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**Radio, Sound, Time: The Occupation of Alcatraz Through  
an Indigenous Sound Studies Framework**

**by Everardo Reyes**

Ethnomusicology  
University of California, Berkeley  
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# Radio, Sound, Time: The Occupation of Alcatraz Through an Indigenous Sound Studies Framework

Everardo Reyes  
Ethnomusicology  
University of California, Berkeley

everardo\_reyes@berkeley.edu

<b>Table of Contents</b>	1
Abstract	1
Introduction: Sunrise Gathering, 2023	2
Oral History and Deep Listening: Sound, Time, and Humor	4
Indigelogics: Time, Space, Sound	11
Music and Social Movements	14
Conclusion	20
References	22

## Abstract

While a large and growing body of literature has investigated the relationship between music and social movements in the U.S., few scholars focus on the role that radio and music played during the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz by the Indians of All Tribes. Analyzing thirty-nine episodes from the Pacifica archive of *Radio Free Alcatraz*, alongside interviews conducted with organizers, participants, and performers associated with the occupation, as well as field work at contemporary Sunrise Gatherings on Alcatraz Island, this paper examines the relationship between radio, sound, music, humor, and political activism emanating from the 1969 occupation. I argue that the sounds of Alcatraz—including the radio broadcasts—carry the lessons of the past into the present and future and assert sonic sovereignty. This sonic continuity serves as both a memory and a guide for future Indigenous movements, challenging settler-colonial norms by maintaining a connection to land, ancestors, and community through sound. Through what I am calling an Indigenous Sound Studies (ISS) framework, I highlight how sound, space, and time intersect to build relations, remember the past, foster solidarity, and imagine new futures. The sonic moments of the 1969 occupation provide insights into the enduring power of sound to shape activism and self-determination for Indigenous peoples.

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## Introduction: Sunrise Gathering, 2023

*The stars seem to dance—the night sky a stage. Slowly underneath the ocean, gold flames reach out to gently touch the sky. The Yuki Resistance Round Valley Traditional Dancers finish their song and take a break. Miguel Gavilan Molina—a KPFA radio host—speaks into the mic:*

A little excitement, it's a lot of energy happening here. The sky is beginning to change. It looks like break before dawn, where the grey turns to pastel blue—the horizon and the sun is coming. Oh yeah, we can still see that North Star and the moon has faded. And I just heard the first seagull cry out as I'm looking up at the sky. It looks like to be—probably three to four thousand people. Now, back to the circle.

*These words, his voice, the Yuki Resistance Dancers—broadcast across the embers that grow in the bay and echo through this city—through your city—through radio speakers in cars and on smartphones. The reverberance of our bodies in this space swim on radio waves and will one day, in the future, greet the dancing stars of the past.*

The Sunrise Gathering on Alcatraz Island happens twice a year. Once on Indigenous Peoples Day and again on UnThanksgiving. These gatherings celebrate the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz by the Indians of All Tribes and showcase activists and allies as they work towards decolonization. The Sunrise Gathering hums across generations and time—putting in relation those who have been there in the past, present, and future.

In this paper I bring together scholarship on music and the Indigenous voice (Fisher 2016; Perea 2014; Reed 2019; Robinson 2020), technology (Fisher 2016; Hochman 2014), and self-determination (Perea 2021; Reed 2016, 2019) to create what I am calling an Indigenous

Sound Studies (ISS) framework<sup>1</sup>. While a large and growing body of literature has investigated the relationship between music and social movements within the U.S. broadly (Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Greenway 1953; Martin 1995; Roy 2010) and the history of Alcatraz (Bauer 2021:100), few writings focus on the role of sounds and music during the 1969 occupation from an Indigenous studies perspective (Perea 2014). My intention through this paper is to establish ISS as a field within ethnomusicology. ISS insists on a decolonial and relational listening practice that unsettles euro-centric ways of knowing.

On November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1969, fourteen Native youth, “primarily college students from the Bay Area, occupied Alcatraz Island for nineteen hours” (Johnson 1996: 50). Calling themselves the Indians of All Tribes (IOAT), the students left the island but planned a second occupation for November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1969. Over the course of eleven days, the Indians of All Tribes were able to coordinate a larger occupation. On November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1969, right before dawn, about eighty-nine Native people gathered at Sausalito to launch another occupation (Johnson 1996: 65) lasting from November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1969, to June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1971. The aim of the occupation was to bring awareness to Native issues and the blatant disregard of treaty rights. Citing the doctrine of discovery, the IOAT were adamant about not leaving the island and making it a cultural center and school for Native peoples across the Americas.

