



DEPTHS OF FIELD: PHOTOGRAPHS AND EARLY SOUTHERN AFRICAN MUSIC STUDIES

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1. The full title is *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Musical Instruments in the South Kensington Museum*. The South Kensington Museum has been known since 1899 as the Victoria and Albert Museum.

2. Natal University College had been newly founded four years earlier, in 1910, in Pietermaritzburg.

Percival Kirby (lower right in jacket) making a sound recording during fieldwork with colleagues from Wits. (Manuscripts & Archives, UCT)

On a winter's day in June 1946, Percival Kirby recalled his early engagement with museums in an address to the South African Museums Association (SAMA) meeting in Pretoria. Scottish-born Kirby (1887–1970) was a musicologist, best known for his early studies of indigenous southern African musics, a composer, conductor, promoter of Western music, broadcaster and founding professor of music at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. In his talk that day, he claimed to have always been 'a student of musical instruments, both from a practical and from a theoretical point of view', reaching back into childhood memories to recount his enjoyment when he was accorded the 'rare privilege' of handling and reading 'the well-known illustrated volume, dated 1874, entitled "Musical Instruments in the South Kensington Museum", a copy of which, together with copies of books on similar subjects, was in my father's library' (1947, 7; Engel 1874).¹ This catalogue by Carl Engel features six photographs, besides 143 line drawings, and appeared 47 years after Nicéphore Niépce produced the first fragile, almost miraculous, photographic image in 1827.

Continuing his reminiscent trajectory, Kirby located the origin of his professional research into southern Africa's indigenous musics in a 1914 meeting in the Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg. Ernest Warren, the museum director and professor of zoology at the Natal University College,² showed him round the museum, pointing out the musical instruments and the Zulu items in particular. Kirby was 27, a bachelor newly arrived in South Africa to take up the post of music organiser for the Natal Education Department. He writes:

