



“An Electromagnetic Tenderness of Remembering”

by Mark Helmsing with Derek Piotr

This interview engages with how one folklorist’s interests in recording spoken sounds and memories of his grandmother opened a pathway to recording the memories and sounds of living descendants of traditional Appalachian balladry. Through the processes of engaging older living people in the elicitation, recollection, and recording of personal memories and stories, we encounter emotions produced through grief, loss, and remembrance. The ghostly traces of memory appear to us through many sonic and aural forms, what the performer, author, and folklorist Derek Piotr explains in this interview by discussing recordings he collected and created from fieldwork over the past several years. Derek, whom I interviewed earlier in 2022, shares how the tenderness of remembering is transmitted through the electromagnetic pulses of audio recordings. While his examples focus on fieldwork in collecting ballads, the implications of what it means to celebrate memories with others, and to pursue the act of remembering, can inspire all educators and learners to think of whose memories they can record. By recording memories of those still living with us, we may take the tender, fragile, and fleeting elements of the act of remembrance and enable such elements to live on even after the loss of the person being recorded. These examples of memory demonstrate the linkages between past and present that are nurtured in folkloristic practices of interviewing and recording. Derek’s work is concerned with what he describes as “tenderness, fragility, beauty, and brutality.” My work is concerned with how affects and emotions such as

About the photo: Lena Turbyfill and family, Elk Park, NC, ca. 1962. Courtesy Pamela Dial.

tenderness and fragility, exist, circulate, and operate in spaces of learning, such as schools and museums, when learning about the past. This interview underscores my primary commitment in teaching and research to better understand how people feel about the past and how the past makes people. Music, recorded sounds, and recollected memories become rich and vibrant materials for feeling the past. This text has been edited for length and readability.

Mark Helmsing: Thank you, Derek, for meeting with me. I am eager to hear about your thinking on music, emotion, and folklore as they intersect through your personal community connections to loss and grief, especially for this special issue considering the Covid-19 pandemic and other tragic events through which we mourn in an ongoing way today. I want to keep this interview open ended so I will start by asking you to say a little bit about you, your life story, your origin story: where you are, where you are from, and what you do.

Derek Piotr: Primarily I'm a musician and I work with my voice. That's the elevator pitch version of who I am and what I do. A way to discuss this is through my relationship with my grandmother. When I was 15 or 16, I had begun making my own music and she was 89 at that point. She was a very vibrant person, very self-sufficient. But I think at that point I was aware she was an important figure in my life. I can't say that she co-raised me because my parents were very supportive and balanced, but she was a huge influence, more like a partner in crime. And so, I began to record her voice in 2008, at first just little bit, but formally began recording her voice, somewhat clandestinely, around 2010.

MH: What does that mean when you say you were recording her voice? What were these recordings like?

DP: So, my grandmother wasn't a singer, but she would tell outrageous jokes and stories, you know. I ended up putting some of those recordings on a record in 2019 that I'll talk about in a second, but I was aware that she was to be celebrated and that she would not be around forever when she was at the age of 89. She did last another ten years, so I ended up with ten years of recordings of jokes, stories, phone calls, directions to old places, and memories, especially memories of her past employers and some of the weird jobs that she had. I have over an hour's worth of fragment recordings of her. I was kind of pre-training myself to think about memory, voice, loss, preservation. A lot of people assume creation comes from oblivion, like nothing. But really the best creation comes from an electromagnetic tenderness of remembering. And I always loved that concept. That phrase always sticks out to me as being like "oh, someone's identified what I care about there." It was [a phrase the philosopher Timothy Morton wrote](#) in a letter to the musician and artist Björk in 2015 as part of [a special exhibition for the Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York.

MH: What does an "electromagnetic tenderness of remembering" look like for you?

DP: I feel strongly about one's transit through life. I think of [Helen Flanders](#), who was a ballad collector in Vermont. She has a quote I love in which she basically says that while we've documented so much music—all these songs and broadsides and transcripts—the individual

memories that go with them cannot be itemized, and that it's just impossible to do so. But I think that the effort to trace the spine of experience is worthwhile, which is what we're doing right now. We're attempting to trace the spine of experience and remembrance. I think the recordings of my grandmother, as dearly as I loved her, are most powerful when I listen to a recording and think "oh yeah she used to say that" and "I forgot that she..." It's the "I forgot that she..." that I'm attempting to kind of kickstart back into my brain and give a piece back to myself when I listen to these recordings. It's impossible to hold on to everything because you'd become waterlogged emotionally as a human being if you did hold on to everything. But there are certainly arenas in your life that are worth engaging in this collection process. There are things worth noticing that are worth recording and remembering.