Based on a larger project about the occupation, this paper draws primarily on my interview with one of the activists, Jonny BearCub (Assiniboine & Sioux), analysis of a December 29, 1969, radio broadcast, and my ethnographic observations at the Sunrise

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<sup>1</sup> This framework has been inspired by the creation of the Indigenous Sound Studies group at UC Berkeley with Sierra Edd.

Gatherings in 2023 to argue that the radio archive, as well as the sounds recounted to me by BearCub, provide insight into how sounds on the island create a space for futurity. I also show how Native humor facilitates new possibilities and futures. By attending to the sonic aspects of the occupation, we can better understand what took place during the 1969 occupation, its effects on Indigenous activism today, and the lessons it can teach Indigenous activists moving forward. The second half of this paper examines the role of music and radio in Native activism and intertribal and interethnic coalition-building. Overall, focusing on the sonic elements of Indigenous activism provides important insights into how music and sound can impact social movements.

Storytelling is a fundamental piece of my methodological approach; stories can offer deep insights into human experiences, cultural practices, and social relations (Kim 2016). Through storytelling, I aim to keep the distinctive voices of those who I have interviewed within the ongoing story of Indigenous activism. At the same time, I show how I am now a part of this story, and how the words and actions of those during the 1969 occupation inspire and influence my research. I use story to re-imagine a space within academia. While at times my writing falls back into an academic voice, I weave the two voices to showcase the way the occupation has influenced me. I try to signal to you, the reader, this weaving by italicizing the sections that are more storytelling.

### **Oral History and Deep Listening: Sound, Time, and Humor**

Pacifica Radio Network has an archive of thirty-nine episodes of Radio Free Alcatraz (also known as Indian Land Radio and Radio Alcatraz), a program broadcasted live from the island

between December 29, 1969, and August 21, 1970. After analyzing and transcribing all thirty-nine of these episodes, I conducted six oral history interviews with activists who attended the 1969 occupation and co-listened to the radio archive as part of the interviews. As I will show, the radio archive reverberates felt knowledge (Harjo 2019:33–34) that does not exist only in the past; its echoes can be heard during the continuing Sunrise Gatherings.

*I download the file titled Radio Alcatraz, sent to me by Pacifica Radio. My heart races as I watch the file slowly load. I spend hours listening through the episodes, outlining the themes as they come up, mesmerized by the voice of John Trudell (Santee Dakota and Mexican) and all the other activists on the radio. I feel connected to them through the sound recordings. From that night, one episode resonates with me: December 29, 1969.*

There is a loud humming in the background as John Trudell explains they are having an issue with electricity. John Trudell was the sole host of Indian Land Radio, leading him to become the “recognized voice of Alcatraz” (Johnson 1996:85)<sup>2</sup>. The show was broadcasted in the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York and received “an estimate of 100,000 listeners” (Johnson 1996:85). Trudell used his voice to raise awareness about Indigenous issues and make intertribal connections, as encapsulated within these broadcasts and his music.

*In the December 29<sup>th</sup> episode, he explains how they didn't have power Friday, which was why they did not broadcast that day. A huge storm came by—essentially making the island inaccessible until Monday. Trudell introduces Jonny BearCub, an eighteen-year-old from Fort Peck, Montana. She begins by reading a list of doctors who have come to the island and offers thanks and appreciation to them. Out of the blue, Trudell turns to BearCub to ask her questions about coming to the island and life on her reservation. The interview seems improvised, and at*

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<sup>2</sup> In the 1998 movie “Smoke Signals,” Trudell is the DJ on the Coeur d’Alene reservation, demonstrating the iconicity of Trudell through radio and as a leader.

*times they can't hear each other because of the generator.*

In 2024, I was able to contact Jonny BearCub through social media. Since 1969, she has received her juris doctorate from the University of Minnesota School of Law, has been the deputy director of the Mayor's Office of Contract Compliance for Denver, and is the current Director of Business Development at Native, a public benefit corporation. I introduced myself to her via email and explained my research, after which we set up a Zoom chat. *As I stand in my home, with sounds of my own kids in the background playing, I proceed to interview Jonny BearCub. We use the sound archive as our guiding point. I play the December 29<sup>th</sup> episode for her, and she explains the backstory of the episode to me. Together, we listen.*

**John Trudell (JT):** “Good evening and I welcome you on behalf of the Indians of all tribes. Indian land. Alcatraz Island.”

