

# Franz Boas and George Herzog Recording of Kwakwaka'wakw Chief Dan Cranmer (1938)

Added to the National Registry: 2013

Essay by Rainer Hatoum (guest post)\*



*Franz Boas*

While Franz Boas, the famous seminal figure of American Cultural Anthropology, never studied music professionally, it still turned out to be one of his main research interests, contributing, thereby, to the emerging field of ethnomusicology. Boas' first venture into that direction was in the course of his fieldwork in Baffinland (1883-84), his very first as such. In the following years, he still touched on the subject of music, usually in combination with other modes of oral literature, i.e., in the form of several publications dealing with the general issue of "Eskimo Tales, Poetry and Music."

But Boas was to leave his lasting footprints in the study of the Native music of a different region, the American Northwest Coast. Ironically, this did not start with fieldwork there, but rather in Berlin, Germany. It all began with a touring group of nine Nuxalk (Bella Coola) visiting the city in 1886. Boas took advantage of the opportunity and worked with the group on two occasions. He described their performances, took down notes on language and mythology, and, most importantly in this context, also recorded at least four songs by notation, two of which were incorporated in Carl Stumpf's 1886 publication on the subject, even before Boas ever set a foot into that region. What began with the transcription of some Nuxalk songs in Berlin turned into a much more profound, life-long research interest in Northwest Coast, and here "Kwakiutl" (Kwakwaka'wakw) music in particular.

While Boas certainly had the necessary skills to treat Native music from a western point of view formally, he chose a strikingly different approach. He decided to look at the cultural context of song and the literary quality of its lyrics. But beyond that--and this is an aspect of paramount interest for this essay--he also turned out to be one of the pioneers when it came to introducing a then revolutionarily new piece of technical equipment, the phonograph, in an anthropological context. Boas' use of it contributed substantially to his already enormous scholarly legacy by adding some essential collections of Native music, which impress to this day by both their substance and size. Except for the 45 wax cylinders he recorded with James Teit among the Nlaka'pamux (Thompson) in Spences Bridge, British Columbia, in 1897, as part of the Jesup Expedition, his remaining collections were all from one group of people, the Kwakwaka'wakw. Among these, the two cylinder-collections Boas recorded among them

stand out not only due to their size but also as they both tie to one of Boas' most remarkable publications: "The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians" (1897). The importance of song in this volume is attested to by the fact that it features no less than 163 individual songs. Most are rendered with Native lyrics and their translations (in the majority of cases in the form of both close and loose translations and 33 even with scores).

While Boas did make significant contributions to numerous areas of ethnomusicological research--including issues of transcription, formal analysis, or the study of song genres--he was also quite aware of the limitations of western notation when it came to transcribing Native music. But it was not only for this reason that Boas had an interest in Kwakwaka'wakw "music." Instead, he was mainly directed toward the subject of "song as cultural expression," and not at a formal ethnomusicological analysis and the related western academic discourse as such. This unique emphasis and perspective, especially in Boas' days, presents us today with a remarkable historic contribution to the subject of Kwakwaka'wakw music, one which is still of value even from a Native perspective.

Looking at the different sources that feed into the picture of Kwakwaka'wakw song as presented in Boas' 1897 volume, it is noteworthy that the bulk of the songs may be traced to a collection of wax cylinder recordings which Boas recorded in 1893 at the Chicago World's Fair in the course of four sessions. With the help of musicologist John Fillmore, Boas compiled a stunning collection of Kwakwaka'wakw song captured on 119 wax-cylinders. A fascinating footnote to this is that some ten songs, recorded on more than a dozen cylinders, were also recorded at the same time by yet another noted pioneer in the field of ethnomusicology--Benjamin Ives Gilman. Today, these recordings are part of the Gilman collection housed at the Library of Congress.

While this is an essential find in and of itself, recent research has shown that several songs recorded in 1893 may be traced back to earlier Boas field trips. The lyrics of eight songs, for example, were first taken down during Boas' very first visit of the Northwest Coast in 1886, while visiting the Kwakwaka'wakw-village of Xumdasbe. This shows that Boas had used some of his early, pre-phonograph-period fieldnotes to trigger some of his 1893 phonograph-recordings, which later fed into Boas' 1897 publication.

Unfortunately, due to the many challenges faced by the use of wax cylinder recordings, only 38 cylinders of the original 1893 collection have survived. To make up for these losses, 72-year old Boas decided to embark on yet another major recording enterprise in 1930, this time in the Kwakwaka'wakw village of Fort Rupert. The result of this was Boas' second major collection consisting of 156 wax cylinders, which Boas filled during his roughly two month-long stay there from October 21 through December 26/27, 1930, in at least 13 recording sessions. Strikingly, quite a number of the recorded songs relate to "The Social Organization," even though they had been recorded more than three decades after volume first came out. A fascinating episode has been documented concerning this collection. It shows how much "the field" had changed in the course of Boas' career. It is alluded to in a letter Boas wrote to his son Ernst, dating November 18. In that letter, Boas writes: "I have used up all my films and phonograph cylinders, and am borrowing more". While it is not completely clear from whom Boas had borrowed wax cylinders, it seems very likely that he did so from some Kwakwaka'wakw friends and acquaintances in Fort Rupert, where he stayed during his visit. Obviously, some of Boas' hosts had already been doing their own recordings by then. In any case, the giving of phonographs in potlatch-celebrations had been documented for that period. While Boas's 1930 collection turned out to be the first and only one that he recorded in Kwakwaka'wakw country, it was not the last of his music collections of this group. When

Chief Dan Cranmer--widely known for being the host of the potlatch that had been raided by the RCMP in 1922, which marked the climax of the potlatch-ban period--visited Boas in his home in New York in 1938, Boas took hold of the chance. And so, we owe to this visit another precious collection of some 80 songs, which were recorded this time on acetate-coated aluminum discs.

Over time, these different Boas collections developed a life of their own. While the remaining cylinders of Boas 1893 Chicago collection may be found in the Archives of Traditional Music in Bloomington, Indiana, Boas' 1930 cylinders have experienced a different fate. With the memories of his 1893 collection's history still fresh, Boas used his good connections to the Berlin Phonogramm Archives, founded in 1904, to take advantage of a method of preserving wax cylinders, which had been practiced there since 1907--galvanization. The main goal of this procedure was to make copper-negatives of the original cylinders from which then unlimited numbers of new copies could be made. Yet this procedure had a negative side-effect: it resulted in the loss of the original cylinder. And so, it comes that we only find a copy-set of Boas' 1930 collection at the Archives of Traditional Music in Bloomington, Indiana, while the Galvano molds from which they were procured are kept at the Phonogramm-Archive in Berlin, Germany. As Boas' 1938 Chief Dan Cranmer-recordings are nowadays also part of the holdings of the Archives of Traditional Music in Bloomington, Indiana, it is Bloomington where the bulk of Boas' recorded legacy may be found today.

*Rainer Hatoum is part of the collaborative project "Edition of The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians (1897)" based at the Bard Graduate Centre in New York. As part of a larger team that includes the heads of the project (Aaron Glass, Judith Berman, and Ira Jacknis), Hatoum has worked extensively on the subject of song as presented in this volume since 2012. He lives in Berlin, Germany.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.