



collected scribblings on music, film and other obsessions

[current issue](#) | [back issues](#) | [about erasing clouds](#) | [links](#) | [contact](#)

Let's Take a Trip: The Quiet American's One Minute Vacations

by Dave Heaton

I'm on a rooftop in India early in the morning, with my eyes closed, listening to birds chirp as they fly across the sky, the sounds of traffic tentatively starting to fill the streets, and, above it all, the echoing voice of a man at a nearby temple, singing his way through a winding prayer of some sort. After 1 minute, I open my eyes, take off my headphones, and look up at my computer screen and the grey walls of my office cubicle. There's way too much work to do... Later on in the morning, I put my headphones back on and journey some more. I'm watching water buffalo in Laos. I'm standing near the Atlantic Ocean on the coast of France. I'm walking through the streets of Nashville, listening to country music flow from the open doors of each bar that I pass. But I never stay for more than a minute...

These one-minute vacations are real-time, unedited, 1-minute recordings that capture moments in places all over the world. They're one of the many sound projects put together by Aaron Ximm, displayed on his [Quiet American web site](#). The bulk of the site is devoted to Ximm's field recordings, which you can listen

to/download from the site in MP3 and Real Audio format. Many of his recordings were recorded during travels in Vietnam (hence the reference to Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*), yet there's a wide array of fascinating recordings on the site, including audio documentaries and recordings he put together as parts of art installations. There's also Ximm's writings about what he does and what it means to him. And lurking quietly amidst all of this, on a page that casual visitors are likely to overlook, are the 1-minute vacations, accessible by clicking on the American flag silhouette that appears in the upper-left corner of most pages.

Here, you're invited to "take a 1-minute vacation from the life you are living," by listening to recordings, made by Ximm and others, which almost-literally place you into an environment--a time and place that envelopes you. The recordings are crisp and involving; don't be surprised if you jump out of your seat when you feel like people, animals or raindrops are encircling you. Also, listen to enough of these, and you'll start hearing the world around you in sharper detail during your everyday life--much like great movies or photographs can make you see things you didn't notice before.

A new vacation shows up on the site every week. There's about a year's worth up now, and the array of locales, moods and sounds represented is staggering. The whole culture of field recordings is fascinating, and the Quiet American site is a great place to start exploring it. Follow the links on the site, and you'll soon be hooked, amazed at what people are doing that you never knew about. To find out more about the one-minute vacations and his other projects, I went to the man himself, whose unbelievably detailed responses to my email questions show the great enthusiasm he has for his recordings. It's enough to make you want to get a recorder *now*, and start documenting the world around you.

I understand from your site that you began recording the sounds around you while traveling in Vietnam? What first made you start recording?

My desire to record everyday sounds grew in parallel with my attention to them -- and both came on only gradually. I grew up 'normal,' immersed in pop music. It took a few well-timed interventions of luck, principally gaining a noise-artist step brother, Scot Jenerik, to open my ears. I think my course was set by Scot, who revealed that there were communities of people enthusiastic about listening to and working with sound in very non-traditional ways... ever since that first exposure, it's

seemed totally natural to me to have an interest the sound around us, and to make time to listen to it for pleasure.

This fall I returned to my old hometown of Chicago and I realized I can pinpoint the first time I recorded ambient sound, and started thinking of its application to composition. We lived in a house where the El tracks ran through the backyard, and every ten minutes it would clatter percussively by. I was recording acoustic guitar on a four track in those days and during one recording the El train ran through -- I found that with the train in the recording, my reaction to the rest of the music was completely changed. The catalytic effect of environmental sound wasn't lost on me - - it made me realize why I liked "Blasphemous Rumours" too! :)

My current project, Quiet American, started after I took a round-the-world trip in '96-'97. I thought about trying to take recording gear for documentary purposes on that trip, but the idea didn't really crystalize until it was too late and I was actually on the road -- and with a limited budget! But just the *idea* of recording changed my attention to the soundscapes I found myself in. I started listening more critically, which in turn changed my experience of places. The rewards of that experience committed me to trying to capture and share some of what I heard -- especially the things that were unfamiliar, unique to the places I visited.