*Trudell's voice rings young and clear against a loud vibrating hum.*

**Me:** “Can you hear it”? I ask BearCub over zoom.

**Jonny BearCub (JB):** “Yes”

*I tap play and we hear Trudell's voice again.*

**JT:** And tonight, there's a little background noise here. We had a problem and we're running our generator inside the studio. And also, we've been having quite a bit of hassle lately with our electricity. We had power failure on Friday. And it lasted through Friday night during mealtime. That's why we weren't on [the radio] Friday night. We didn't have any lights at all. Or any power of any type to use. And Saturday, we were kind of stranded on the island because of bad weather. Sunday. Not many boats running. And so today we're giving an attempt. Tonight, we have Jonny BearCub with us. From-- Wolfpoint, Montana, who was going to offer some thanks to the doctors that have helped us - everyone. Jonny, go ahead.

*I pause to ask BearCub her thoughts so far.*

**JB:** “I've heard this about 1000 times,” she says with a smile.

This blending of time washes over me. The sound of Trudell and BearCub's voices from 1969 places me on the island. And as BearCub and I listen in 2024, I think of how an Indigenous-

centered approach to music studies can enable a better understanding of this sonic moment. For example, Mvskoke scholar Laura Harjo (2019) explains how Indigenous music allows for a connection across time and space as it engages and situates the past while signaling to the future. Harjo writes of listening to stompdance recordings: “The songs activate felt knowledge and experience tied to location. Songs hold memory, functioning as kin-space-time envelopes, and this can support resilience and thriving too” (Harjo 2019:33–34). What Harjo calls a kin-space-time envelope, a connection to the past and ancestors through memory, also provides “instructions for how to be in the world, or invokes a sense of responsibility in the person recalling the memory” (Harjo 2019:28). If we engage ISS from this perspective, the music and sound of Alcatraz create a connection between the past and the future and reverberates the memories and histories of Indigenous ancestors.

For example, Miguel Molina’s continuation of Radio Free Alcatraz during contemporary Sunrise Gatherings showcases the continued importance of radio to current and future radio DJ’s. At the 2023 gathering, Molina reminds me (an Indigenous scholar interested in radio and sound), that our role is to document what is happening. He explains that we are the messengers with the very important job of reporting and giving voice to the voiceless. “Not to get arrested,” he abruptly tells me. The conversation happens so quickly, in between interviews he is doing, I don’t have time to pull out my recorder, but I write down our exchange right away. Not because it’s part of my research as an ethnomusicologist, but because Molina is reminding me what my responsibility is as an Indigenous scholar.

Molina was given the mic by John Trudell to continue broadcasting Indian Land Radio during the Sunrise Gathering. Furthermore, the training of younger DJ’s during the gathering sustains this connection for future generation. For example, there is a younger DJ named Daniel

learning the ropes at the gathering. He explains to me how radio is paramount to him in expressing Indigenous and Chicana issues. The oral tradition embedded in radio as a means for self-determination is sustained from Trudell to Molina, and Molina to Daniel.

In the examples above, radio is a type of kin-space-time envelope, connecting past, present, and future generations. Furthermore, the Sunrise Gathering continues these connections as it sustains Indigenous voice and ways of knowing across generations, providing a blueprint of how to be in the world for younger generations. The historic sounds of the 1969 occupation create an echo into the future which hums an Indigenous sovereignty that simultaneously invokes the past and present into a single space.

BearCub and I continue listening to the December 29, 1969, radio segment. I tap play again and we both listen to Trudell's voice.

“That was Jonny BearCub. Seeing that Jonny's around, we may have a little discussion. But I'd like to find now, Jonny, how old are you?”

“What!?,” young BearCub says it more as a comment than a question. The pitch of her voice rises.

“How old are you?” Trudell asks again.

“I'm 18.”

I paused the recording.

**JBC:** You notice that I said, “What?”

**Me:** I did! Like—wait, WHAT?! I love that.

BearCub and I both laugh as we listen to the 1969 recording.

As I mentioned above, humor is a part of the occupation. The interview between BearCub and Trudell is filled with sounds of laughter. Even as the gargantuan gurgling generator

spews a cacophony of noise—the joy and laughter of Trudell’s interview with BearCub pierces through. This sonic exchange is important, as activists have been stranded on the island for three days and are still joyful. BearCub explains to me the situation: Trudell couldn’t bring new people to the island to interview, and he didn’t want to lose another day of broadcasting out of fear of losing the time slot on the radio, so he started interviewing BearCub, much to her surprise.

