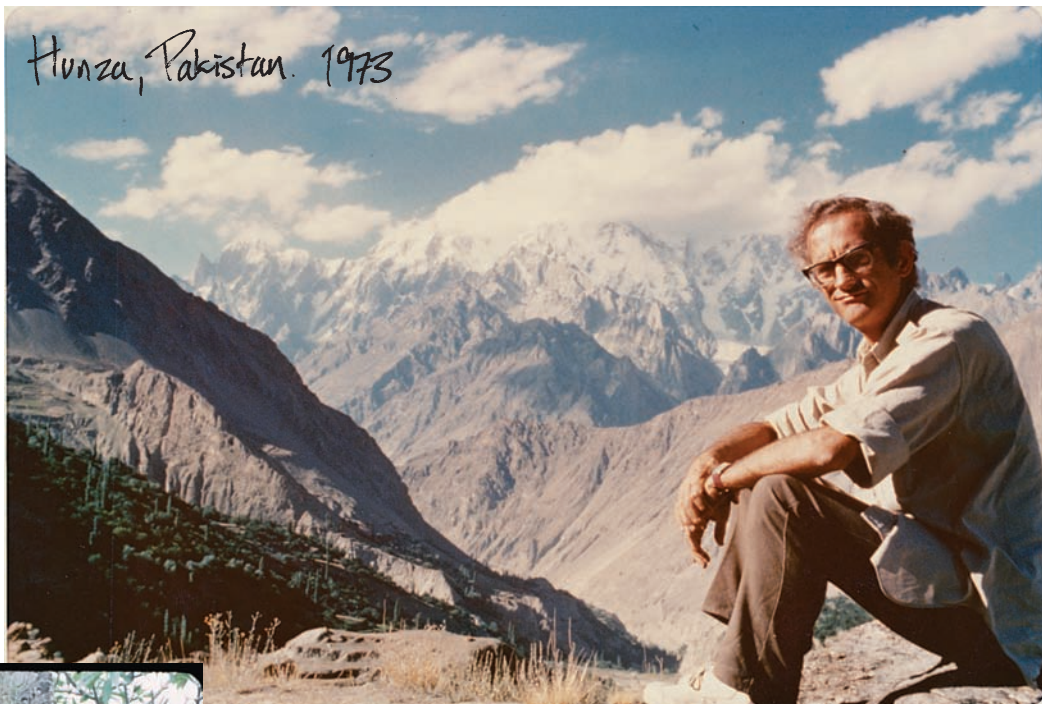


# David Lewiston Global Recordist

by Curtis Settino 2001

For forty years, David Lewiston has been recording traditional music all around the globe. He grew up in the London suburbs playing the piano and went on to study at Trinity College of Music in London, then with the Russian composer Thomas de Hartmann in New York. Thanks to de Hartmann, he was introduced to music "outside the Western canon" and decided to record it at its source. His first release, *Music from the Morning of the World*, was the very first stereo recording of the gamelan music of Bali. Released in 1966 as part of the landmark Explorer Series from Nonesuch records, these recordings launched his career as an engineer and producer.



Hunza, Pakistan. 1973



Above: Ubud,  
Bali. 1966

Right: Ladakh-  
Hemis Monastery,  
India. 1977.



Dalhousie, India. 1972

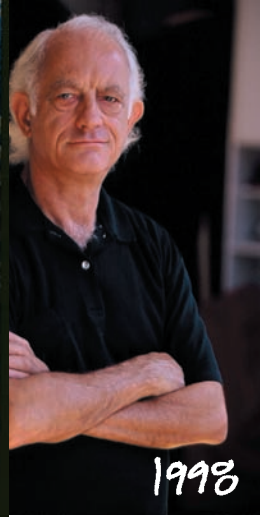


Lahul Tandi,  
India. 1981

Hunza Bitaan,  
Pakistan. 1973



Ladakh - Hemis  
Monastery, India - 1977



1998



Lahul, India 1983

*Interview begins on the next page*

### **So how did you manage to make those first recordings in Bali?**

I had the ultimate boring job at a trade paper in New York. I asked my boss, "I'd really like to go to Southeast Asia; any chance of a leave of absence?" He said, "Sure!" We agreed that I would use a few days of that leave of absence to do a story for the magazine on banking in wartime conditions in Vietnam. How's that for a scam?

