

The background of the cover is a lush, dense rainforest. A large, fallen tree trunk lies horizontally across the lower half of the image, partially obscured by ferns and other vegetation. The forest floor is covered in a thick layer of green plants, including many large ferns. The lighting is dappled, with sunlight filtering through the canopy, creating a sense of depth and mystery. The overall color palette is dominated by various shades of green, with some brown tones from the fallen log and the forest floor.

Rainforest Soundwalks

Recordings and Notes
by Steven Feld



If you travel all the way into Papua New Guinea's interior from any direction you'll ultimately come to the country's Southern Highlands Province. Travel inward further still, and you'll reach Mt. Bosavi, an extinct volcano rising to eight thousand feet. In the northern foothills that ramble six thousand feet below lies a vast mid-montane rainforest. Bosavi is the name its two thousand residents give to the land and to themselves.

Since 1976 I've been a regular visitor here, learning how Bosavi people create a sense of place in the rainforest ecology. I've studied how birds are named and known by their sounds. I've been taught how poetry creates maps of forest trails, and why these song paths hold memories of people and land. I've realized that sound deeply shapes the Bosavi world, and that listening is a vital way of participating in it. I've given my ears to this Bosavi acoustemology, this sonic way of knowing, and on *Rainforest Soundwalks* you'll hear a touch of what I've encountered and tried to absorb.

So how did I get here? After making academic LPs documenting Bosavi music in the 1970s, I came upon *The Tuning of the World* and the World Soundscape Project of R. Murray Schafer. His insistence that research on acoustic ecology be disseminated as musical composition led me to experiment with soundscape radio in the 1980s. And that led to *Voices of the Rainforest*, my 1991 CD for Mickey Hart's series *The World* – a sound portrait of the rainforest environment and of the vocal, poetic, and musical forms it inspired for Bosavi people. Many naturalists and sound artists responded by requesting a recording devoted completely to Bosavi's forest ambiances. Ten years later, here it is.



Track One:

SEYAK, butcherbird

Seyak is the Bosavi name of the Hooded butcherbird, *Cracticus cassicus*. A conspicuous local presence, *seyak* typically fly from tree to tree in the open, then perch, pause, and let out one of their flamboyant calls from an exposed branch at the forest edge. The *Birds of New Guinea* handbook describes the call this way: "A loud, jumbled bugling and yodeling, which combines bell-like notes and liquid rollicking phrases with hoarse notes, gurgles, musical croaks, and duets" (Princeton University Press, 1986).

Like all Bosavi birds, *seyak* are locally heard as one of the many everyday clocks of

the natural world. But Bosavi people hear much more than that. They hear these voices as "gone reflections," the reverberant spirits of their dead who have passed on to the treetops.

Deina Hewabe and I recorded this *seyak* from a ridge above a forest creek. Emerging from the thick white noise of predawn rains and mists, *seyak* wakes the surrounding forest. As fog lifts, voices of orioles, friarbirds and other butcherbirds mimic and reply. As if gradually taking note of all his accompanists, *seyak* progressively slows his pace, from sixteen to six phrases per minute, allowing the distant voices an increasing presence.

While quite familiar with the daily variety of butcherbird calls, I had never heard anything as long and as musically varied as these two hundred consecutive phrases. Deina was equally moved; "really different!" was his emphatic remark as *seyak* finished.

A few weeks after making this recording I had an impromptu visit from Seyaka Yubi, one of my oldest Bosavi friends. Seyaka's father, Yubi, who died in 1984, was my first forest guide. His extraordinary knowledge of Bosavi birds is discussed in my book *Sound and Sentiment*. In fact, I titled the book's bird chapter with one of Yubi's pointed comments about our different realities. What he said was: "to you they are birds, to me they are voices in the forest."

Yubi's words were brought home to me yet again when I played this *seyak* for Seyaka. As we listened, I casually mentioned that I had been visiting with his namesake, as indeed, many Bosavi personal names, like his, derive from bird names. But when I said that, Seyaka just smiled and gently corrected me: "no, that was my father talking to you."



THREE AMBIENT SOUNDWALKS

Hearing it lift-up-over sounding out there, hey! my Bosavi is really calling out to me, I'll be thinking like that.