My interview with BearCub sheds much light on the radio segment. At first, I thought maybe this was Trudell’s first interview—maybe he was learning the trade. But no—it was because of external circumstances that he had to improvise with the situation. Once you come to understand that this interview comes after being stranded on the island for three days, the laughter is more striking. As Vine Deloria Jr. wrote in his 1970 book *Custer Died for your Sins*: “Humor has come to occupy such a prominent place in national Indian affairs that any kind of movement is impossible without it”(Deloria 1970:149). Native humor is one ingredient in ISS that helps facilitate new possibilities and futures while also providing healing and medicine in response to the violence of settler colonialism. Vine Deloria Jr. (1970:148) provides insight on this as well:

One of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh. Laughter encompasses the limits of the soul. In humor life is redefined and accepted. Irony and satire provide much keener insights into a group's collective psyche and values than do years of research

BearCub touches on the presence and sounds of family and joy during the occupation:

But I think that the noise that you hear when you're sitting on an island, if you're sitting somewhere and you're just meditating, you could hear the laughter of the kids. Because the children are always running around playing everywhere. You could hear them laughing. You could just hear the drum, hear them singing. If they were singing down on the dock, no matter where you were on the island, you could hear them. You could hear them, it would reverberate through there. So, it was never quiet. The island was never really a quiet place. It always had some type of sound going throughout it.

*I think about this laughter and how it still lives on Alcatraz. My visits to the island impressed those pictures in my head—the things you remember, like polaroid photos. Families together, on that boat that crosses the bay before the Sunrises. But now, I'm aware of the laughter they bring. Being a parent, I know that children on the island make you lighthearted, make you funny—trying to find ways to make them laugh.*

Humor resonates throughout the occupation. This can be heard during a press conference on November 11, 1969, when Richard Oakes (Mohawk) reads the Proclamation of Alcatraz:

We, the native Americans, re-claim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by *right of discovery*. We wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with the Caucasian inhabitants of this land, and hereby offer the following treaty: We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for 24 dollars in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man's purchase of a similar island about 300 years ago. We know that \$24 in trade goods for these sixteen acres is more than was paid when Manhattan Island was sold, but we *know that land values have risen over the years*. Our offer of \$1.24 per acre is greater than the 47 cents per acre the white men are now paying the California Indians for their land. We will give to the inhabitants of this land a portion of that land for their own, to be held in trust by the American Indian Government for as long as the sun shall rise and the rivers go down to the sea -- to be administered by the *Bureau of Caucasian Affairs (BCA)*. We will further guide the inhabitants in the proper way of living. We will offer them our religion, our education, our life-ways, in order to help them achieve our level of civilization *and thus raise them and all their white brothers up from their savage and unhappy state*. We offer this treaty in good faith and wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with all white men.

Oakes uses humor so we can accept the current situation in all of its bitterness, only to confront this reality and aim to redefine it. He uses humor and irony to bring awareness to broken treaties, policies, and law. But I argue that Oakes is doing more, using humor as a medicine for the atrocities that have happened. It's funny—but there is a level of horror that acknowledges the ridiculousness of colonial law. And in this space, between humor, truth, and medicine, Oakes gestures to an Indigenous future—switching between the present and a possibility in the future that contests the present situation. Oakes addresses the limits of the colonial soul while redefining life and what is expected.

## Indigelogics: Time, Space, Sound

Musicologist/ethnomusicologist Jessica Bissett Perea (Dena'ina) theorizes what she calls Indigelogics. She builds on a term originally introduced by George Lewis as Afrologics to explain the “aesthetic and values” between European (Eurologic) and African-American forms of music (Perea 2021:259).

Indigelogical aesthetics and sonic vernaculars center kinship and space, and thus stylistic developments by Native American musicians over time are the product of real-time improvisations in space. Indigenous improvisations are steeped in lived and trans-temporal experiences— their own and ancestral—and placed, material realities that are inextricably intertwined with structures of coloniality. Indigenous improvisations thus reject attempts to erase memory and history from music—a history that attempted to destroy family and lineage in an "image of whiteness" and in the name of nation-building assimilationist policies.

