of seventeen on board the *Nile* and continuing for every one of his subsequent expeditions, have tremendous value. Author W. Gillies Ross, whose publication of Captain Comer's journal of his 1903-1905 voyage to the Hudson Bay has made Comer's reflections accessible to the public, gives these remarks:

> He appears to have kept a diary on every one of his voyages, and with few exceptions he made entries every day, even during the floe whaling of April and May, when the men cruised among ice floes, constantly cold and damp, eating and sleeping in the small whaleboats. He knew that a record of the events within his own experience would be valuable not merely as a memento but as a historical document as well.[8]

The self-discipline and attention to detail which manifested itself in these daily journal entries also was evident in Comer's investigation of Eskimo life. W. Gillies Ross provides the following information:

> He collected plants and bird skins for professors at Yale. He learned what he could about Eskimo burial customs, spiritual seances, and taboos. He took photographs of various aspects of Eskimo life, examined ancient graves, compiled population figures for the principal groups, recorded the names, ages, heights, and weights of Eskimos of both sexes, and made plaster casts of a number of heads, hands, and feet.[9]

(continued on page three)

From the Director

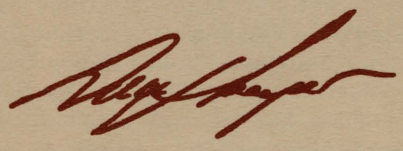
In August I attended the 29th World Congress of the International Council for Traditional Music in East Berlin, where I presented a paper on the professional responsibilities of ethnomusicologists to archives in which their material is deposited. In the discussion, I found that Dietrich Schüller, director of the Vienna archive, Artur Simon, director of the Berlin archive, and I face similar difficulties and could agree on a number of issues. One general conclusion of the session was that the more ethnomusicologists, folklorists, linguists, and anthropologists become involved in the archiving process, the better our archives will be able to serve them.

The kind of involvement we were discussing mostly had to do with the preparation and documentation of field collections for deposit at archives. But there are many other kinds of involvement that will both improve archives and contribute to the improvement of the materials deposited in them. These include archivists taking an active role in professional societies and making the memberships aware of the uses of archives as well as responding to complaints of the members about archives' inadequacies, training students in systematic data collection and archiving before they go to the field, providing modern, convenient, and secure facilities for collections, and strengthening archives in order for them to be better able to realize their potential in the coming decades.

The Archives of Traditional Music is involved in all these areas. I serve on the executive boards of two societies, frequently present papers, and act as a consultant to archives outside the U.S.A.; Dorothy Lee, Associate Director and also an elected official in several societies, will be giving a six-week course on archiving designed especially for directors of community archives in May-June 1988; Mary Russell, Librarian, will present a paper on documentation at a joint session of the Society for Ethnomusicology and the Midwest Music Librarians Association to be held in Ann Arbor in November; Marilyn Graf, Archives Secretary, edits this publication so that it reaches out beyond the already committed and makes a larger public aware of the activities and organization of sound archives; Brenda Nelson, Visiting Librarian, continues to back catalogue our field collections on the international OCLC database; our five graduate student assistants are learning the nitty-gritty reality of archiving at first hand, and we continue to modernize our facilities and improve our service to the public.

The interaction of archives and public is a two-way affair. Scholars and the larger public can do something very important for the Archives of Traditional Music: make a donation to the Friends of the Archives of Traditional Music. Every year I repeat that your donations represent more than the purchasing power of the dollars you give. They are a tangible indication to the university administration of your interest and support in a medium administrators can understand. Since we claim that we serve a large public beyond the university, we have to demonstrate that there is some interest in our activities on the part of that public. Please take the time to send a check now. Fifteen dollars guarantees that you will receive this quarterly for another year and helps us demonstrate the support for our activities that your donations represent. A larger donation gives our budget a much-needed flexibility so that we are able to purchase recordings or meet sudden expenses even after our university-supplied budget has been exhausted.