In 2019 I put out a record titled [Avia](#), which is Latin for "grandmother." It's also Galician for the past tense of "he had," as in "he had a grandmother." The record included some of the phone calls and voicemails and other recordings of my grandmother. That was my first real interface with braiding my own creative practice with the act of celebration in remembrance of someone else. Even though I've been doing that privately, that was my first foray, and it was like pre-training to do all my folklife work and become a folklorist. I had begun working on it when my grandma passed away, and it was sort of a sort of a folksy-chamber record, indebted to modern classical music such Morton Feldman and John Cage, but it had some proto elements of the folk-thing that I was after. I stayed in Connecticut for my grandmother, as she was very important to me, and she lived to be 99. I wanted to be around for her journey. When she passed away, I felt unbounded as if I could finally kind of go anywhere. I remember being on the phone with a friend and saying that maybe I wanted to move to somewhere like West Virginia and see what that experience would be like. I kind of wanted to go off the grid and be in a slightly more rural community. I grew up in a rural community in Connecticut, and my brain was pointing me toward fieldwork and folklore even if I didn't realize it yet at the time.

MH: Can you share a little bit of context for me and the readers about Lena Turbyfill?

DP: I first heard [Lena Bare Turbyfill](#) as part of a compilation of recordings issued by the Library of Congress, and I was really struck by her voice and the content of the songs that she was singing. I sought more material of hers because of one song in particular, "[Bolakins](#)," that was recorded in 1939 by Dr. [Herbert Halpert for the WPA](#). I knew her songs would be in the Library of Congress, so I planned back in December of 2019 to visit the Library of Congress. But then Covid happened, so I couldn't go. It was interesting timing as what Covid forced me to do was do research at home on Lena, Lena's family, and Lena's repertoire. There wasn't too much else out there sonically, but then I ended up getting connected to Lena's family as a lot of her descendants were aware of Lena's experience with the WPA and her recordings by Herbert Halpert. Some of the family members were on [www.ancestry.com](#) and [www.findagrave.com](#), which allowed me to connect with them fairly quickly, which is how I got in touch with Nicola "Aunt Nicky" Pritchard, who was Lena's last surviving daughter before passing away herself in 2021. At the time, some of Lena's grandkids said, "oh well, her daughter is still alive and lives in Elk Park." That is when I made the visit to meet Nicky. So, in July of 2020 I drove to Elk Park, North Carolina, to meet "Aunt Nicky."

Nicky was welcoming and so, so loving. I was struck by the degree to which Nicky wished to celebrate memory with me; it was sort of unparalleled with some of the other folks with whom I have been working. This is not to say those folks have been uninterested, but Nicky was the youngest girl, and I think even despite that she really had a kind of tugging-at-the-skirt-hem-enthusiasm for wondering about her family: What's grandpa doing? What does “the *kiver*” mean (a dialectical British term for quilt)? Why are you going out into the woods and getting ginseng and cohosh? She really wanted to learn about her family heritage so to have someone reach out 50 years later, and be like “hey that's pretty neat,” was special. She was tickled beyond pink, tickled like fuchsia. This interest in family memory was crucial and really set the blueprint for what I wanted to begin doing in working with these informants.



Derek Piotr with Nicola “Aunt Nicky” Pritchard, Elk Park, 2020.

When I met Nicky, it was like stepping right back into the role of recording my grandmother. Nicky had a lot to say about Lena’s life, moments of Lena’s community outreach, Lena’s song repertoire, and so forth. One of the most heartening things Nicky ever said to me happened one day when we were on the phone. Nicky said, “oh honey, if I had met your grandmother, if she was still alive, I know we would have been best friends,” and I think Nicky said this because of how I would share my memories of my grandma with her. Nicky was sort of my first informant when I began doing this work. I was recording those phone calls with her and she wanted to sing for me. Because Nicky could recall these Child ballads, and these old songs, although not a singer herself, she could still sing and had a lovely voice. She would sing for me if she could remember something, even though she wasn't an active singer or performer.

MH: A little while ago you said, “Nicky wished to celebrate memory with me.” What would it mean to celebrate memory with someone, especially in the context of loss as in the theme of this JFE issue?

