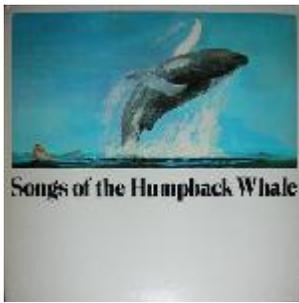


“Songs of the Humpback Whale” (1970)

Added to the National Registry: 2010

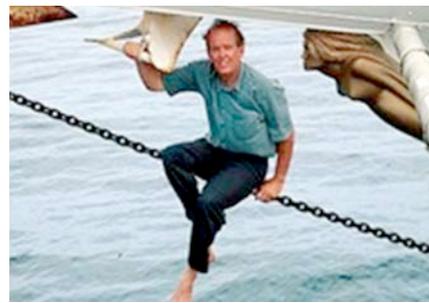
Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original album cover



Album label



Roger Payne, c. 1970

Named to the National Recording Registry in 2010, the album, “Songs of the Humpback Whale,” is probably the most famous nature album in American history.

The album was largely the work of Dr. Roger Payne (1935-) a biologist and environmentalist. A graduate of Harvard with a Ph.D. from Cornell, Dr. Payne began his research career by studying owls and their ability to find their prey in the dark and by studying moths and their ability to avoid capture by their main predators, bats. In the late 1960’s, Payne, with the assistance of his wife, Katherine, shifted his focus to the oceans and their largest inhabitants: whales.

His recordings of the unique “songs” made by whales—humpback whales specifically—was made possible via the use of a “hydro-phone,” a microphone created exclusively for the recording of sounds underwater. Frank Watlington, of the Columbia University Geophysical Field Station at St. David’s in Bermuda, was one of the first to employ the hydro-phone and to document whale vocalizations.

These early studies by Watlington and Payne helped establish that whale noises were more than just beautiful, they were meaningful. That these songs were, in essence, a language, used for whale-to-whale communication.

It was determined that the male of the species were the most vocal, especially during the mating season. (To date, it is not known if female whales ever sing, or even have the ability.) Male whale cries serve as mating calls. Their calls are also used to dissuade (scare off) other males from approaching when a female has been located for mating purposes. Besides the mating season, whale vocalizations are also common during whale migration and feeding times of the year.

It was also determined that whale sounds, like well-known bird songs, are not the equivalent of animal gibberish but are, indeed, complex communiqués which occur in exact and repeated sequences. A single whale song can last from eight to 15 minutes while some can extend to as much as half an hour in length. Furthermore, a whale might repeat a song several times, in sequence, in full, with the resulting vocalizing session lasting several hours or even days. Whales will also vary their tone in songs—ranging from high squeals to low roars.

Whale sound research has also determined that particular whale songs are localized. That is, the sounds made by whales in some locations (for instance those living near or around Hawaii) are different from those living in other oceanic locales.

Whale songs can even change (evolve) over time. Whales communiqués recorded in the 1970s will differ from the timbres and textures of whale sounds heard today. The evolution of a whale song--often until it bears no sonic similarity to its original--is gradual within whale communities

though some songs have been known to be completely reinvented by the species in as little as two years!

Conversely, whales can have a memory about their songs. Payne noted one whale that repeated the same song in the same part of the ocean one year after it originally “sang” it. The purpose of this unique “repeat performance” not fully understood at this time.

Whale and other marine sounds travel in a unique “sound channel” of the world’s ocean; it’s a layer of the ocean that is most hospitable to sound carriage. Whales, it is believed, are more dependent upon sound communication than most land mammals since the deep waters in which they live render other types of inter-species exchanges nearly impossible.

These myriad of revelations helped forever alter conceptions about all animal noises, not just whales. But it’s the whales that drew the most attention at the time,...and who had the hit album.

Originally, this collection of whale recordings by Watlington and Payne was released in 1970 over the CRM record label and sold for \$9.95. (CRM, which stood for “Communications/Research/Machines, Inc.,” was an imprint of “Psychology Today” who also wrote up the whales in their June 1970 issue.)

The recording was later re-released on Capitol. The album, which bore such selection titles as “Solo Whale” and “Three Whale Trip,” would go on to sell over 100,000 copies. It was an impressive feat for a musical work with no musicians, no lyrics, no danceable beats and actually no singers either. (Humpback whales do not possess vocal chords; they make sound by their pushing air out through their nasal cavities.)

As interesting as their scientific significance was, it was the ethereal beauty of the whales’ calls which enchanted listeners. Their sounds were unearthly, soft, haunting, mournful, meditative and peaceful.

Their soothing sounds, and the ecological message behind them, fit in perfectly with much of the national mood of the 1970s. The whales’ relaxing nature would soon serve as the soundtrack for a million yoga classes and other 1970s pursuits. They would further allow the hippie culture to continue their connection and communing with the earth and all its creatures. Incidentally, the very first nationally-observed Earth Day was celebrated in April of 1970.

The cries of the whales and their album’s notes also helped bring the issue of whale hunting to the global fore. Soon, the slogan “Save the Whales!” became omnipresent as part of a movement to ban whaling worldwide. After years of campaigning, in 1986, a global ban on whale hunting was passed by the International Whaling Commission.

Whale noises would enter the cultural consciousness other ways as well—via film (consider “Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home” from 1986) and popular music. In the late 1960s, even before the original album’s release, Roger Payne presented a cassette recording of the whales to folk singer-songwriter Judy Collins and asked if she could do something with it. Moved by the beauty of what she heard, Collins quickly worked to incorporate whale sounds onto her upcoming album. She paired the whales with an old whaling song she sung a cappella. The song was “Farewell to Tarwathie”:

*Farewell to Tarwathie, adieu Mormond Hill
And the dear land of Crimmond, I bid you farewell
I'm bound off for Greenland and ready to sail
In hopes to find riches in hunting the whale.*

“Farewell” appeared on Collins’ 1970 album “Whales & Nightingales.”

Folk singer Pete Seeger was also inspired. He wrote “The Song of the World’s Last Whale,” which detailed both the recording of the sounds and the plight of the often hunted animals, in 1970.

Whales sounds went classical that year too. In June of '70, symphonic composer Alan Hovhaness created an orchestral work which also incorporated the whale recordings. His composition, "And God Created the Great Whales," was first performed by the New York Philharmonic.

About a year later, the whales invaded primetime when the sitcom "The Partridge Family" based the sixth episode of their second season on the songs of the whales. In the installment "Whatever Happened to Moby Dick?," Shirley Partridge and her brood records their own tune ("The Whale Song" composed by Dan Pevton and Marty Kaniger) that features whale sounds. In the series, the family band ends up donating their proceeds from the single to a whale preservation organization.

(Even later, British songstress Kate Bush would sample some of the whales for the opening of her song "Moving," off her debut album "The Kick Inside" from 1978.)

In 1977, whale songs even went intergalactic. Recordings of their songs were sampled and recorded on NASA's "golden disc," "The Murmurs of the Earth," for placement on its Voyager space craft. For all we know today, extraterrestrials are enjoying the hums, roars and squeals of humpbacks right now, somewhere, out there.

Today, whale sounds (songs, vocalizations, whatever they are called) are so well known it seems hard to imagine a time when these giant creatures were considered silent. Equally as difficult is recalling the time when their sounds were considered just noise and not a type of species-to-species communication. The resonating power and importance of "Songs of the Humpback Whale" as a recording was its ability to greatly publicize and educate people about this unique and amazing underwater world.

Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).