On 7 November 1903, Captain George Comer of the American whaling schooner Era recorded on a phonograph a few songs of the Aivilingmiut and Quernermiut in northwestern Hudson Bay (Ross, 1984:73). These appear to have been the earliest sound recordings ever made among the Inuit of Canada and Alaska. The recordings made by Diamond Jenness among the Copper Eskimos (1914-1916) and those made by Christian Leden among the Padlimiut (1914-1916) have hitherto been considered as the earliest, but Comer’s first recording preceded these by more than a decade and his pioneering work should be recognized.

Earlier recording ventures had been undertaken among Eskimo people in eastern Siberia and Greenland. During extensive phonorecording among several native groups in northeastern Siberia, the Russian anthropologist Waldemar Bogoras, working for the Jesup North Pacific Expedition of eastern Siberia, the Russian anthropologist Waldemar Bogoras, working for the Jesup North Pacific Expedition of the American Museum of Natural History, obtained several cylinders of songs from the Aivan Eskimos. These were recorded at Indian Point on the Bering Sea coast, probably during May and June 1901 (Boas, 1903:115).

Shortly thereafter, at the opposite extremity of the Eskimo domain, a Danish botanist, Christian Kruuse, used a phonograph to record six songs and five incantations in a camp near Angmagssalik on the east coast of Greenland. This occurred sometime during the winter of 1901-02; the precise recording dates are unknown (Kruuse, 1902, 1912).

The American explorer Robert Stein, who between 1899 and 1901 studied the music of the Polar Eskimos of Northwest Greenland using the oral or direct-dictation method, remarked that a certain song had “already been recorded by means of the graphophone” (Stein, 1902:345). Regrettably, he gave no details. It is not clear whether he was referring to one of Kruuse’s recordings or to another early and undocumented ethnomusicological achievement.

When Comer first recorded the songs at Hudson Bay in November 1903, the Era was in winter quarters at Fullerton Harbour, N.W.T. (Fig. 1). The vessel was visited frequently by “ship’s natives” and their families, who had completed the autumn caribou hunt and settled at the whaling harbour for the winter to work as hunters for Captain Comer and his crew.

On earlier voyages to the region Comer had developed a profound interest in the life of the Inuit, had observed aspects of their material and intellectual culture, and collected samples of their implements and clothing. In this work he had been encouraged by various scientists, notably Franz Boas. Before Comer’s 1903-1905 voyage, Boas, then curator of ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, had supplied him with a phonograph and 50 blank wax cylinders for recording songs and stories. The machine used by Comer was evidently an Edison Standard Phonograph, on which a metal stylus cut grooves on a wax cylinder. He used it on a number of occasions during the winters of 1903-1905, and again during his voyages of 1907-1909 and 1910-1912. All the cylinders he obtained — a total of 64 — were deposited in the American Museum of Natural History. The Comer collection of Eskimo music then sank into obscurity.

The famous Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv built up a bank of about 11,000 phonographic cylinders and many disc records from various parts of the world between 1900 and 1940 (Reinhard, 1961:44). This institution evidently possessed some recordings of Eskimo music around 1902, which were regarded by Erich von Hornbostel and his students as “representative of the world’s most elementary music” (Cowell, 1954:3). Nattiez (1980:111) suggests that this was the Comer material from Hudson Bay, which had been “published” by the American Museum of Natural History between 1901 and 1909. In fact, none of Comer’s cylinders reached the American Museum until the end of October 1905; they were never published in oral or written form; and the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv claims to have no knowledge of Comer’s cylinders or von Hornbostel’s study of them (A. Simon, pers. comm. 1984). If there were records of Eskimo music in Berlin as early as 1902 they must have been made either by Bogoras in eastern Siberia (1901) or by Kruuse in East Greenland (1901-02).
It is not impossible, however, that some of the music recorded by Comer was present in the Phonogramm-Archiv after 1905. In 1906 the Archiv developed a process for copying wax cylinders by using copper negatives, or “galvanos”, and was subsequently involved in copying arrangements and exchanges with many foreign institutions (Reinhard, 1963:8). References to the existence of Comer recordings might have perished during World War II when, according to Reinhard (1961:44), roughly 90% of the holdings were dispersed and lost.

I know of no evidence that the music recorded by Comer over a decade, with considerable effort (and a certain amount of persistence through time, a vital facet of cultural change during the period of Euro-American influence.

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