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Matter - Spotlight Session

New Songs in Old Voices: Into the Archives with Brian Harnetty

By [Molly Sheridan](#)

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It's easy to imagine that composer Brian Harnetty salvaged most of his equipment from various attics, basements, and yard sales. A scan of the stage at a recent performance revealed three worn turntables and a beast of a Rhodes. Even the tape deck looked like it remembered the '80s.

As it turns out, it was an appropriately theatrical way set the scene, because in a sense the music itself is something of a rescue operation. Ever since he was a music fellow at the Berea College Appalachian Sound Archives in Kentucky, Harnetty has been creating work that brings gem recordings from that collection up out of the basement and into the light. With a soft touch, he weaves these aural snapshots—a snippet of fiddle playing or the gravely voice of an elderly woman singing a half-remembered folk tune—with his own music. The elements feel loosely tied together, allowing the lines to float over and beside one another, slipping in and out of focus.

The archival recordings are rich documents, often capturing related memories or the nervous laughter of the participants along with the music. Harnetty sought these moments out. "The whole allure for me in those archives, listening to these things, was that these people weren't used to being in front of a microphone necessarily. So when they were being recorded, there was an awkwardness that I started to fall in love with," he explains. "In most commercial recordings, obviously, that's the part that gets cut out, so these in-between moments were really magical for me."

Pairing those moments with newly composed music became a rewarding balancing act as he looked to filter experimental ideas through older media, and older ideas through new technology. The pieces Harnetty has created with this material are showcased on two discs: *American Winter* (2007) and *Silent City* (2009), both on the Atavistic label. While the music on *American Winter* serves as a kind of frame for the samples, with *Silent City* Harnetty seems to have shifted the equation around a bit and used the archival audio as one



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