Bissett Perea blends the concept of Indigelogics with Vine Deloria Jr.'s theory of Indigenous space to showcase how an Indigenous way of understanding space yields different ways of being and relating in the world. A unique aspect of Indigenous culture and religion, as Deloria argues, is the emphasis on space and how “religious tradition is taken directly from the world around them, from their relationships with other forms of life” (Deloria 2003:65). Unlike “Christian religion that underlies Western secular thought” (Deloria 2003:97) he explains that: “[n]o Indian tribal religion was dependent on the belief that a certain thing had happened in the past that required uncritical belief in the occurrence of the event” (ibid: 98). Deloria is arguing that an Indigenous centering of space and location allows for connection that sacred time can come from. This contrasts with Western religions which center time in history—their belief system comes from a reliance on time/history that must be the ultimate truth. In regard to the US, this creates a distorted view that is part and parcel of settler colonial violence as it uses time to legitimize the disposition of land to Indigenous peoples (i.e. the Doctrine of Discovery and

Manifest Destiny). Alcatraz, I suggest, becomes a sacred space which rebukes settler colonial notions of time which invoke history by the timelines of settlers.

The specific location of Alcatraz and the relationship between those on the island creates a sacred time. Through the concept of Indigelogics, music and sounds of the occupation are vital as they connect Indigenous people, kinship and space in a way that rejects settler colonial structures of time and history. BearCub explains to me the sounds on the island.

It was really a beautiful place. There were times when you'd be walking around on the island and the tide would be out and you could go down and look for shells and that. And you could hear the water, the waves coming up and rushing against the rocks.

*I can feel like I'm back on Alcatraz during the Sunrise Gathering. I turn inward—the words ring through me. It is as if she was on a stage—as the lights dimmed and spotlight:*

You could hear the wind, you could hear those buoys ringing when they'd be out there. And then when the fog would roll in, everything would be muffled. There are times when you would go, and we'd climb up and sit on the very top of the cell blocks. And it was so quiet up there. And you could sit and look at all the lights across the bay. And if you were really quiet and the night was really still, you could hear traffic. You could hear the cars going across the bridge. You always had sporadic times when the Coast Guard would be making noises but after a while they kind of died down and you could hear the boats. The boats making their noises to come in. **Always, always could hear the seagulls**--always could hear them.

Reflecting on the radio broadcasts, I am taken back to April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1970. Trudell has Charles Dane (Choctaw) on the program. After Dane plays “Song to Woody,” Trudell says:

That was just an experiment, we're testing out the acoustics here tonight. And I think I found a small problem here. I had one of the pots up...and our new studio is here. We got this magnificent view of the bay now, San Francisco. I turn my head, and I can almost see Berkeley. If I'd just look around the corner of the building here, Treasure Island's off to our left and the Golden Gate Bridge is off to our right and downtown San Francisco. The Fisherman's Wharf area is right straight dead ahead of us.

April 9, 1970, is the first day Trudell broadcasts from a new location on the island. Trudell was picking up clicking sounds on the monitor, only to find the volume was all the way up on the monitor. Like other episodes, there is improvisation with technology. But what strikes me here is

the description of the Bay. Living in the SF Bay Area for five years, listening to this episode I can almost hear the fog. I hear a sonic connection between the way BearCub describes the island, the radio broadcast from 1970, and the lived experience at the Sunrise Gathering. When BearCub and Trudell explain the beauty and unique landscape that surrounds Alcatraz Island, I am transported to my time at the Sunrise Gatherings. Specifically, BearCub's and Trudell's words transport me to the specific moment at the Sunrise Gatherings, when the sun peeks its head over the horizon.

*We all face the east, hands raised. We are all quite together. My hand raises up toward the warm sun. In times of Covid, and times of hardship, the warm sun peeking out after a cold morning brings us who attend solace. We as Indigenous people are reminded of the hardship our ancestors faced and are at the same time reminded of the power of community and resilience. At the Sunrise Gathering, we can feel their guidance in the hardships of the present. And for the hardships to come, after our time, we hope that our actions in the present can make the hardships of the future a little easier to navigate. The sun is smiling at us, and we feel the joy wrap around us like a warm hug. And at that moment, the Bay becomes audible. The seagulls with their chorus of song wash over us. The sound of the water in the bay dancing around us.*

While I listen to the 1970 radio broadcast of Trudell describing the Bay, and as I listen to my interview with BearCub, I feel a continuity between the 1969 occupation to the 2023 Sunrise Gathering. When you are there, in that moment of camaraderie, hearing the environment, one realizes the continuity of these sounds from the past, and how they will continue into the future. Even though I did not live in 1969, going to the Sunrise Gathering, I not only hear but *feel* what BearCub and Trudell are describing. Space and time are connected in these movements and are pushed up against each other through sound.

