There is a substantial legacy of representations of Bali and its music left by composer/ethnomusicologist Colin McPhee: dozens of piano transcription of Balinese music (though few published), an enormous musical ethnography (*Music in Bali*), and a toccata for two pianos and orchestra jangling with Balinese musical ideas (*Tabuh-tabuhan*), just to name some of the largest projects. In this paper I will discuss the artistry of a few early projects (1935-36) that garnered McPhee much praise. I will argue that these projects had a significant impact on the reception of Balinese music in America and among modernist composers in particular.

Early in his career McPhee was attempting to make his way both as a sort of musical ethnographer and as a modernist composer in the New York scene. In my consideration of the mutual inflection of his efforts in both of these spheres, I draw insight from a comment by McPhee’s fellow modernist and world-music enthusiast Henry Cowell: “No Western composer has probably ever known the music of another culture so thoroughly as McPhee does the Indonesian, so that when he writes in this style he is able to retain the characteristics that are most important to Indonesian culture and at the same time most attractive to us.” Like Cowell, yet more pointedly, I argue that McPhee’s depiction of musical culture in Bali was to an extent a reworking of pre-existing modernist motifs. The vivid sense of Balinese life that McPhee evinced through prose and musical composition in fact resembled that of an ideal modernist community.