### **It's a good one! [laughs]**

Yeah, I thought so too! I took off and went around Southeast Asia. First stop was Fiji, then Japan. After that it was Taiwan, Java and Bali. We're talking about 1966. Do you realize that there were no battery-powered stereo portable recorders at that time? The stereo Nagra hadn't been invented, and the venerable Nagra 3 was still the state-of-the-art field recorder. For stereo there were Ampex 600s and the like, but nothing that you could take around with you. When I got as far as Singapore, all I had was a mono Uher 4000. It was used by reporters a lot, weighed about eight pounds, and ran on lead acid batteries. I also had a pair of very decent small condenser mics, which a friend had lent me. Imagine my delight when I walked into a store on Orchard Road in Singapore and saw a battery-operated stereo recorder called the Concertone 727, selling for less than 200 bucks! It took five-inch reels and was pretty flimsy. But luckily, it worked during my time in Bali and Java. In Bali I struck up a friendship with a young chap who didn't want to use

his princely real name, preferring to be called Dean, which he thought was really trendy! When I talked about wanting to record gamelan, he said, "Oh, no problem I'll take you around." Part of being a cultured Balinese gentlemen is a serious interest in the arts, painting, sculpture, and music and dance. So before noon, we would go to three different locations, meet the gamelan managers and arrange sessions for later that day. How's that - three sessions in a day? The first one at 2 pm for an hour or so, then the next one at 4 pm for an hour or so and then the final one after dark.

### **Did the recordings elicit any kind of a response?**

I don't recall. But obviously they were *reasonably* satisfied. By today's standards, the recordings aren't that good. But at that time, there weren't any stereo recordings. I wish the geniuses who design plug-ins would find a way to eliminate distortion, a flaw of many of those early recordings. Their inadequate sound prompted me to return in the late '80s. Nonesuch was transferring some of the old masters to digital. They thought that *Music from the Morning of the World* was something that many people wanted, so it was in the first batch. When I listened I was really disappointed by the distortion, poor mic placement and other inadequacies. So, I went back in '87 and spent five months redoing everything.

### **Is there a lot of extra material floating around on tapes that have never made it on to record or CD?**

Hours and hours. At the moment, I am trying to find a home for the 400 hours that I have sitting in the archives. Not just Balinese, but also Tibetan rituals, a lot of Himalayan folk, 50 five-inch tapes of South American music, plus Central America and much else.

### **What do you think you have the most of?**

Tibetan rituals, probably, because they're so long. At one monastery it's nothing for me to record five or ten hours of material in a day. When I returned to New York in 1966, I got to meet the now-legendary Teresa (Tracey) Sterne, a fine musician who had been hired by Jac Holzman, the guy who started Elektra, to run his new Nonesuch label. Jac was interested in folk rock, and by extension, intriguing music from faraway places. So he started what was originally called the International Series, which under Tracey's guidance was transformed into the more glamorously named Explorer Series. While Tracey was a fine Western classical musician and a former child prodigy, she had the gift of recognizing fine music from all over the world. She listened to my tapes together with Peter Siegel, the staff engineer and another lover of world music. After a brief chat we agreed on a deal, she took me to meet Jac Holzman, and that was that. Boom. Can you imagine going in with a bunch of tapes and someone saying, "Sure we'll do an album. Will a \$500 advance be okay?" A few years later, when Tracey discovered that I seemed to do well working with musicians from around the world, she paid me a producer's fee to run sessions of Asian musicians who were touring the States.



*Dalhousie, India. 1972*

### **Did you engineer those sessions?**

Most of them, yes.

### **What is your engineering training?**

Oh, I'm a knob-twiddler. I belong to the learn-by-doing school.

### **Have you had any miserable failures?**

Yeeeahhh... actually I had a bad time in '98. I was up north in India in Jammu. And, boy those tapes are distorted. That's why I really need a distortion removal plug-in. I was using a [Neumann] KM 84 and an MKH30 - you know, the bi-directional Sennheiser - as a mid-side configuration, and the recordings are dreadful. These guys were singing really loud, and there was maybe 140 dB SPL. A friend said, "Hmm... I think it's the mic capsule bottoming." But then I consulted with Klaus Heyne, the mic guru, and he diagnosed the problem as an overloaded FET in the KM 84. At times like that, I think, "Gee, I wish I had somebody knowledgeable along," you know?