The next time I was able to travel outside the US was to Vietnam in 1998, where I did my first serious recording. It was fortuitous that minidisc was just hitting its stride in the US around the time ~ and that the internet was in place to lead me to it! The significance being that MD drastically lowered the entry-level costs for making "good" recordings.

Does recording always relate to travelling for you, or do you record the sounds of your everyday life at home?

I find it much easier to maintain a level of committed recording while traveling, because I have so few other obligations; recording in fact becomes my primary obligation -- what a luxurious position to be in! I do record while traveling in the US, but usually those trips have competing demands on my attention. And I do record at home, but only when I can free time or for particular projects.

Traveling, I carry my gear with me all the time, so I end up capturing many more

serendipitous sounds, and a lot more of the daily soundscape; but I haven't been up to doing that here. Maybe that would be a good resolution this year :). I'm still listening -- just not capturing...

Incidentally a real challenge of recording at home is that it's harder to hear familiar sound critically. The flip side is that when I do work closely in the studio with a sound I've recorded that I hear all the time, my relationship to it changes. I find that when I hear it again in the day-to-day, I snap instantly into attentive listening. A perfect example is seagull cries, which I worked with on my 'Maritime Suite' album ~ I *always* notice them now...

Do you travel the world often? Do you record everywhere that you go?

No! Not nearly often enough. At the moment I have three competing pressures ~ a day job; a stack of projects I want to do using the sound recording on my last trip; and a concert series I've been hosting at my warehouse in San Francisco.

I do hope to get away this year, though, even if only briefly. A long term goal is to hook into the European festival scene, which would provide a great opportunity for not only presenting work, but making recordings in Europe at the same time... At this point I can't see traveling without recording gear, unless it was specifically as a sort of retreat from that kind of work!

What can you tell me about the idea behind the 1-minute vacations? What led you to start putting those on the site?

After my last trip, I rebuilt my website into its current form; and while I was doing so I made a decision to not post my compositional work incrementally. Instead, I decided to post things only in their final form. So I was looking for something to give people more regularly, so they'd have a reason to check back from time to time.

The one-minute idea crystalized instantly when I was invited by v.v (Ven Voisey) (a gifted Oakland-based artist) to participate in a double 3" project. He solicited twenty-odd one minute unedited recordings from different artists and collected them on a 3" disk. The second disk compiled compositions made only with those recordings on the first.

The act of isolating a single minute to contribute to the project was very liberating -- it was hard to pick something, but it produced a result that didn't require a huge investment from the listener. It was clear to me that Ven had hit upon a great format for listening to field recordings. Really, I'm just taking his idea in a different direction. What's that they say about great artists? :)

When I posted my minute on my site, I found that it was crying out for a unique home -- making it a weekly feature that people might check in with just seemed perfect.

At the moment the idea seems to have developed some momentum; I'm getting a decent stream of submissions, which is really a confirmation for for me, a success. I say success, since the project is intended to incite to people to make their own recordings. After all, it's only a minute... *anyone* can do it...right?

So you reading this. Hear something interesting today? Send me a recording! Or at least, make one and lose it somewhere. When you find it later you'll be glad.

Are the 1-minute vacations that you record generally interesting sections of longer recordings, or do you record for exactly a minute and see what you get?

My own contributions are almost all excerpts from longer recordings. Barring some pragmatic problem, I always try to record for at least five minutes ~ as I write somewhere on the site, "the cutting room floor is a bottomless ocean." And: "I make a lot of bad recordings, so I make a lot of recordings."

What is it about the 1-minute time span itself that interests you?

I think I touched on that above, the most important thing is that it's a small enough time that people surfing are willing to make the commitment. It's a short enough demand on attention that someone can make it part of their Monday routine, slip it in between emails.