There are many appeals for your funds these days: political causes and famine relief vie with appeals for assistance to the ill and discriminated against. Our appeal is urgent, too: we are acquiring and preserving some of the most beautiful and fragile achievements of mankind for present and future enjoyment, reflection, and understanding. This too requires support, and I hope we can count on yours.



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It is not surprising, therefore, that Comer was eventually commissioned to work as an ethnographer for a number of scientific institutions. By the time the *Era* left again for Hudson Bay in 1903, with Comer as captain, he had requests from the anthropologist Franz Boas, from the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and from the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin to secure specific cultural materials.[10]

Comer apparently responded to these requests with extraordinary enthusiasm. Instructed by a sculptor, at the request of Franz Boas, Comer learned how to prepare life masks. He departed on the *Era* from New London, Connecticut, with three barrels of plaster. He returned in 1905 with forty-nine casts. He continued this work in subsequent years; by 1917, he had given more than two hundred casts to the American Museum of Natural History. Many of his collected artifacts were also sent to New York. Their ethnographic value was frequently commented on by Boas, in his publications concerning Eskimo culture. Most notable is "The Eskimo of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay. From Notes Collected by Capt. George Comer, Capt. James S. Mutch, and Rev. E.J. Peck."[11] In more than five hundred pages of commentary, Comer is frequently mentioned. Boas draws heavily upon physical artifacts deposited by Comer in the Museum of Natural History, such as harpoon points, bladder darts, clasps, buckles, arrowheads, fish hooks, fish spears, knives, needles, buttons, dishes, spoons, snowshoes, jackets and ornaments. He also frequently acknowledges Comer's descriptions of the traditions, customs and religious ideas of the Eskimos of the Hudson Bay.

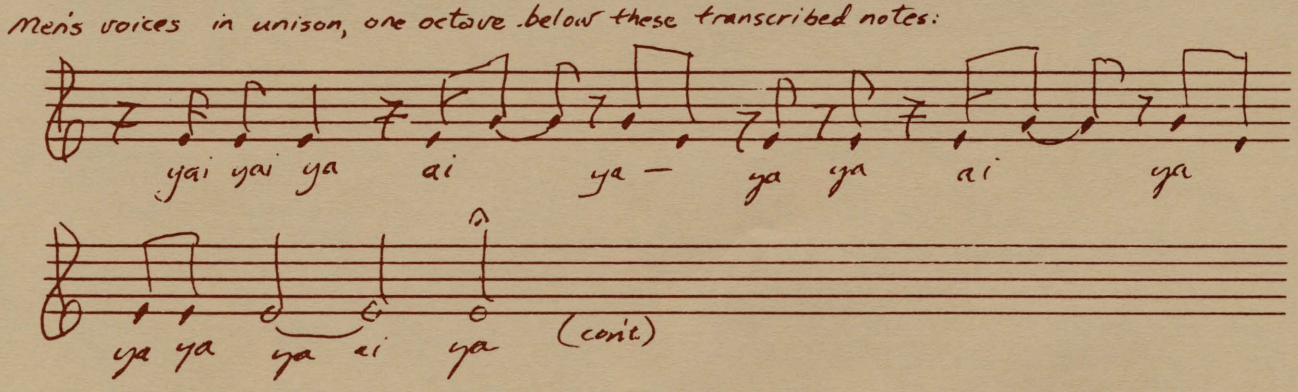
Comer's abilities as a photographer were also manifested during his voyages. According to Ross:

> Comer first used a camera among the Aivilingmiut and Qaernermiut of Hudson Bay in 1893-4, and within a few years was selling photographs of ethnographic interest to the American Museum of Natural History. There is a sizeable collection of his original glass plate negatives and lantern slides in Mystic Seaport, Mystic, Connecticut.[12]

