

Interview with a Songcatcher

Interview by Brian Handwerk

What does MUSIC say about us?

KEY IDEA Imagine someone you've never met, who knows nothing about you but your three favorite songs. What could she guess about you based on this information? Could she tell what you think is important? what makes you happy? what makes you sad? In the following interview, journalist Brian Handwerk talks to a woman who has made a career of learning about other people through their music.

CHART IT Copy this chart in a notebook. Then decide whether you agree or disagree with each statement. After you read "Interview with a Songcatcher," you'll revisit this chart.

Anticipation Guide

	Before Reading	After Reading
People with different tastes in music probably don't have much else in common.		
The words of a song are not as important as the melody.		
Politics and social conditions have little impact on a culture's music.		



ELEMENTS OF NONFICTION: INTERVIEW

If you've ever read an entertainment magazine, you have probably read an interview. An **interview** is a conversation between two people in which one person asks questions and the other responds. An interview

- often includes both the reporter's questions and the interviewee's responses
- typically provides long, uninterrupted quotations that give readers a sense of the person speaking

As you read "Interview with a Songcatcher," notice how the format of the interview helps you follow who is speaking.

READING SKILL: DISTINGUISH FACT AND OPINION

A **fact** is a statement that can be proved true from personal observations, by consulting a reliable source such as an encyclopedia, or even by conducting an experiment.

An **opinion** is a statement that cannot be proved because it expresses a person's feelings, thoughts, or beliefs.

Fact: The Chicago White Sox won the 2005 World Series.

Opinion: The Chicago White Sox are a great team.

When you read nonfiction, it's important to distinguish between facts that you can rely on and opinions about which people could disagree. To practice telling the difference, use a chart to note at least four facts and four opinions as you read this interview.

Statement	Fact or Opinion?

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

The words in column A help one woman tell how she's learned about people's music. Match each word with the word in column B that you think is closest in meaning.

Column A	Column B
1. circumstance	a. undeveloped
2. composer	b. innermost
3. informant	c. situation
4. intimate	d. distant
5. primitive	e. songwriter
6. remote	f. speaker

Writing That Travels

the Globe Freelance writers like Brian Handwerk don't work for one particular newspaper or magazine. They get to write for a variety of publications on a range of topics. For example, Handwerk has written articles on the environment, politics, and scientific



Brian Handwerk
born 1970

discoveries. His articles have been printed in publications around the globe. He says, "One of the best parts of the job is being able to interview amazing people like Henrietta Yurchenco . . . I'm lucky to be able to meet people like her through my writing."

Background

Ethnomusicology Each culture has a unique way of expressing itself through music. The study of ethnomusicology (ěth'nō-myōō'zī-kōl'ə-jē) is dedicated to preserving the music of all the world's cultures. Ethnomusicologists—also called songcatchers—travel to remote areas to record music from different groups. In addition to studying songs and instruments, songcatchers also study the ideas and methods that lead to the creation of music. For example, Henrietta Yurchenco (hě'n-re-ět'ə yūr-chě'n'kō), the songcatcher featured in this interview, spent two years studying and recording music in isolated areas of Mexico and Guatemala. Today, a number of universities and colleges offer courses in ethnomusicology.



MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND BACKGROUND

To learn more about Brian Handwerk and songcatching, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.



Interview with a Songcatcher

Brian Handwerk

Ethnomusicologist Henrietta Yurchenco spent over 60 years traveling the world in search of the unrecorded music of small cultural groups. Yurchenco recorded the music of various groups and tribes in Mexico, Central and South America, Spain, and Morocco. Her collection of world music is now housed in the United States Library of Congress, preserved for future generations of music lovers.

INTERVIEW

Who is asking this question? Tell how you know.

circumstance

(sûr'kəm-stäns') *n.*
a condition that affects or relates to an event or series of events

You've had such an incredible career, how did it all begin?

To tell you the truth, I think that most of the things that happened to me in life happened with absolutely no plan whatsoever—just a set of funny **circumstances**.

When I was working at WNYC [radio station] I was introduced to music from around the world, because everyone came to WNYC. I played artists like Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Pete Seeger,¹ and I also played music from all around the world. I was curious, you know, just plain curiosity.

