

UDK 781.7:304(73)

Maureen Loughran

Department of Music, Brown University
Oddelek za glasbo, Univerza Brown

“But what if they call the police?” Applied Ethnomusicology and Urban Activism in the United States

»Kaj pa če pokličejo policijo?«: aplikativna etnomuzikologija in urbani aktivizem v ZDA

Prejeto: 31. oktobra 2007
Sprejeto: 2. aprila 2008

Received: 31st October 2007
Accepted: 2nd April 2008

Ključne besede: aplikativna etnomuzikologija, aktivizem, lokalne skupnosti, deleženje večšin, urbana kultura

Keywords: applied ethnomusicology, activism, grassroots communities, skills-sharing, urban culture

IZVLEČEK

Članek raziskuje nujnost in težave, pred katerimi stoji aplikativna etnomuzikologija pri raziskovanju ene izmed ameriških urbanih sosesk. Predmet raziskave je tako metodološka teorija aktivistično usmerjenega dela, ki povezuje akademski pristop z lokalnimi skupnostmi, kot tudi izzivi, do katerih se mora aplikativna etnomuzikologija ustrezno opredeliti.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the difficulties and necessities of applied ethnomusicological research in an urban American neighborhood. A theory of method for activist centered work which connects academia with local, grassroots communities is discussed as well as the challenges of positioning oneself as an applied ethnomusicologist in the field.

The crowd was beginning to trickle into the Wonderland Ballroom, a bar in Columbia Heights, a neighborhood of Washington, DC, for an evening of old-time country music. Members of the local band on that night's bill lingered by the entrance, collecting cover fees and mingling with patrons. As I entered the bar, one of the band members introduced me to the rest of the band as “the person who is writing about the live-music ban in Mount Pleasant.” The band only recently discovered that they could not play in a popular bar a few blocks away because of a city ordinance which prohibited live music performance in establishments which sold alcohol in that specific neighborhood. It

did not matter to the authors of the ordinance that this would prohibit residents of the neighborhood from earning a living as musicians in their own neighborhood. Their concern about noise levels and clientele trumped anyone's right to free expression, and thus the regulation was created.

A few weeks later, while leaving a community meeting on Mount Pleasant Street, I ran into a member of that same old-time band, who immediately told me the band's plan to bring music back to the neighborhood. They would play at the Marx Café on Mount Pleasant Street, right in the heart of the neighborhood, and dare the music-ban authors to stop them. One of my friends from the meeting, knowing the situation asked, "But what if they call the police?" This question is at the root of what it means to be committed to activism. And ironically, it is not the first context in which I have heard this question asked in the midst of my research. What would happen if those who instituted this ban on live-music called the police? Could I potentially be carted off to jail for listening to music? Researchers often encounter delicate situations like this while in the field. One typical response is to inhabit an observant, outsider stance to ensure that the research data collected is not tainted. In this scientific, clinical approach, the researcher is seen as an unbiased evaluator of cultural scenes. What happens when the researcher decides to become actively involved in those same scenes? Does bias de-legitimize observation?

This chapter explores the difficulties and necessities of activist centered work in an urban American neighborhood. In Washington, DC, many neighborhoods are being transformed from poor, neglected barrios and ghettos into up-market, wealthy enclaves. With these outward changes come new attitudes toward cultural life on the street and in the community. To an outsider, these changes may seem inevitable, but to an activist scholar, one can see the inherent imbalance of power that allows the acceleration of change in favor of more recent affluent arrivals. In one particular neighborhood, new attitudes have culminated in a "ban" on live music. I will discuss the reasons for and challenges of positioning myself as an applied ethnomusicologist within my research as well as move toward a theory of method for activist centered work which connects academia with local, grassroots communities.

What is Applied Ethnomusicology?

Applied ethnomusicology is a philosophical approach to the study of music in culture, with social responsibility and social justice as guiding principals. Applied ethnomusicologists use their academic training to advocate for musical communities and to act as mediators between the music culture and the general public (Sheehy 1992, Titon 1992, Graves 1992). Ethnomusicologists like Alan Merriam and Mantle Hood both acknowledged some of the benefits of applied work. However, the work of applied ethnomusicologists has been either ignored or seen as dangerous by these same scholars (Merriam 1964, Hood 1971, Nettl 1964, 1983). Because these leading scholars in ethnomusicology did not address the ideas and theories of applied work, the history of the development of applied work within ethnomusicology is scattered amongst the history of public projects in the United States (Sheehy 1992). The controversial nature of what applied ethnomusicolo-

gists do, ‘meddling’ as some have referred to it (Hawes 1992), has led to its history not being included in the history of ethnomusicology. Applied ethnomusicology is more than meddling, it is a philosophical approach to the study of music in culture that revolves around social responsibility and justice. Applied ethnomusicologists do not stop at the informal relationship fostered through fieldwork, instead seeking to collaborate with musical communities to find solutions to problems or to address issues of concern in the community they study. Issues that applied ethnomusicologists address include copyright and traditional music, the survival and preservations of musical traditions, the encouragement of musical communities in documenting their own cultures, and the training of individuals to become advocates for their own communities. How these issues are addressed relates to the establishment of a theory of applied ethnomusicology, which is still evolving (Sheehy 1992, Titon 1992).