### **To blame? [laughs]**

Yes, or to bail me out! [laughs] It's hard when you're there all alone, trying to handle all of the recording, the documentation and the photos. And it was unbearably hot. It was the hot season in Jammu, so I was sweating profusely the whole time as well.

### **You're recording to a DAT now?**

Yes. The only DAT recorder that I feel works, if we're still talking stereo, is the [HHB] PortaDAT. Maybe the Fostex PD2 or PD4 are good, but I've never used one. I have a PortaDAT and I really like that. They're made basically for film work. The problem is that young people who want to go off and record just don't have \$15,000 for equipment - three grand for the recorder and the extra batteries, which are essential, are 150 bucks a clip. You've got to have at least three batteries and then you need a selection of mics. I have a pair of KM 84s, a pair of KM 83s, the MKH20, and a pair of inexpensive [Electro-Voice] RE50s because I find they're absolutely well behaved. They're what I use whenever I need a spaced pair of omnis, rather than the KM 83s. In fact, in '87 I used only the RE50s in Bali, and everybody is amazed at the quality of the recordings. Here I am using a pair of inexpensive dynamics and the transients aren't bothered at all. While this mic has a fairly steep fall off below 100 Hz and above 13 kHz, it's perfect for Bali!

### **Has there ever been an occasion where the musicians stopped because they weren't happy with the performance?**

Yeah. Musicians stop from time to time and say, "Wait a minute, that passage isn't right." And then they go back and do it over. Basically, I feel I'm there to serve the musicians and to give them the best recording of their material. And of course, for them it's a business also. When I went back again to Bali in '94 they were really pleased to see me because they knew, "Oh! David pays!" When I'm planning a trip, I always have to decide what is a realistic sum to allow for musicians' fees. What I try to do is to come up with payment that makes sense within a particular culture. In Bali in '87 the going rate for a session with a big gamelan was \$100. When I returned in '94, I sought out the same musicians because I had enjoyed

working with them, and asked, "Would you care to do some more recording?" "Absolutely," they said. And then I asked them, "How much?" Their response: "The regular price is \$400. But for you David, only \$250." At that point, I'm not going to insult musicians by bargaining, right? That would be really low class. So I either have to say, "Gee, I'd love to. But I just don't have the money," or "Okay. I'll find the money." When I recorded in Kullu in India's West Himalaya in the early '70s, I met Seshi, a fine musician who was the staff composer at the AIR [All-India Radio] station in Shimla. He had some of the AIR Shimla staff musicians with him. They went to the local festivals to give concerts and learn fresh tunes from the locals. We worked together to make recordings in Kullu, and his gifts were clearly evident. He's really able to inspire fine performances. So when I went back to Delhi a few years ago, I rang his house, was delighted to find he was still alive and asked him, "Any chance of you producing a few more sessions?" The nice thing about having Seshi run a session is that he knows the local music, and which performers will give a good performance of a particular piece. He makes sure that Bollywood pop music is banished during the session. I think of him as my Bollywood filter.

### **That's an increasing problem isn't it?**

It is. That's why I like to work with somebody knowledgeable within the culture. In remote villages I always seek out local educated people, administrators, school teachers, doctors and other professionals, and enlist their help. They make really helpful intermediaries with the local musicians, who are generally farmers or laborers. They explain that I want the pure local music - not Bollywood hits. Sometimes young sprigs who like my lifestyle will write me, asking questions. One thing they nearly always overlook is budgeting adequate compensation for the musicians. They write me saying "I plan to make token payments to the musicians," to which I reply, "You don't get it. The compensation needs to be meaningful." And they say, "Oh, but I'm a starving student." I tell them, "Look, if you go into a culture where they barely have a pair of shoes and you have all of this fancy gear... Let me give you an example: If a well-to-do young Japanese guy were to come into your college town, with a lot of fancy gear you know you'll never be able to afford, and say he'd like to record your group, offering to pay you the sum you'd normally make for a day's work for recording an hour of your music, you'd think that was fairly decent. You'd think that was fair, wouldn't you?" And the young sprig replies, "Yes." And then I'd tell them, "Just think, how would you feel if he came in with all this fancy gear, having paid for this expensive trip from Japan, and then all he wanted to give you was a ball point pen?"