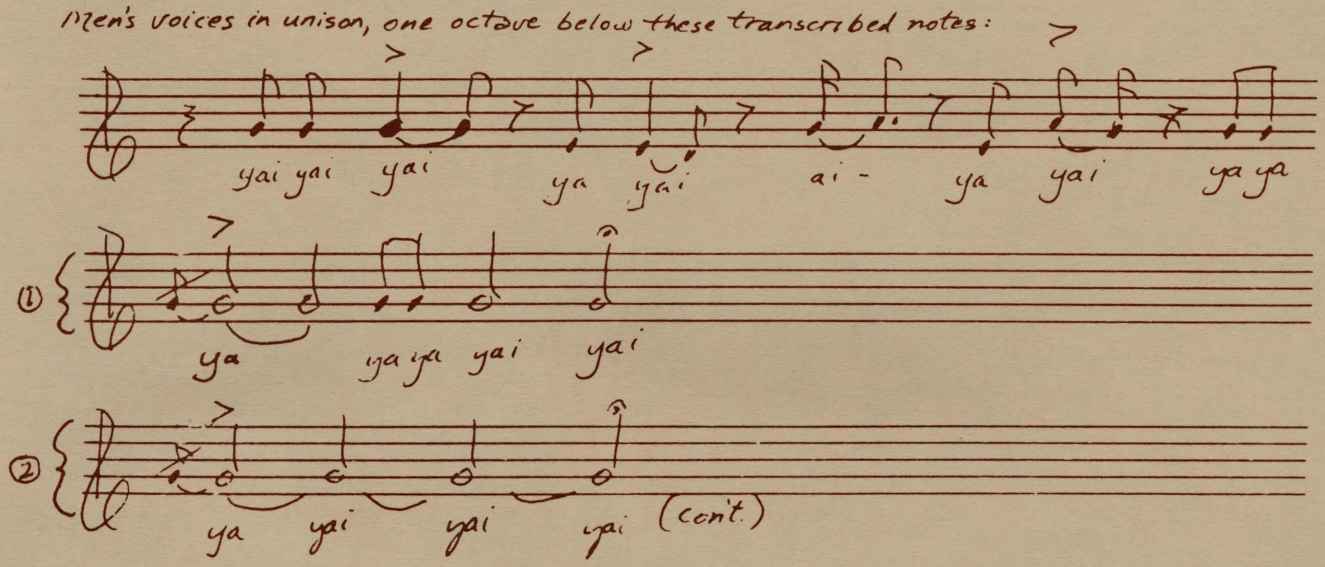
Many of these photographs are of extraordinary detail and beauty, especially those which show the faces of the Eskimo people. Some depict native women who are dressed in elaborately beaded parkas, the amoutik. Others convey the intensity of cabin life during the wintering season, in which large numbers of visiting Eskimos have packed themselves into very close quarters. They stare at Comer's camera with expressions which register amusement, disbelief, fear and astonishment. Other photographs document Eskimo art, such as drawings of Eskimo costumes. A few photographs capture the details of shamanistic ceremonies.[13]

Finally, there was the documentation of sound. Comer stated in his journal of the 1903-1905 Hudson Bay voyage, "I have also a graphophone to take north with fifty blanks and about forty records. These I believe will be quite a surprise to the Eskimo."[14] The graphophone to which Comer referred was most likely a rather heavy, but portable machine which made recordings on wax cylinders. Patented by Thomas Edison in 1888, the cylinder recorder was made widely available during the early years of the twentieth century. The Edison Standard Phonograph, similar to the popular Edison Home Phonograph, would most likely have been the type of machine which Comer used. It was provided by the American Museum of Natural History, along with a

Example 1.
Cylinder number 1115. *Kenepetu (Qaernermiut) deer hunt song.*



Example 2.
Cylinder number 1125. *Iwilik (Aivilingmiut) deer hunt song.*



number of blank wax cylinders ("blanks") for the purpose of ethnographic documentation. The "records" to which Comer refers in his journal most likely were commercial cylinder recordings of popular American music; Comer often played them on the Edison phonograph for the entertainment of both the *Era* crew and its visitors and for the native Eskimos.[15]