One of our friends, the great Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo, called my husband and I and said “We’re driving to Mexico, do you want to go?” We did. We drove from New York to Mexico and it changed my life.

1. Woody Guthrie; Leadbelly; Pete Seeger: American folksingers and composers.

BACK FORWARD STOP REFRESH HOME PRINT



Henrietta Yurchenco shows off her early recording equipment.

It was in Mexico where you first began field recording of remote tribes?

Yes, because of a chance letter from the Library of Congress. I was doing radio programs for the Inter-American Indian Institute. . . . Dr. [Manuel] Gamio, the head of that institute, said, "We've received a letter from the Library of Congress. They'll send equipment and a little money. Are you interested?" **B**

20 I almost bit his hand off. I said, "I'll do it!" He was telling me about sleeping on the ground, long trips by animals, deadly scorpions, et cetera, but I wasn't listening. I didn't care. That's what I did for the next two years in Mexico and Guatemala.²

Were the practical aspects as difficult as advertised? Dealing with cumbersome early equipment, for example?

It was a horror. . . . People have asked me, "You went so far into those remote areas with just one recording machine?" One machine? I was thankful

2. **Guatemala** (gwā'tē-mā'le): a country in northern Central America.

ANALYZE VISUALS

What do the **details** in this photograph suggest about Henrietta Yurchenco's interests and personality?

B FACT AND OPINION

Yurchenco states that the Library of Congress offered money and equipment to the Inter-American Indian Institute to record tribes in Mexico. Is this a fact or an opinion? Explain.

remote (rĭ-mōt') *adj.*
located far away



Yurchenco poses with Tzotzil Maya musicians in 1942.

to have one. . . . At one point the cord broke when we were way into the mountains. My photographer was with me on that trip and he just held it together with his hands. He stayed absolutely still, didn't move an inch, and it was a perfect recording.

On most of the trips we had a big car motor for power. We had to carry gasoline, the machine, and the aluminum or even steel discs. That's all we had so we just hauled it everywhere. The only thing that really terrified me was deadly scorpions. It's not comfortable sleeping on the ground when you know those things are around—but it was a great adventure.

Some places I had help from missionaries,³ some places I was alone with 200 pounds of equipment. Don't ask me how it worked sometimes.

How difficult was it for you to understand the culture of these remote communities?

When I was in Mexico I visited some very **primitive** and isolated people who had had no contact with mainstream society for many years. I swear I saw animal sacrifices and curing ceremonies that were thousands of years old. I discovered what there was of pre-Hispanic⁴

3. **missionaries** (mĭsh'ə-nĕr'ēz): people who are sent to do religious work in foreign countries.

4. **pre-Hispanic** (prĕ-hĭ-spān'ĭk): related to an era before Spanish conquerors arrived in the Americas.

INTERVIEW

Reread lines 33–35. What do they reveal about Yurchenco's personality?

FACT AND OPINION

Reread lines 36–37. What might you do to verify these statements as facts?

primitive (prĭm'ĭ-tĭv)
adj. of or relating to a nonindustrial, often tribal, culture



music and dance at that time among 14 different tribes. After some of the recordings these people died and the younger people did not really learn the stuff. . . .

People in the field have to be very careful because they're told things but shouldn't believe them. You have to look behind the words. **Informants** might tell you what you want to hear, or not tell you something that the community won't want you to hear. So you have to be very careful, and really observe. . . .

How are you able to do that as an outsider with a lot of recording equipment?

First of all it was easy because, as you've no doubt noticed, I'm a woman. So I'm not threatening and they did not regard a woman as threatening. Secondly, I never asked direct questions. Anthropologists⁵ go into the field with questions. I didn't, I just went with hugs and kisses and asked "Will you please sing for me?" When you ask about music it means, "She's interested, she likes me, she respects me." And I've never met a people who didn't respond to that.

