

MONTRÉAL SOUND MAP

MAXWELL STEIN

<http://cessa.music.concordia.ca/soundmap>

OVERVIEW:

Sound maps are in many ways the most effective auditory archive of an environment, touching on aspects political, artistic, cultural, historical, and technological. Soundscapes are constantly evolving, and maps are very useful in showing where and how these changes are occurring.

Dating back almost forty years to the first sound mapping efforts made by R. Murray Schafer and the Vancouver Soundscape Project in the early 1970s, sound maps have existed in various forms but have always faced challenges due to technological limitations of the time. Today's technological advancements in portable recording equipment, personal computers, and the widespread use of the Internet have opened up many new opportunities for interactive Internet-based projects to reach and involve audiences larger and more extensive than ever before.

The Montréal Sound Map is an interactive soundscape project based around a *Google Map* of Montréal onto which users upload field recordings taken from around the island. The aim of the project is to create an archival database of sound recordings from all over Montréal. It is an ongoing and continually evolving project with the goal of a constant addition of new recordings being placed into a browsable tagging system.

TAGGING SYSTEM:

Users are able to upload sound recordings and photographs of the recorded location to the map through a form found on the website with criteria including: author, location, coordinates, date, time of day, equipment used, and description/comments. Participants also choose whether the recording was static or mobile and whether the recording is binaural. Sound files are automatically plotted onto the map at the location of the submitted coordinates, and the rest of the information is automatically entered into a database. From this database, the information is pulled and organized into a tagging system based on the following criteria:

TYPE OF RECORDING: *Static, Mobile, Static Binaural, Mobile Binaural*

LOCATION: *Borough, Neighbourhood, Suburban, Type of location (i.e. waterways, parks)*

DATE: *Time, Month, Season, Day of the Week*

EQUIPMENT: *Recording Device, Microphone*

In the future, keywords from the descriptions will be included in this system, and a search will be implemented so that users will be able to find recordings according to specific sound sources, time, and locations in Montréal.

All files are licensed with a *Creative Commons Share-Alike License* <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/ca/>> and available for download in mp3 and flac formats. These two formats were chosen for their ability to carry metadata. Each audio file carries with it the author, location, date, and coordinates submitted when the file was uploaded to the Montréal Sound Map. This information will follow these files wherever they end up after being downloaded.

A spectrographic image is also created for each submitted recording using *Sonic Visualiser* (Centre for Digital Music, Queen Mary, University of London) <<http://www.sonicvisualiser.org/>>, a free software application developed for viewing and analyzing sound files.

FOCUSED LISTENING:

One of the main goals of the project is to promote focused listening. When visiting the website to browse and listen to the sound recordings, users listen with purposeful and special attention that is rarely given to the sounds of an environment. The recordings on the map are of environments that often surround the users on a day to day basis, and by listening to the sounds present in these recordings, the goal is that it will bring to the user's attention the realization that interesting sounds are all around us.

In an effort to promote focused listening, group soundwalks through different areas of Montréal are to take place beginning in September 2009. These soundwalks are open to the public and will be plotted on the Montréal Sound Map, documented with detailed descriptions, and given a spot in the website's tagging system. Participants will be encouraged to record the walk and to add their recording to the sound map.

AS AN ARCHIVAL PROJECT:

Soundscapes are constantly changing. The Montréal Sound Map can also be thought of as a sort of sonic time capsule preserving sounds as they disappear and/or transform from the soundscape. Since the project's conception, perhaps the largest change in Montréal's soundscape can be found in the transit system. Montréal's transit system has made a move from a magnetic stripe card to a contactless smart card, and with this change arrived a new digital beep with every entrance into the metro and bus. Also, as old buses have begun to be replaced, there has been a change from a mechanical bell ding to a digital chime when signaled to stop. This evolution from mechanical to electronic sounds is one example of a common change found in many soundscapes. If in ten years from now, there are no longer uploads being submitted to the sound map, it will still be useful to compare the present soundscape to that of ten years before.

OTHER USES AND THE FUTURE:

An Atom web feed has been set up to automatically track uploads to the Montréal Sound Map. This feed is linked with *Twitter* <<http://www.twitter.com/mtlsoundmap>> to automatically make posts when the files have been uploaded. The recordings on the Montréal Sound Map have also been added to *Radio Aporee Maps* <<http://aporee.org/maps>>, another Google Maps-based sound mapping project with several thousand files from locations all over the world.

It has also been used as a tool for teaching. Staff members of *CKUT* <<http://www.ckut.ca>>, McGill University's radio station, have offered to send students from their portable audio device recording workshops off to record with the goal of uploading to the Montréal Sound Map. It was also used in the curriculum of an audio recording course in Concordia University's electroacoustic studies program.

The Montréal Sound Map will continue to evolve over the years. Plans include live feeds linked with *Radio Aporee* <<http://radio.aporee.org/>> and/or the *Locus Sonus Audio Streaming Map* <<http://nujus.net/locusonus/site/streams/map>>, further developments with the tagging system including a search function, and using *Google Maps Polylines* <<http://facstaff.unca.edu/mcmclur/GoogleMaps/EncodePolyline/>> to trace paths of mobile recordings and soundwalks added to the map. The project is planned to be kept online indefinitely, and submissions will always be encouraged. The more sound recordings present on the map, the more meaningful the project will become.