This Edison machine had the capacity both to record and to play back on wax cylinders. If a cylinder was unacceptable for any reason, or if the ethnographer wanted to use it again, it could be shaved and recorded again, just as modern magnetic tape can be erased. Comer does note in his comments about the recordings that one of the cylinders was "shaved, April 2, made April 4."[16] It may thus be assumed that Captain Comer knew how to fully utilize his Edison phonograph. By changing the type of needle, he could cut a recording of an Eskimo song on a blank wax cylinder. If the sound quality was not acceptable, he could shave the cylinder and try again.[17] He could also change the needle of the machine and, in a matter of a few minutes, play back the song to the person who had just performed it. To a native of these remote Hudson Bay regions, this display of technology must have surpassed what Comer had predicted in his journal to be "quite a surprise."

Of the ethnographic recordings made by Comer on the 1903-1905 voyage and on a second two-year voyage from 1907-1909,[18] sixty-four have survived to this day. They are now housed at the Archives of Traditional Music.[19] The first disc copies of the collection were made by Helen Roberts for the American Museum of Natural History, where they remain. After the original cylinders were acquired by the Archives of Traditional Music, two more sets of recordings were made, on tape, in 1977 and in 1984.

Considering their age and the conditions under which they were first recorded, these original cylinders still have fairly good sound quality. Many ethnographic cylinder recordings from this time period have suffered from "box marks," or scratches from their original cardboard containers, and many have warped from heat and dampness or have been slowly eaten away by various forms of mold. The Comer cylinders, though by no means of excellent sound quality, did receive fairly high "ratings" at the time the 1984 tapes were made. One cylinder was badly covered with mold, two were cracked and of these, one was warped. All of the rest were in good condition. Of the sixty-four, thirty-seven received a rating of "good" sound quality, twenty-four were "fair," two were "poor," and one was "very poor."[20]

The content of these cylinders is mainly songs; the Iwilik (Aivilingmiut) Eskimos are most frequently represented. In some cases, the type of song is not identified; occasionally no specific name for an Eskimo group is given other than Inuit, which simply means "the people," and has no specific designation. Among the Inuit, individual culture groups are named by the regions which they occupy, or by a striking feature of that region or its people.[21] Comer interpreted these names in his own way, often with a variety of spellings.[22]

Of the songs that are named, those occurring most frequently are deer songs. Fourteen of these deer songs are further designated as deer hunting songs. The Inuit

consider caribou to be valuable game, so it is not unusual that so many songs in the Comer collection have to do with its capture. Further, hunting songs play an important part in the Inuit belief in magic. Franz Boas, drawing from data provided by Captain Comer, states the following:

> It is believed that success in hunting may be obtained by means of magic formulas. One man who is very successful in catching salmon stated that his grandmother had taught him what to sing when fishing. This song for salmon is also effective for seal; but for ground-seal he must sing another one, and still others for musk-oxen and for caribou. He had not taught these songs to his children, but intended to do so before he died.[23]

Many of the deer hunting songs collected by Captain Comer exhibit both melodic and rhythmic similarities. All seem to contain a fixed, repeated melodic section, somewhat like a chorus. This section usually has very little linguistic variation; notes are prolonged on the syllables "ya" or "yai." Other verse-like sections of these deer hunting songs move faster, with more words per note, in what might very loosely be described as a "recitative" style. The transcriptions above depict similarities in the "chorus" sections of two deer hunting songs. Both songs are performed by several men who sing in unison, without accompaniment. Both are also interspersed with shouts.