The Yaquis,⁶ for example, who were known as a very warlike tribe, were absolutely marvelous. They were poets; their stuff was gorgeous. I said to the chieftain, "I want to get the words for all these songs"; he said, "We'll come together before you leave and we'll write it all down so you get it right." Well, the entire tribe came to this little community center, babies, women, grandparents, everyone. We sweltered in there, it was 100 degrees, but we got it all down. **E**

You had to be a good listener. I've sat on many, many a porch with women of all kinds and colors and just asked "So what happened after that?"

70 Was the lack of a common language a problem?

I never found that there was a distance between them and me because I didn't understand their language. To this day I travel to one area of Mexico that has a rich musical heritage. I've been going there since 1942, and the

5. **anthropologists** (än'thrə-pöl'ə-jīsts): scientists who study the origin, behavior, and cultural development of humans.

6. **Yaquis** (yā'kēs): a native people of Sonora, Mexico, who settled mainly along the Yaqui River.

informant (ĭn-fōr'mənt)
n. one who gives information

E FACT AND OPINION
What two opinions does Yurchenco express about the Yaquis? Tell what words led you to this conclusion.

composer (kəm-pō'zər) *n.*
one who creates musical pieces

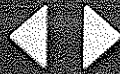
INTERVIEW

What does this response to the question reveal about Yurchenco's approach to her work?

FACT AND OPINION

Reread the first sentence of this paragraph. Can you verify this statement as fact?

BACK FORWARD STOP REFRESH HOME PRINT



wife of the main Indian **composer** there doesn't speak Spanish. Every time she sees me we just hug, and she kisses me and cries. They know whether you respect them and you don't need words. **E**

It's better to use music than bombs to win friendships. When we were in Morocco⁷ the last time most of the Jews had left for other countries. We were sitting in Tangier⁸ in a café, and a little ensemble
80 was playing Arabic music. I went up to them and I said, "We are musicians from New York." They got up, gave us hugs and kisses, and said, "Please sit down and we'll play for you." It's a wonderful bond. There's nothing more emotional than the arts and music. **G**

There's a voice to be heard through that emotion as well?

The song to me is the basic human expression. It tells you things, or avoids telling you things, or disguises things, but you have to look at what it means.

There's so much study of folk music and typically there's not much study of the words. It's like going to the opera for many people, and they
90 don't have the ghost of an idea what it's about. They just hear the music. But if that's what the composer had meant he would have just written, you know, "Blah, blah, blah." Music itself tells you things but so do the words. You have to look at the meaning. . . .

You've always been attuned to the political aspect of music as well.

I'm concerned with more than music. I'm concerned with the society, with the people more than anything. When I hear popular music I have to consider the social and political things that are going on in order to understand it. It's the same with any music around the world, but that
100 fact is very often neglected.

I'm not a romantic; I'm political. These romantics say "We must preserve the precious culture." But at the cost of poverty and ignorance? Is that what you want? That's what it means. Life changes, and with modern communications, roads, and infrastructure a lot of things will

7. **Morocco** (mə-rōk'ō): a country in northwest Africa. It has coastlines on the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

8. **Tangier** (tǎn-jir'): a northern Moroccan city.



disappear, of course. But maybe people's lives will be better—I don't just talk about music as if it were surrounded by a moat⁹ or something.

Why is the work of field recordings important, and why is it important to preserve and distribute these voices of the past 100-odd years?

110 It's our history. We have a written history. There are books for political history, the formation of nations, political and social struggles. But music is one of the most **intimate** expressions. Through music you become knowledgeable of the intimate aspects of life that aren't told in books. It's important because the people themselves tell you; it's not someone's interpretation. History books are written by the victors, but songs are the people's own words and melodies. That's what makes music a very powerful tool to understand people. **H**

9. **moat** (mōt): a water-filled ditch that surrounds and protects a castle, fortress, or town.

intimate (ɪn'te-mĭt) *adj.*
relating to one's deepest nature

H FACT AND OPINION

Find one fact and one opinion in this paragraph. How were you able to identify each?

ANALYZE VISUALS

What can you **infer** from this photo about the way Yurchenco relates to the people she meets?