DP: Well, I always say that if someone called me out of the blue, and said “hey you’re Dot’s grandson, right? How's it going? What's going on?” but they didn't have a clear reason to contact me, I'd say, “it’s going ok.” However, if they called me and they said, “your grandma won blue ribbons for her tomato plants all the time at the Grange. I was a Grange member for 40 years I

really miss her,” that would be different. To give someone a direction when you reach out to celebrate someone goes a long way toward celebrating memory. The stories just start to fall out. I think if I had been vaguer, I wouldn't have gotten as far as quickly with my informants. I think to celebrate memory with someone, the nuts and bolts of that, I haven't really considered. It just sort of happens, right? But the stories do just kind of fall out of these people. You get ahead of yourself before you know it, which is why my recorder is always on. Unfortunately, a lot of this music is going away. With a lot of this music, there is a hair's difference between whether it will be here tomorrow or not. And that's down to whether the person will be alive tomorrow. A lot of this music, particularly Appalachian music, but also just oral music in general in America, is tied to memory. The children of these performers may have memories of their parents, but because they haven't maintained that tradition, their descendants may not have any idea. I think part of what I aim to do when I speak to these septuagenarian and octogenarian informants is to ask questions about their singing: When did they sing? Which sorts of things did they sing? How often would they sing? I think what I've learned through getting all these memories and details recorded is that the songs are the banner headline and the human lives underneath the songs are the article. You would obviously much rather read the article all morning; you don't want to read only the banner headline. So, in this way, the song has almost become incidental to the memory. The songs are like how Buddha says that it's just the hand pointing to the moon, and then there's the moon.

What I have become fascinated by is the 'stuff' of these people's lives, which is almost more valuable than the songs they performed. Many times, I will know someone was a singer, and by the breadth and dimension of the songs they sing I can kind of tell what sort of background they have. For example, some families tend toward rosier songs such as "Lord Lovel" or "Barbara Allen." Some families tend toward songs like "the Cruel Mother" or "Bolakins." You can kind of get a sense of what that family's emotional tenor was. My aim is normally to get as much detail about the human being behind the song. I don't feel like there's a formal approach I take with celebrating and recording memories, but certainly as I've kept going with this work, the songs almost become incidental even though they are the focus of my archiving, which now includes about 160 recordings of various people singing various songs. What I'm left with is the tenor of the person's life that they're remembering and the ability the person has of remembering this person through song. The song may be the entry point, but it then becomes about the person. I may remark that someone knew "The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy," but the process of knowing that song, and carrying that song, and the voyage that they went on to even to know that song, all of that outshines the song itself.

MH: Can you talk a bit more about this engagement with these memories and this remembrance that you did with Nicky?

DP: One thing Nicky was adamant about was the remembrance of her father, George Washington Turbyfill, Lena's first husband. George had gone through World War I and was severely shell-shocked as a result. He was abusive and somewhat unbalanced and was an alcoholic. Yet, despite all that kind of hardship that he inflicted on his family, and the daughters begging Lena to leave him, Nicky told me Lena was pretty staunch that when his family went to bury him someone was to remove the flag off of George's coffin that would have been draped over it because, as Nicky remembered Lena saying, "he hated this war and it absolutely ruined him and there's no way we're

going to bury him with a flag on his coffin. It just doesn't make sense.” Lena was an advocate for emotional justice with her family, despite whatever injustice she might have endured. Nicky also could remember Lena taking George's World War I pension early on for a time. To hear Nicky recall and tell this memory, there was family living in a hollow on the outskirts of Lena's community of Elk Park that had struggled to have enough resources and food for the members of their family. Nicky can remember Lena taking a lot of George's war rations distributed as part of his pension—flower, butter, eggs, sugar—and Lena would drive these rations out to family's hollow. Lena brought them things they needed because the rest of the community had sort of shunned them. So, Nicky was able to celebrate Lena's memory with these emotional stories as well as mundane memories, such as, “Lena did laundry all the time.” It was like beginner's luck for me as a folklorist to have her be in a way my first fountain of memory because she was a source for these amazing, brilliant stories of human resiliency and resourcefulness.

MH: One of our keywords in this issue is loss and I'm thinking about this entry that you have on your CV called *Last Wisps of the Old Ways: North Carolina Mountain Singing*. I'm guessing that, as a project you curated, it sheds some light on this notion of loss. What is loss? How do we regain, if we can regain, something that has been lost? What would you say about that?