There are some other nice side effects of the minute format -- the MP3s are small enough that they're realistically downloadable by people with low bandwidth connections. They're small enough for people to email me. And as I said above, it's a length people aren't intimidated to take on making themselves.... and it's hard to

come up with a raw field recording that will hold someone's interest for five minutes, unless they're into esoteric or experimental music.

I also think there's something slightly funny about the "one minute vacation" idea, it echoes the "seven minute abs" thing. Experimental fast food for the ears is the subtext. And of course, there's the dubious American ideal that if something is worth doing, it's worth doing twice as quickly...

With some of the recordings, I feel like the people, the animals, the rain, etc. are all right around me--it sounds like I'm in the place where it was recorded. To what extent is crisp, high-quality sound important for the 1-minute vacations (or your other recordings)?

The geek in me is always wondering how to get better recordings, in the hi-fi sense. I have a multidimensional sense of the quality of my own recordings -- some I like purely for their content, others purely for the way they capture an interesting acoustic space. The best ones of course combine the two. :) My current compositional practice [which uses my own recordings as the sole source material] is grounded in rich source material; I'm very interested in the complexity of soundscape in good field recording -- it's the obvious counterbalance for the naive listener to the lack of inherent musicality.

But for the vacations that people submit, there are no requirements. Other people's contributions are often interesting for reasons unrelated to their clarity or the depth of the stereo field. The best of them give you a window into someone else's reality - - and I certainly don't think you need great gear to do that, especially in a short format.

That's another reason the short format works, by the way -- you can listen to almost anything, for sixty seconds.

The 1-minute vacations take listeners to all sorts of locations. Are there certain types of environments or circumstances that are better-suited to recording than others?

I find myself thinking about that question at many levels -- conceptually, you might argue that any soundspace is worthy of attention, perhaps precisely when,

superficially, it's a banal or silent one. An example springs to mind, of a recording I recently put up on the site from Cambodia: of the silence at the Choeung Ek "killing fields" outside Phnom Pehn. Why record that silence, let alone choose to put it on my website? I think the answer is self-evident.

But most of the time I analyze a soundscape according to fairly conventional metrics, starting with whether the gear I have is capable of capturing it well ~ and running through a gamut of personal preferences: for the presence and absence of musical qualities; the number of layers of simultaneous events; whether or not the soundscape is unique or ubiquitous, etc.

The 1-minute vacations section includes contributions from other people besides yourself, and your site also has links to a fair number of other people who record the sounds around them. Do you think there is a growing culture of people who do this type of work?

I do! I think there're two trends interacting actually: one, I think more people are actually out there making recordings of ambient sound, and working with it compositionally, and listening to it; and two, I think people are finding each other and organizing and communicating through the internet. The meme is out there.

There are great resources in place now if you're interested in field recording: EarthEar.com, phonography.org, the lowercase-sound and microsound mailing lists, etc. And there is a disturbingly long list of talented people applying their talents in this area. Disturbing, that is, if you have an ego-investment in making a unique contribution... :)

Of all of the recordings that you've made, which one (or ones) are you most proud of getting? Which sounds that you've recorded do you find most entrancing?

I don't know if I'm really *proud* of getting given recordings, but there are definitely some that I'm grateful to have.

Well, on second thought, I do have a certain pride in recordings that extracted a toll in their making ~ falling down a waterfall in Bangladesh, for example, or having a giant beetle crawling into my shorts(!) in the surf in Thailand; or having trash dumped on my over a temple wall in India. The pride in these cases usually comes

from a feeling of perverse success at not shouting or coughing or ruining the recording. And holding in sneezes or coughes -- I've gone *mad* trying to do that, had tears pouring down my face. These are personal victories, though, that usually aren't reflected at all in the final recording, which as often are not weren't worth the effort anyway!