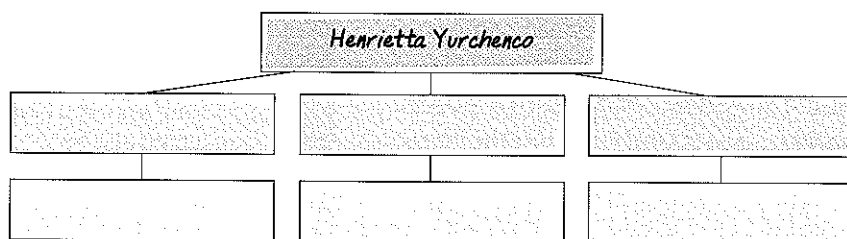


Comprehension

- 1. Recall** How did Henrietta Yurchenco begin recording tribal music?
- 2. Clarify** Why does Yurchenco think music can tell more about a culture than history books?
- 3. Summarize** Reread lines 70–83. How is Yurchenco able to communicate with people who don't speak her language?

Critical Analysis

- 4. Describe a Songcatcher** What type of person is Henrietta Yurchenco? Using a chart like the one shown, write three adjectives that describe Yurchenco's personality. Expand your chart using one statement from the interview that supports each adjective.



- 5. Analyze an Interview** Reread Handwerk's questions to Yurchenco. What do these questions tell you about his interest in or prior knowledge of songcatching?
- 6. Evaluate Fact and Opinion** Look back at the facts and opinions you recorded as you read. Then exchange your list with a partner. Does he or she agree with you about which statements are facts and which are opinions?
- 7. Make Judgments** Look again at the questions Handwerk asked Yurchenco. Were they good choices? Why or why not? If you were to continue the interview, what are another two questions you would ask?

Extension and Challenge

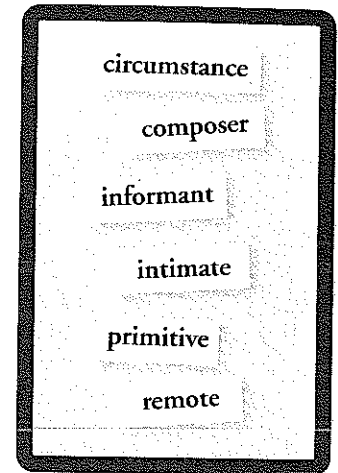
- 8. Big Question Activity** Go back to the anticipation guide you started before reading. Now, fill in the "After Reading" column. Have any of your opinions about music changed after reading this interview? Explain.
- 9. Creative Project: Music** Imagine that Henrietta Yurchenco came to your class. What music would you play for her to let her know what it's like to be a student your age in the United States today? With a group, come up with a list of five songs. They can be songs written by recording artists, or songs written by one or all of you. Next to each song, explain why you chose it.

Vocabulary in Context

VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Show that you understand the boldfaced vocabulary words by telling whether each statement is true or false.

1. A **remote** village is far away from other communities.
2. A **composer** is someone who writes plays.
3. Most European cultures are **primitive**.
4. An **informant** is the same as a liar.
5. Most people share **intimate** details about their lives with no one but family members and friends.
6. A **circumstance** is a person who bosses others around.



VOCABULARY IN WRITING

If Henrietta Yurchenco were to write the story of her career as a songcatcher, what might she say? Write the introductory paragraph of Yurchenco's memoir. You might start like this.

EXAMPLE SENTENCE

*My first trip was to a **remote** village in Mexico.*

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION

A word's **denotation** is the basic definition found in a dictionary. Its **connotation** is a feeling or attitude linked with that word. Connotations can influence the meaning a word conveys. For example, the vocabulary word *primitive* means "of or relating to a nonindustrial, often tribal, culture." But the word has also come to mean "unsophisticated" or "crude." Recognizing connotations can help you understand the opinions of the people you read about.

PRACTICE Replace each boldfaced word with another word with a similar meaning, but a negative connotation.

1. Marcus's dog is **overweight** because the family feeds it too much.
2. Even after she left the room, Lia's perfume left an odd **scent** in the air.
3. The **elderly** woman moved slowly as she crossed the street.
4. Michael is so **clever**. He always gets his way.
5. I can't be friends with Cynthia. Her attitude is **unpleasant**.



VOCABULARY PRACTICE

For more practice, go to the Vocabulary Center at ClassZone.com.