—Gigio Weinabe, as he noticed me recording one morning

Tracks 2, 3, and 4 were recorded at the village edge, around trails leading to deeper forest. *Keafo* is the ambience of morning, an hour or so after dawn, when many birds have retreated. *Galo* is the ambience of mid-afternoon, before the swell of bird activity near dusk. *Nulu* is the ambience of evening, well before the deep night is taken over by mists, rains, and frogs.

I call these tracks soundwalks because they focus on the experience of sound in motion through space and over time. As you listen,

imagine a brief walk along a small stretch of rainforest trail. You'll hear raindrops and flies land on the microphone the way they would land on your forehead. Concentrate on the way the sound is both fixed and moves around with you. You'll feel the slowly unfolding transformations of texture and timbre. You'll feel the heights and depths of the forest above and around as the sound continually shifts figure and ground. This is the acoustic density that Bosavi people so poetically call the "lift-up-over sounding" of the rainforest.

The sensation of "lift-up-over sounding" is partially achieved in these soundwalks by mixing two to four pairs of stereo tracks, each originally recorded from slightly different forest heights and depths. The effect is to create something both acoustically transparent and hyperreal, a cross between soundscape documentary and electroacoustic composition.

Track 2: **KEAFO, morning**

The shifting densities and rhythmic patterns of cicadas pulse in the foreground, punctuated by a deep background of hooting pigeons and doves. At mid-canopy or in the open, triple swoops of the riflebird and gurgles from a friarbird intertwine with sporadic voices of other passers-by.

Track 3: **GALO, afternoon**

The cicadas move far into the background. Many acoustic niches are filled by the back and forth presence of scrubwrens, pigeons and doves, birds of paradise, cockatoos, riflebird, friarbird and oriole moving through the mounting afternoon breezes. From the forest floor to the canopy, the mid-afternoon pulse builds to a louder and thicker interplay just before dusk.

Track 4: **NULU, night**

Crickets constantly shift and pulse in unfolding layers, like an orchestra of syncopating maracas. Numerous creatures of the night, insect and frog, pop into the foreground with momentary punctuating rhythms, then disappear and reappear at surprising intervals.

You can read about and hear more of the Bosavi sound world in my other publications:

Voices of the Rainforest (CD)
Rykodisc, 1991.

*Bosavi: Rainforest Music
from Papua New Guinea* (3 CD)
Smithsonian Folkways, 2001.

Sound and Sentiment. University
of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.

Music Grooves (with Charles Keil).
University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Senses of Place (edited with
Keith Basso). SAR Press, 1996.

Bosavi-English-Tok Pisin Dictionary
(with Bambi B. Schieffelin).
Pacific Linguistics, 1998.



This CD is dedicated to Deina Hewabe, a longtime forest companion who passed on to the treetops in July, 1999, and to Gigio Weinabe, my closest Bosavi neighbor for many years.

My love of the Bosavi bird world was first sparked by Jubi and Kulu, and was nurtured by Ulahi, Deina, Hobole, Hegulu, Ayasilo, Hasele, Gigio, Odo and many others with whom I've shared the pleasures of the trail. Many thanks to these Bosavi friends, and to my research colleagues Bambi B. Schieffelin and Edward L. Schieffelin.

Thanks too to those who so generously supported my Bosavi projects in the 1990s: Mickey Hart, Caryl Ohrbach, Howard Cohen, Jeff Sterling, and Tom Flye at 360° Productions; Don Rose and Cheryl McEnaney at Rykodisc; the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; the University of Texas at Austin; the University of California at Santa Cruz; New York University; the Music Department of the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies.



Track one was recorded on a Sony D7 DAT through an Aerco preamp by Jerry Chamkis, with AKG 460B + CK1 microphones in an X-Y stereo pair. Tracks two, three, and four were recorded on a stereo Nagra 4S with Bryston Dolby SR, also through an Aerco preamp, with AKG 451EB + CK1 microphones in an X-Y stereo pair. Digital editing and mixing was done with Manny Rettinger at Ubik Sound, in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Author royalties from the sale of this recording go to the Bosavi People's Fund, a trust established in 1991 to support locally initiated projects in the Bosavi region, and to the Music Department of the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies.

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CD Master: Manny Rettinger ■ *Design:* Michael Motley

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Photographs of Bosavi, Papua New Guinea by Steven Feld
Photograph of Hooded Butcherbird by William S. Peckover
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