But the thrust of the question is really, do I have favorite recordings, and I do. Some of them are excerpted on my site -- one is the recording I titled "enchanted dusk" on the Cambodia field recordings page, of kids playing in pools at Angkor Wat. Another, which I hope to put up sometime soon, is of tigers roaring across a river in Bangladesh ~ with a boat of nightfisherman mockingly yelled back.

It's hard to pinpoint commonalities in my favorite recordings, other than that they all evoke (for me at least) a very distinct emotional shade, the way good music does. Some take longer to unfold than others ~ I think of another favorite, my "S3" train recording, which is 74 minutes long. What I like about that one is the breadth and scope of it, which I find very symphonic, almost composed. Almost.

At a gut level I'm a sucker for polyrhythms, or what I think of is accidental musicality: a recent vacation (December 16), is a good example, of a printing press you could dance to. And drone: one reason I love walking around India is the experience of coming across loud public Hindu ceremonies, which can involve a lot of bell-ringing (as in the vacation posted on April 8).

Finally, some recordings just take me back to specific experiences ~ the enjoyment in many of those is very personal, and I don't know if it's transmissible. I'm too close to tell. One example is of fish swarming to eat phosphorescence in a river ~ it was the third ever vacation (February 4). The tide was coming into the delta where our boat was moored, and rippling waves would set the phosphorescence in the water glowing. The light would attract fish to the surface to eat, and they the surface would dissolve in a sizzling frenzy. Other than the stars and phosphorescence rolling by in regular waves, it was totally dark; the constellations being eaten below were mirrored in the constellations above... definitely a treasured memory that I'm sure comes across not at all on 'tape!' :)

By the way, the reason I'm keen on other people making their own recordings is all right there in the last paragraph. I can't tell you how valuable it is to have

recordings to listen to from four or five years ago, that can take me back to the realities of a previous life. Video and photographs just can't compete, at least, for me. My wife's grandmother recently died, and I find I have at least an hour of one of our last visits with her recorded -- all innocuous conversation, but it's something we can share with our relatives to help them remember her.

Do you anticipate continuing the 1-minute vacations project for a while?

As long as I keep getting good submissions, and digging up recordings of my own that I like -- I'm still working through the 150-odd hours of recordings I made on my last trip.

I've almost hit the one-year mark with the vacations, which I'll mark by rolling up the first 52 recordings onto a CDR release, assuming I can get or assume permission from all the original submitters. I'd like to offer it for sale with all the proceeds to go to a charity, but I'm not sure if getting permission is going to be a headache ~ if it is, I'll probably just offer it at duplication cost for whoever wants a copy.

If you would, please tell us about some of the other recording projects you're involved in now.

Let's see... I'm nearly done with the first full-length composition project that will come out of the recordings I made on my last trip; it's a several-CD set titled *Kagbeni Variations* which will consist of a 3" CD containing an unedited 21-minute recording I made of a Buddhist ceremony in Kagbeni, Nepal, just below the Mustang trade route into Tibet; and a full-length CD containing a series of rigorous process procedural composition studies made using only that recording as sound source.

I've also been collecting recordings for a compilation tentatively titled "Drifting" ~ all of recordings made while walking through different environments around the world. My hope is to weave the submissions and my own walking recordings into a single, continuous walk around the world. (Readers interested in participating are encouraged to do so as quickly as possible, details are at my site, there's a link to more information off my 'news/performances' pop-up on the front page....)

On the raw-recordings side, I'm polishing a set of recordings for a CD which I think is going to come out on Dale Lloyd's and/OAR field-recording-centric label in Seattle;

it's probably going to be titled "Irrigation and Plumbing of South Asia" -- the title is intended to be dry humor (no pun intended), but is descriptive. The disc really is just recordings of wells, pipes, sprinklers, toilets, etc... but I at least think they're interesting. :)

Oh and I already know what I want to do for the next two or three projects are after that ~ but you'll have to visit [the site](#) in a few months to find out!

[Issue 12, January 2003](#) | [next article](#)

[current issue](#) | [back issues](#) | [about erasing clouds](#) | [links](#) | [contact](#)