

# Cylinder recordings of Ishi (1911-1914)

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*Ishi*

The man known to us today as “Ishi” was the last member of the Yahi people of northern California. The Yahi, the southernmost group of Yana-speakers, lived in the valleys and foothills east of the upper Sacramento River. A small group at contact, their numbers declined precipitously through the 19th century due mainly to systematic attempts by the settlers to eliminate them.

Ishi, born probably about 1860, spent most of his life in hiding with his family, avoiding the assaults of whites invading the Yahi homeland, the Deer Creek valley area of Tehama County. In the fall of 1908, his family was contacted by a party of surveyors, but no sign of them was found again until Ishi walked into the nearby town of Oroville on 29 August 1911. All the members of his family, along with the rest of the Yahi, appear to have perished. Ishi’s notoriety has come from the belief that he was the last Native American to have lived a “traditional” life, apart from the invading society.

A few days later, he arrived in San Francisco, where, until his death from tuberculosis on March 25, 1916, he lived at the University of California Museum of Anthropology (now known as the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum, UC Berkeley). Given the name Ishi (“man” in Yahi) because no one was able to learn his real name, he worked as a janitor at the museum. Ishi, who often offered demonstrations and performances, was widely known for his exquisite projectile points made of black obsidian and colored glass. A high point of Ishi’s last years was a trip back to his homeland in the summer of 1914, when the anthropologists took hundreds of photographs of him recreating scenes of traditional Yahi culture, a life that Ishi no longer lived.

Ishi was also a determined singer and story-teller, who was recorded on 148 wax cylinders, totaling about five hours and 41 minutes. All made in the San Francisco museum between September 1911 and April 1914, they were recorded principally by the museum’s curator, Alfred L. Kroeber, along with his assistant, Thomas T. Waterman, and William F. Kretschmer, a local musician.

Ishi's recorded repertoire consists of mythological texts, narrative accounts, and music. He started this work almost as soon as he arrived, recording "The Story of Wood Duck" on an unprecedented set of 51 cylinders, lasting two and a quarter hours. This was the longest continuous Native American narrative recorded up to that time. While this was the only mythic text Ishi recorded, he also documented four narratives: the fate of souls after death, the ceremony for adolescent girls, the nature and causes of earthquakes, and a description of fishing.

Over the next four years, Ishi recorded 65 songs (including 11 repeat renditions). It is likely that these songs comprised Ishi's complete musical repertoire. Because there are no comparable recordings for his own people, however, we can never know how typical it was, nor how good a singer Ishi was. Nevertheless, it is an important and fascinating document of one individual's version of his own culture.

Most of Ishi's songs have a range of three tones; others contain four or five. With the exception of two songs in which Ishi beats time with a stick, in none of his songs did he use a musical instrument. Several neighboring groups, however, played flutes, and shook rattles of cocoons or deer hoofs. Some songs were meant to accompany the gambling associated with the hand-game, some were ceremonial, and some were for curing. The many songs associated with animals may relate to hunting or myths. Despite the temporal limitation of the wax cylinders, most of Ishi's songs contain multiple repetitions of verses and phrases. Unfortunately, many of the texts remain untranslated.

As the only sound recordings of the music and speech of the southern Yana peoples, this set of cylinders--still at the Hearst Museum--has been repeatedly transferred and restored over the past century. In fact, because of the intense interest in Ishi, his sound recordings have been the most copied and remastered in the Hearst's entire recordings collection. Ishi's recordings were not made available to the general public until the mid-1970s, when, as part of a sampler series on California Indian music, the museum produced its first collection of Ishi recordings, sold to the public on a 25.5 minute cassette tape. In 1992, a new version, consisting of 12 songs and narrative excerpts on a 34.5 minute cassette tape was prepared by Bernie Krause, a local environmental sound artist. Most recently, the museum's entire cylinder collection has been optically scanned and converted to digital sound files.

Following Ishi's death from tuberculosis on 25 March 1916, his memory was gradually forgotten until it was revived with the 1961 publication of Theodora Kroeber's book, "Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America." Despite his historical reputation as "the last stone age Indian," Ishi had lived his entire life among the invading settlers. We now know that Ishi and his family were already selectively making use of these new materials and objects from the western world, a process that only accelerated after he came to live in San Francisco.

Ishi's life is compelling because it can represent the larger story of the massive genocide of Native Californians, who have otherwise remained anonymous. While Ishi may have been the last speaker of the Yahi language, his Yana relatives survived, and like all Native Californians, they have maintained a vital culture to the present.

*Ira Jacknis is the author of the essay, "Yahi Culture in the Wax Museum: Ishi's Sound Recordings" (Karl Kroeber and Clifton Kroeber, eds., "Ishi in Three Centuries," pp. 235–74; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003). He is Research Anthropologist at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.