### **What about publishing?**

If I'm working with traditional music, I'm assuming it's public domain. What I've done is to write a one-paragraph release, which covers the essentials. In some situations, the payment for the performance may not be a complete buyout, so there's space on the release form to write in how much more will come to

the musicians if the recording is used. That happened when I was in Morocco in '98. There, \$200 is a ridiculously small sum to pay for a recording session, but it was all I could afford. The musicians weren't happy, but I explained that I only had \$1,000 to pay all of the groups. So we agreed - 200 bucks down now, and then if it's released, they will get an additional payment. Later, at the urging of a respected entertainment lawyer, I decided to copyright all my recordings. That way there will be some publishing income to send back to the musicians.

### **When you are recording outdoors have you ever had any really nasty traffic noises or airplanes or stuff like that get in the way?**

That's something that needs to be discussed with the musicians. If you go in during the day and you're setting up an evening session, ask them, "Is it very noisy here at night?" And they'll say, "What do you mean?" And then you can say, "Well how about traffic? How about dogs? How about young kids, because kids love to cluster around the mics. So you need an agreement to banish the dogs and kids while the recording is taking place.

### **Any unusual recording setups that you've had?**

In '87 I made three recordings of one particular kecak.\* First of all, the group wasn't very good. And then the places where I recorded were unsuitable, and the mic placement didn't help. It sounded uninteresting, mediocre. Then I was referred to a better group in Bona Village, which is the home of the kecak. We met the kecak's manager, agreed on the details and recorded them in the very large, open courtyard of the local Temple of the Dead, which is a traditional place for kecak performances. My 200-foot hank of eighth-inch nylon twine came in very handy. I ran it across the temple, attaching the ends high up on pillars on both sides. Then I hung the RE50s from the twine, roughly 12 feet above the kecak performers, separated by 20 to 30 feet. The result: A recording that captured the drama of a fine performance. If something doesn't work, you have to scratch your head and try again. In '66 I recorded gamelan with a spaced pair of cardioids, letting the gamelan set up the way it always does. When I went back in '87, I tried the same thing and was dismayed with how lousy the recording sounded. So after a few more unsatisfactory recording sessions we tried something different. The 20-piece ensemble, called *gamelan gong*, consists of a large section of melody metallophones, called *gangsas*\*\* , each played with a single mallet; a few *gender* —large two-mallet metallophones; a wooden frame containing several gong pots, called a *reong*; a single gong pot used as a time beater; small cymbals, *cheng-cheng*; three gongs, the largest more than a meter in diameter; two drummers, and a flutist. In a large open space, we put the RE50s spaced 15 to 20 feet. Visualize the "recording space" as an inverted "V" with its narrowest point at the back and the widest point close to the mics. At the very back we put the three gongs, centered. We put the *gender* and *reong* off to

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the left, and the *gangsa* off to the right, so that they formed the inverted "V". We hid the time-beating gong pot behind the *gangsa* so that it wouldn't be too loud, with the small cymbals - also really loud - beside it. The most difficult thing was placing the drummers. In the *gamelan gong*, the key people are the lead *gangsa* player and the two drummers. Together, they control the whole ensemble. Since the drummers play both heads of the drums, I needed them to face the mics rather than facing one another. It was difficult for them because they never perform that way. I positioned the flutist between the two drummers. But when we started recording, we knew this was the way to record the big gamelan.

### Were they okay with moving things around?

Yeah. Well, this was Bali's best gamelan so, when I explained what we needed of them, they said, "Okay, we'll give it a try." And it worked. When we played back the first take, everyone loved the result. The musicians loved it, my hosts loved it, and I loved it! ☺



Tash: Jong, Tibet. 1998

\* In the *kecak* (the Balinese music drama, nicknamed the "Monkey Chant") 100-200 men seated in concentric circles create complex rapid vocal patterns based on the syllable 'cak'; this 'cak chorus' acts as the rhythmic motor which propels the hour-long reenactment of the Ramayana legend by dancers, singers and a narrator.

\*\* *Gangsa* and *gender* are metallophones somewhat like *marimbas*. The *cheng-cheng* consists of a horizontally-mounted pair of cymbals.

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