The earlier account of laughter on the island, along with the sounds of the seagulls and the bay also reveal the important relationship between space, sound, and Indigenous sovereignty. By incorporating an ISS framework, I theorize how space and sound connects Indigenous histories, relations, and memories together. For example, Hopi scholar Trevor Reed explains how, "Indigenous creative work in sound attaches people, histories, and genealogies to places and to communities, not only by indexing particular memories individuals and groups have had in places but also by generating a particular feeling or feelings that became iconic of places" (Reed 2019:524). Reed argues that Hopi traditional music, taatawi, enacts what he calls sonic sovereignty, as it connects Hopi history, relations (human and non-human), and relations to Öngtupqa (Grand Canyon). During the Alcatraz occupation, music, radio, laughter all contributed to sonic sovereignty, which reverberates in the Sunrise Gatherings. The sonic sovereignty of Alcatraz also contributed to Indigenous activism beyond the island.

## **Music and Social Movements**

The 1960s were fraught with turbulence, social change, and lots of music. Artists like Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, etc. used their music to critique and provide new possibilities to social life. The role of specific artists or bands in "articulating the collective identity of social movements" (Eyerman and Jamison 1998:21) has been theorized as a *cognitive praxis*. Sociologists Eyerman and Jamison elaborate on this concept to showcase how music is a cultural process that produces knowledge, coming from an artist, that creates a collective identity. For example, Jimi Hendrix's 1969 performance of the Star-Spangled Banner at Woodstock produces a collective affective and identity for youth as they confronted the

horrors and violence of the Vietnam war, racial violence, and inequality. The buzzing guitar swoops in, exploding on stage as sirens wail in the background. Hendrix's performance is a cognitive praxis which embodies and articulates the deep feeling of anxiety, ennui, and tumult that shook youth to their core in the 1960s. Woodstock can be marked as an event that legitimizes the collective identity of a generation, and I argue that the same is true for the occupation of Alcatraz, but the entire soundscape of the occupation is the focus of my inquiry.

Music as a cognitive praxis is most clear during my interview with Bill Means. It's November 2023 at the Sunrise Gathering. The sun is up, and there is a buzz in the air. Seagulls call out overhead. There is a type of electricity in the crowd. I am standing inside a little area where a DJ from KPFA is interviewing and broadcasting the Sunrise Gathering over the radio. I got to meet and interview Bill Means, thanks to the KPFA DJ Francisco. Francisco flagged Means down after he was interviewed by Miguel on the radio. Means is a co-founder of the American Indian Movement and the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), which organizes the Sunrise Gatherings that happen on the island. In our discussion, he spoke about the role of Native music in creating collective pride. Means explained to me:

The music was very heartwarming, and especially returning from Vietnam to be able to hear the music of our people, to see, hear, and talk to some of my relatives in our Native language that I met here, on the island. Then I went back home from here to South Dakota; I went to South Dakota and began to learn more about our language more about our ceremonies. And so that feeling of Indigenous identity for me, was reignited here on Alcatraz.

For Means, his experience on the island during the occupation reignited his Indigenous identity, and music was the entry point. In this way, the music during the occupation echoed past 1971. It inspired Means to reconnect with his Indigenous identity and influences Indigenous activism to

this day, as it was the IITC that began organizing the Sunrise Gatherings. Listening carefully to Means, we hear how sounds and music of the 1969 occupation shaped his activism and still reverberate.

Means explained how the 1969 occupation inspired the creation of one of the first Native-owned radio stations:

Well, we realized the importance of that [radio] because we have 100,000 watt station on our reservation called KILI radio... And we're in the process of rebuilding our station, which is now the oldest Indian-owned, operated station in America. It's 40 years old--in February it will be 40 years that we've been on the air. So, we learned a great deal from Radio Alcatraz, and we took it home. And we created--After Wounded Knee, one of the things the community asked us to work on was a radio station. So now it serves the whole reservation and several other edge of reservation all the way to Rapid City at 100,000 watts. So, we got a lot of power there. And we reach a lot of areas, both Indian and non-Indian. So, we're able to educate the non-Indian and our people as well. Keep them informed, tribal council meetings, the weather, basic events of education so they can hear their children playing sports, you know, live sports and things like that we covered. You know, powwows, elections, all those things that are that are near and dear to our people we cover that on the radio. So, we learned a lesson here for Radio Alcatraz and we took it back to South Dakota, the Black Hills.

