

# “Music from the Morning of the World”—Various Artists; David Lewiston, producer (1966)

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Essay by Curtis Settino (guest post)\*



*David Lewiston, far left*

In 2005, I interviewed David Lewiston for “TapeOp Magazine,” *the* magazine about creative recording. “TapeOp” covers fairly indie-rock territory, but David’s DIY method fit right in, even if it was for capturing Tibetan monks rather than Portland punks. At 76 years old, he was a gracious interviewee, filled with great stories and passion. After only an hour of talking, we had to break but I would have gladly gone on, if only for my own amusement.

Years ago, after lying his way into an editor’s job at a New York banking magazine, David then wrangled a trip to Bali. (He got away with his deception because he was a well-educated, post-war Englishman who could “write a grammatical sentence,” and “Besides, who’s going to call England and check on these jobs I made up?!”) In Bali, with an “introduction” to a hotelier, he landed a room to stay in (while battling diarrhea--a traveler’s right of passage back in the day), and acquired an enthusiastic local music guide, and a free car to use. This was all quite a stroke of luck. Even more so because it was mere weeks after the end of the Indonesian mass killings of 1965–66, carried out by the armed forces and government against communist sympathizers, ethnic Chinese and alleged leftists. Lewiston was one of only a handful of Westerners on the island at the time. Technically, he was there to write an article on wartime banking in Southeast Asia. The magazine work, however, didn’t last much longer because the music recordings he brought back got him a record deal. And boom! He became an engineer and a producer. In 1967, Nonesuch Records released “Music from the Morning of the World” as part of its Explorer Series—the first stereo recording of Balinese music.

Sure, there are earlier mono recordings. And, really, whether you hear Balinese music in mono or stereo, you know something different is going on. Even with outsider influence (i.e. Lewiston as recordist), the Balinese arts have retained a distinct flavor and have only deepened in quality.

David did a great job of capturing this, not only with the audio but also with his photos and notes. That complete package is what makes “Music from the Morning of the World” so special. And timing is everything. As the planet was shrinking culture-wise, it was a race to record traditional musics before they became corrupted by pop--the Beatles in the West, Bollywood film songs in India, and so on. The fact that cheaper and more portable recording gear had just hit the market enabled David to do this effort.

One aspect of this record that David and I spoke about was the snapshot nature of it. Some of the musical selections are just excerpts from much longer performances he recorded. Having been to Bali and attended similar performances to those on the record, these snippets can feel a bit disjointed. For example, I am just starting to get into the Ketjak Dance when it fades out. A little over four minutes of an hour-long performance is a tease. David clearly had to make some pretty hard choices about what to represent and how much of it to share. It’s not a failing of the record. In our interview, I told David that it feels almost like a postcard for Balinese music. He agreed. And it’s a great piece of musicology from that era too. By the time I got to Bali in 1996, the metallophone gamelan was way more prevalent than some of the other ensembles heard on this record. In one pavilion, I even saw a rock band setting up. Regardless of whether this record is misrepresenting the ratio of ensembles (because of hard choices) or the popularity of the metallophone gamelan has grown, it is still a snapshot of a time and place.

Another interesting thing about this recording is that, ultimately, David wasn’t satisfied with it. He returned to Bali in, I think, 1986 to rerecord everything. In the intervening 20 years, David had been around the world recording more traditional music, audio gear had advanced, and he had learned a lot about how to handle a session. He remarked that he wasn’t happy with how he had done some of his early recordings--he hadn’t paid the musicians enough, or maybe at all. He wasn’t forthright with it. But he emphasized that he had since implemented a strict policy of compensation and would tell any “young sprig” who asks to do the same.

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