DP: Some of it's like impossible, unfortunately, I mean a lot of people died from Covid that I would love to have met. As I meet more people to interview and record, people have said, “oh I wish so and so was still around, but Covid wiped him out and he would have told you everything.” So I am very mindful that we're sort of on this precipice. When I began doing this work, many of my informants have been of “The Silent Generation” or “The Traditionalists,” meaning they were born somewhere between 1929-1935, and with great exception you may get some of “The Greatest Generation.” I did interview a woman in England who was 102, born in my grandmother's year of 1919. Working with these people, striving to collect these last wisps knowing they may not be there tomorrow, is important as I think sometimes their children tuned out anything that was going on with their grandparents. It's a little damning to call it “the last wisps” because there will always be revivalists. But as far as source-memory singers, source-memory folk-tellers, and source-memory story-givers, it's going away quickly. We're at an interesting juncture right now with people who are long-living and with links to other people who were once long-living. But once that link is gone their kids aren't going to know what these individuals were talking about when they were alive. So that's sort of why I called that compilation that.

MH: If you were mentoring young people to turn them on or open their possibilities to this kind of work that you do, what would you do? What kind of moves would you make in working with young people to help them think about this kind of work that you do?

DP: I just say: “ask your grandparents.” And I say this to everyone. I mean I've said this to people who are like, “wow, what you do is really neat, I wish I could do it.” And I'm like, “but you can, ask your grandparents. Are they still around? Go ask them something.” Sometimes they will respond back to me, “I don't think any of my family sang,” to which I will say, “right, but ask them about their wedding day. Ask them about their honeymoon. Ask them if they remember, you know the Vietnam War. Ask them anything. Ask your grandparents.” Creating a voice memo on and iPad and an iPhone makes that so easy.

And I was talking to [AGF](#), who's a performer with whom I have been friends with for almost 15 years. Her music is very electronic, and she's not really into what she calls "dead people music." We caught up for a couple of hours on Zoom and had a conversation after her father had passed away. I saw a Tweet from her a few days later that was like, "wow I really wish my grandparents or even my father was still alive as there's so much I could have asked them." I think that just getting that idea into young peoples' heads is important. Call your granny, don't simply ask her how she's doing, but ask her *what* she was doing. I think many older people turn their memories over in their heads and may say to themselves something like, "those were the days." But has anyone ever asked them "what *were* the days? What were they like?" Often when that happens these older folks are overjoyed. It was their lives and they have lived them. Just because you've got snow on top doesn't mean that the mountain isn't still there. It is shameful sometimes how we neglect the fact that a person has lived a life and are still living their lives right now.

MH: Yes, go out and record their lives! Allow their lives to live on through remembrance after and through death and loss.

DP: I did ask my parents what they can remember of their parents singing, but it's all music such as Engelbert Humperdinck, Frank Sinatra, and stuff like that. But still, that's kind of their folklore in a way. Time moves and unbroken oral tradition is a really neat thing to chase, and a really lovely chain to keep unbroken. What we're going to be left with in 50 years are records by The Monkees, The Beatles, and such. My mom sang "Here Comes the Sun" every morning when she made coffee. I just made that up, by the way, but I mean memories of music, and how we remember people through music like that, will be just as valid as the as what I'm chasing now. I am aware that I am at a very distinct crux in time in which I can get these last wisps of memories into a jar. You're going to be left with what people were exposed to, and if it's not oral tradition or old ballads, it'll be old records, or what people think of as "old" records. Then, in 200 years, someone will sing "Baby Shark" for someone, and it will get recorded. So, you kind of just gotta roll with it, right? Time just moves.

MH: You referenced your friend and musician who used the phrase "dead people music." What do you think that means, or what do you think they mean with that?

DP: I think I have opened Antye (AGF) up to the idea of "dead people music" a little bit more. I think she says that phrase more so to dismiss the old blues records her husband really likes. These records that were made in the 1930s may sound fusty, and old, and dusty, but they were what a person was doing and singing that very day. Many of these recordings were not released, they were held in repositories, so to be able to hear them for the first time may help for the public today to experience the Zeitgeist of the time to some degree. Listening to recordings of Lena, it's like Lena's in the room with you. That's a really invigorating feeling to me.