The above example relates to Eyerman and Jamison's concept of cognitive praxis, which focuses on the "content of social movements" and how social movements create "knowledge producers as social forces opening spaces for the production of new forms of knowledge" (Eyerman and Jamison 1998:21). The establishment of KILI radio is a direct outcome of the activism and broadcasting initiatives spearheaded by figures like Trudell and highlights the enduring significance of radio as a tool for cultural preservation and political mobilization. The creation of KILI radio exemplifies the pivotal role of radio in fostering Indigenous independence and self-determination. It also showcases the long-lasting effects cognitive praxis can yield. This historical context enriches our understanding of Radio Free Alcatraz and similar endeavors as

not merely acts of resistance but as foundational movements shaping the landscape of Indigenous media and cultural expression.

BearCub and Means are individuals who create spaces for Indigenous knowledge in the communities they return to. This suggests how the 1969 occupation—like sound—spilled into the places each activist had come from—like a sprouted seed, the music grew to create bonds within reservations, and inter-tribally. The performance of music during the 1969 occupation as well as performances done at the Sunrise Gathering contributed to intertribal coalition building and activism. These memories reverberate into the present and future as activists return to the island, but they also are a sonic artifact of the island’s previous history of intertribal coalition building.

A long Indigenous history of the island preceded colonial settlement. The Muwekma and Hukueko people visited the island in the Bay Area often, using it “as a camping spot and an area for gathering bird eggs and sealife” (Forbes 1972:44-45; Johnson 1996:1). Other tribes, such as the Coast Miwok, Pomo, Wintun, Wappo, Maidu, and Northern Yokut also used the island as a haven when navigating the bay waters (Johnson 1996:1). Even before the 1969 occupation, the island served as a gathering place for intertribal connections. Gatherings such as the Sunrise event attach this history to the island. In reading this as sonic sovereignty, I acknowledge that while federal agents removed the IOAT from the island in 1971, the history and future of Indigenous solidarity will always reverberate there, regardless of settler colonialism. Alcatraz is not just part of the past, but is instead “part of a longer history of Indigenous and civil rights activism” (Bauer 2021:98) echoing out to the 2016 protest against the North Dakota Pipeline and

the 2020 protests in South Dakota, which led to the LandBack campaign aimed at returning “sacred lands to Indigenous Peoples, including the Black Hills, to the Lakota” (Bauer 2021:100).

During the 1969 occupation, coalition-building and cultural exchange was not just between members of Tribes in what is now the United States. My oral history with Jonny BearCub highlights this:

You know, we had the South Americans come, and they have a different type of music and different types of flutes and for those of us who have not been out in the world a lot, that exposed us to a wide variety of different types of music, and the diversity of that music. *I think helped to solidify the sense of community, because people would hear the music.* They'd all come down and bring their little kids down there and sit around and listen, and people would talk. So, you just brought everybody there. It's kind of like, sporadic little impromptu concerts everywhere, you know, whether it was on the dock, whether it was out there where the basketball court was, whether it was up there in an area with a big prison, because acoustics, you know, the acoustics was different there.

Music was/is a social activity and process that brings people together and sustains these bonds.

Music solidified a sense of community. As BearCub explains, people on the island would gather around, with their families and kids, and listen to the music together—bringing Indigenous cultures together to learn about each other and creating relations. The impromptu concerts happened everywhere and brought everyone together—spurring conversations.

Music also facilitated coalition building across racial and ethnic lines. As BearCub explained to me:

So, you'd get people who would come out that weren't tribal, who would bring their instruments out. They'd either be studying at a music school or something like that, and two or three of them would show up, and they'd just play

I think that the other thing I think that has to do with music is a lot of culture sharing. Like the Japanese came out, they shared their music that they had. African Americans came out and they had all the drums and different things that they had—the island songs. So, it was exposure to other cultures, and their appreciation and their love of music. That broadened our horizon.

Music played an important role within the movement, showcasing the importance of music in facilitating social interaction. For example, in an oral history with Herb Butler, an Alaskan Native who was at the 1969 occupation, he recounted to me how the Grateful Dead did a benefit concert for the IOAT in 1970. Butler states, “They had a concert for us at the Fillmore. A fundraiser. And I remember going to that one concert there and we had backstage approval as Alcatraz people. I remember hanging out in the backstage with the Grateful Dead.” Folk musician Malvina Reynolds also recorded a song titled ‘Alcatraz;’ proceeds from the song went to the occupation. She even performed on the island during a benefit concert on December 12, 1969, which aired on KPFA radio. Music brought together multiple groups (African Americans, Japanese, Indigenous South Americans, etc.) and created solidarity and connectiveness.