Other specific songs in the Comer collection refer to bear hunting and musk ox hunting. Two songs are labeled "hunting songs," and may refer to whaling, though whaling is not specifically mentioned. In a few cases, Comer's notes on the original cylinder boxes and his spoken announcements at the beginning of the actual recordings give tidbits of contextual data. One song, for example, is described as "a song sung . . . when seeing ships." (1108) Another (1128) is a "song of the Inuit of the time they were hungry." One game song is further depicted as a "song sung by the Iwilik Inuit while playing jackstones." (1129) One selection well-suited to the featureless Hudson Bay regions is described by Comer as an Inuit composition about ". . . a man walking a long way and seeing nothing." (1490) Similarly appropriate, a women's song is an expression of ". . . a wish to see their friend." (1496) One performance is briefly named: "ice song." (1485)

Seven cylinders in the collection contain primarily spoken material. These narratives are about travels, hunting trips, and personal adventures. Two "oddities" also show up in the collection: the first, identified as a religious hymn sung by a Savage Island native, contains portions of two very "Western" Protestant hymns, and may well be the result of an earlier religious effort of missionaries (1118); the second, announced by Comer as a "Kenepetu play song," sounds remarkably like a solo vocal jazz improvisation! Its style is like no other musical performance in the collection. (1487)

FOOTNOTES

[1] W. Gillies Ross, ed., *An Arctic Whaling Diary: The Journal of Captain George Comer in Hudson Bay 1903-1905* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1984), p. 3.

[2] See Ross, ed., *An Arctic Whaling Diary*, pp. 22-23; see also Renny A. Stackpole, *American Whaling in Hudson Bay 1861-1919* (Mystic, Connecticut: Munson Institute of American Maritime History, 1969), p. 34.

[3] Ross, ed., (1984), p. 23.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 28.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 28; see also p. 41 N4.

[11] See Franz Boas, "The Eskimo of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay. From Notes Collected by Capt. George Comer, Capt. James S. Mutch, and Rev. E.J. Peck," *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. 15, Pt. I (1901), pp. 1-370; Vol. 15, Pt. II (1907), pp. 371-570, (New York: AMS Press Facsimile Reprint, 1975).

[12] Ross, ed., (1984), p. 40 N2; see also Dorothy H. Eber, "Bringing the Captain Back to the Bay," *Natural History*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (January 1985), p. 67.

[13] See Ross, ed., (1984), for photographs reproduced in the first nineteen pages of *An Arctic Whaling Diary;* see also Renny A. Stackpole (1969), various illustrations.

[14] Ross, ed., Comer's journal entry June 29, 1903, pp. 40-41.

[15] See Ross, ed., pp. 40-41 N3. Documentation of phonograph concerts occurs throughout Comer's 1903-1905 journal; see Ross, pp. 40, 51, 52, 60, 73, 84, 88, 92, 93, 97, 98, 99, 120, 137, 142, 145, 156, 167, 177, and 187. Further information about cylinder recording machines has been provided by Mrs. Kathleen Drake of the Midwest Phonograph Museum, Martinsville, Indiana.

[16] See American Museum of Natural History, New York, New York: Records from The American Museum of Natural History, Eskimo, Comer, p. 3, Cylinder 1140.

[17] The physical condition of the original cylinders indicates that they were not often shaved. A cylinder which has been shaved and re-recorded several times may be very thin.

[18] Comer sailed from New London in the *A.T. Gifford*, July 13, 1907 and returned to Connecticut two years later. See Stackpole (1969), p. 47.

[19] See Ross, ed., p. 41 N3. The Comer cylinders were obtained by Indiana University from the American Museum of Natural History through the efforts of George Herzog, who then served as director of the Archives of Traditional Music.

[20] Ratings of sound quality are from the Archives of Traditional Music Cylinder Project, by recording technicians Nancy Cassell McEntire and Bruce Harrah-Conforth, March 7-9, 1984.

[21] See Ross, ed., p. 14.

[22] Please note the discrepancies between Comer's names and the culture group names in the "Summary of Cylinder Recordings found in Collection 54-115-F," in the Archives' documentation file.

[23] Franz Boas, "The Eskimo of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay," (1901), p. 153.

This article will be continued in the January 1988 issue of *Resound.*