This also reminds me of [Will Ritter](#), a mutual of friend of me and my friend [Bobby McMillion](#), who was a singer, storyteller, and folklorist before he passed away last year. Will, unlike our friend Bobby, did not want to venture into the musical archives that Bobby would point us to search within. Will would rather just hear stories from Bobby while Bobby himself was still alive. Will says he is more interested in music from people with warm hands than with cold hands. I am more

of the cold hand variety. I found a woman, born in 1844, who had been recorded reading aloud memories and stories of her life. She and her first husband rafted down the Delaware and when they eventually landed that's where they moved. She was only 16 at the time. Her first husband cut his foot hauling railroad ties and bled out to death in the woods. Just fascinating cold hands stuff. Maybe I am a little more Gothic in my interests as I am more of the cold hand person. But Will made a good point getting in touch with “folks with warm hands,” find them, follow them. Will was like, “I could go listen to some of Bobby's records, or go on YouTube and see what he's done, or I can just give him a call, and I'd always rather just want to call him.” I do work with living informants all the time, but you know it was almost an admonishment to hear Will say that. I did talk to Bobby plenty when he was alive, so I feel like I did my warm hand duty, but I am more interested in the cold hands, in part because life was very strange even 150 years ago for Americans.

MH: I'm struck by a press review describing your work as “hauntingly raw folk, saved from obscurity.” Each of the words in that review gesture to the theme of this issue. What does it mean for something to be saved from obscurity? What does it mean for something to be hauntingly raw?

DP: I think that when I play recordings of Lena and her family for her descendants, they may say things like “oh yeah that's mee-maw,” and they may take in the sounds as just hearing a family member singing. But the grain and the content of the songs matter. I approached Lance Ledbetter, who founded the music and sound preservation team [Dust-to-Digital](#), about releasing the recordings I have done on a larger scale as perhaps part of a boxed set. Eventually it began to look like a lot of remastering and editing would be involved, something like what I describe as “pinning a bug to a Boy Scout swab of cotton,” in how removing the creature from the context is problematic. The thing that I love so much about the music label [Death Is Not the End](#) is that its producer, Luke Owen, was up for presenting the recordings I have in exactly the way they are, presenting them sort of *in situ*. There is a really short fragment of a version of “[Cindy](#),” a song everyone knows very well. On paper, it looks terrible. Lena does about two and a half verses and then there are some distant echoes of Ben Duggar in the background singing his own, but you can't make the sounds out, and then, when Ben finally gets up to the mic and the record cuts and he's there, he just does half the chorus and the recording ends. On paper this looks terrible, but to hear these people move around a table and get up to the microphone was fantastic. For months waiting to hear Lena's recordings at the Library of Congress I was dreaming of what they would sound like, and I knew there were many people involved and that people would be moving around the table. What I had dreamed was pretty close to what the recordings sounded like, and I really wanted to preserve the sense of temporality and the sense of space in them. It is very easy to brush these things up and cut out all of that, and just have the song, but then you don't get a sense of what this person was doing. People like Lena obviously fell through the cracks, and I'm of the opinion that, if it weren't me now, someone in 10 or 15 years would come across her and try to raise her star because she's just such a fine singer and so magnetizing.

MH: Thank you, Derek, for sharing these thoughts and impressions. Is there anything you'd like to add or share or conclude for having the final word?

DP: Go call your grandparents. Everyone reading this, go call your grandparents!

Read more about Derek’s work with the recordings of Lena Bare Turbyfill in these articles:

1. <https://www.blueridgemusicnc.com/news/entry/ever-since-weve-known-it-uncovered-recrodings-of-lena-bare-turbyfill>
2. <https://deepsouthmag.com/2022/04/20/lena-turbyfill-a-folklore-legacy>
3. <https://www.appalachianhistory.net/2020/09/songcatching-bolakins.html>
4. <https://www.fieldwork-archive.com>

Urls

<https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/25630/1/bjork-searches-for-meaning-in-these-personal-emails>
<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1458>
<https://umaine.edu/folklife/women-folklorists/helen-hartness-flanders>
<https://derekpiotr.bandcamp.com/album/avia>
<https://www.blueridgemusicnc.com/news/entry/ever-since-weve-known-it-uncovered-recrodings-of-lena-bare-turbyfill>
<https://www.loc.gov/item/afc9999005.7532>
<https://libraries.indiana.edu/halpert-midatlantic>
<https://www.ancestry.com>
<https://www.findagrave.com>
<https://antye greie.com>
<https://www.blueridgeheritage.com/artist/william-ritter>
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<https://dust-digital.com>
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<https://deathisnot.bandcamp.com/track/cindy-2>