Sociologist William Roy (Roy 2010:2) highlights this point, arguing:

the effects of music on social movement activities and outcomes depends less on the meaning of the lyrics or the sonic qualities of the performance than on the social relationship within which it is embedded. This implies that music is fundamentally social. Accounts and perspectives that focus solely on textual meaning or sonic quality disregard a profound sociological dimension of how music operates in social interaction.

While sociology provides important insights into the role of music in social movements in the US, calls to decolonize listening (Robinson 2020) urge music scholars to reconsider the way Indigenous music does law and healing. Indigenous scholars have written about the distinctive relationship between music, Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and law. For example, Hopi scholar Trevor Reed argues that “sonic sovereignty, or resonance of political authority within territory, requires merging theories of sound and law—intellectual domains which European and European-descended settler thought has traditionally conceptualized as separate and perhaps irreconcilable” (Reed 2019:510). Activists on Alcatraz merged these intellectual domains of sound and law, and as a result the radio broadcasts and music resonate a

political authority within the territory that is Alcatraz Island: the radio broadcast and music played on the island then call settlers to listen and recognize the authority that is Indigenous sonic sovereignty.

What is music? What is sound? Who defines the difference between them, and what implications might this have? Indigenous scholars in music studies have taken these questions head on (Bissett Perea 2021; Robinson 2020; Reed 2019), building on the work of other BIPOC writers such as Deborah Wong (2014). Shifting to focus on sound, including generators, seagulls, and laughter, as well as music, is important for ethnomusicology as the field finds itself working against the “aesthetic framework” that centers European definitions of music (Wong 2014:347). By reconceiving music as sound, ethnomusicologists are provided with an opportunity to break away from the preconceived notions of what music is. As ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong poetically states: “I am leaving music behind. I will follow the trail of sound, noise, and silence, which makes powerfully audible the questions I find most important” (Wong 2014: 351-352). By shifting the ethnomusicological focus to sound, Wong rejects the European aesthetics of music, which teaches a strict dichotomy between music and everything else, like law, medicine, etc. As mentioned above, Reed is asking us to merge ‘intellectual domains’ that we have been taught (through Euro-centric education) are separate. By interrogating these intellectual domains and theorizing ISS, further research can build across this boundary to showcase how music/sound can do law and even medicine.

## **Conclusion**

Sounds of past recordings hold memory, highlighting how Indigenous music and sound played and recorded on Alcatraz evoke kinship to ancestors and future activists. Furthermore, the

performance of Native music during the Sunrise Gatherings today and the ongoing presence of radio conjure up the memory of the occupation while also signaling to future possibilities and generations. From 1969-1971, activists broadcasted, wrote up plans, and lobbied community members for a future that centered Indigenous ways of knowing, and sound provides one way of invoking this history into the present as Indigenous activists carry on this legacy.

This remembrance of the activism on Alcatraz is vital, as I encounter people who have never heard of the 1969 occupation. The history and importance of the occupation is at times lost in the national understanding of the island that chooses to remember it only as a place that housed infamous gangsters. But what gets memorialized influences how we relate and understand history. In this paper, I've written a new possibility, a futurity, that centers Indigenous ways of knowing around sound, family, sovereignty and joy.

The occupation was as much sonic as it was physical as activists took over airwaves and filled the space with song. Ethnographic fieldwork, oral history interviews, and countless hours of analysis of radio broadcasts show that Indigenous activists were not just taking physical space at Alcatraz, but also asserting sonic sovereignty through music and sound. Even today, as highlighted in the opening vignette of this paper, music and sound are still used to uphold Indigenous sovereignty through music (the Yuki Resistance Dancers) and sound (the voice of DJ Miguel Molina broadcasted through radio). Using an Indigenous Sound Studies (ISS) framework, I argue that sound, space, and time were fundamental to the occupation in amplifying its political stance, goals, and calls for self-determination. By attending to a more sonic aspect of the occupation, we can better understand what took place during the 1969 occupation, its effects on Indigenous activism today, and the lessons it can teach Indigenous

activists moving forward.

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Institute for the  
Study of  
Societal Issues

2111 Bancroft Way STE 344, #5670  
Berkeley , CA 94720-5670

tel: 510-642-0813

email: [issi@berkeley.edu](mailto:issi@berkeley.edu)

web: <http://issi.berkeley.edu>