Because applied ethnomusicology is a more recent development in the field of ethnomusicology, it follows many precedents from longer established traditions of applied work in the fields of folklore and anthropology. Some scholars question the methods or intellectual integrity of applied work (D’Andrade 1995). The literature in applied anthropology tends to focus on development and medicine (Scheper-Hughes 1995, Chambers 1985, Wallace 1997). I see both of these public engagements by anthropologists as a result of their experiences in fieldwork. Striving to uphold the model of objective observer, these anthropologists seek to use their skills as ethnographers to assist the people they study, not solely to report on their ways of life. Applied anthropologists acknowledge their role as advocates for communities by engaging in policy and community decisions. By understanding that advocacy is not a neutral position and in many ways works against the objectivist model put forth by most standard anthropological literature, these scholars seek ways to incorporate the specialized knowledge gained in academic training for the good of the communities they study.

American folklorists especially, have created an entire subcategory within their discipline for the public application of folklore research. By working within institutions and in grassroots organizations, folklorists have contributed to the debates about cultural pluralism, cultural heritage preservation and presentation in the United States (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988, Payne 1998, Feintuch 1988, Spitzer and Baron 1992, Hufford 1994). Through festival presentations, arts apprenticeships, educational programming and various other methods, folklorists have worked to engage the public in a greater appreciation and understanding of expressive culture. It is through these public presentations that folklorists actively pursue the public discussion of diversity and preservation on a local and national level. Folklorists have been able to do this in national institutions like the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress. Within a more local environment, folklorists use their training in ethnography to document the diversity of the communities in which they work. The result of their work has influenced the way in which we think about the cultures we study. Ethnomusicologists have worked with folklorists in this capacity, but have only recently acknowledged the role that they could (and do) play in assisting communities (Sheehy 1992, Titon 1992, Graves 1992).

These scholars seek to collaborate with musical communities to address such issues as access, consumption and preservation of their traditions. In the United States, as else-

where, collaboration has led to the creation of national cultural policy and educational institutions charged with preserving, documenting and fostering traditional music. However, the threat to musical expression is not always one of extinction, but can simply be the denial of the right to participate in musical expression itself, whether that expression is based in traditional cultures or created within popular culture. Other threats can originate in the society itself, through laws and policies that impact the everyday life of musicians and musical culture. As people trying to live within complex governments and societies, it is not easy to separate out music from the existence of everyday life. Musicians can face eviction, deportation, harassment from police, drug and alcohol abuse, not to mention the denial of the right to perform and make a living with their art. To be an activist for music requires that one be an activist for social justice issues as well.

During the Summer of 2005, I taught a class in community ethnography and radio documentation at Bell Multicultural High School in Columbia Heights, the neighborhood adjacent to Mount Pleasant. In the class, I trained a group of young people from the neighborhood in ethnographic methods, which allowed them to engage in research for and about their own neighborhood. The students learned to photograph and make audio recordings, to engage in interview/conversations with neighborhood merchants (specifically in ethnic markets and music shops) and to create a radio portrait of a musician from their school. Nate Allen, a fellow classmate and senior at Bell High School, was the subject of the students' documentary. Through interviews and clips of Nate's own music, the students displayed the creativity and musicianship of their classmate, while also giving a place to hip-hop culture in their understanding of their neighborhood.¹

The project highlighted for me several important issues in the discussion of applied ethnomusicology. I argue that radio is a format uniquely suited to the field. In radio, we can tell those stories we find in the field, but with the actual voices of the 'informant,' as well as immersing ourselves in their aural existence, their musical world. By focusing in on the stories that people tell about their lives and their relationship to music, we engage in a sharing of information that is connected to a sense of responsibility: you have shared with me your story and now I am responsible for sharing it respectfully with others. The researcher becomes a steward of life stories and an advocate for that music or that musical world.

To be an applied ethnomusicologist does not mean one is always leading a project. Sometimes, the best way to be an activist is to observe and participate in what is already happening around you. As researchers, we often enter a community as an outsider, seeking to understand the mechanics and meanings behind community actions. This outsider stance naturally inhibits leading the charge on organizing in a community. In most cases, the applied ethnomusicologist becomes an advisor or assistant, providing support in technical or physical ways. But this stance also allows us to observe how people in the community are already doing what we called applied ethnomusicology. These grassroots responses to issues of culture and community should be models from which applied ethnomusicologists take note. By witnessing how a community reacts

¹ This radio documentary, titled "An Inside Look at Urban Culture with Nate Nice" was broadcast on Radio CPR in September 2005 and later published in an local audio 'zine on the independent label Sockets.

to problems through cultural work, applied ethnomusicologists can find ways to get involved without insisting they be the leaders of projects.

Applied ethnomusicology defines itself in reaction to the isolation of the ivory tower scholar. The field insists that its practitioners get involved in the communities they study. However, the emphasis has often been on creating projects that bridge the divide between academia and the community. As workers in universities, these scholars utilize the power of the university to intervene in and impact local music communities, seeking to find positive solutions to community issues. Naturally, this creates a project-leader mentality which can be very off-putting to communities. I argue that applied ethnomusicologists should instead take note of what is happening around them and find a way to get involved that does not insist on leadership. This solution may not be profitable for the resume or the tenure committee, but it is more helpful and useful for the communities about which we care so deeply. In this way, we can still be applied ethnomusicologists without being overbearing academics. By taking notes from and following the lead of community responses to community issues, we can better serve those we seek to assist.

Please Sign our Petition!: Being Involved in Community Issues

The neighborhood pro-music group, Hear Mount Pleasant, was setting up their information table in front of Don Juan’s restaurant. It was supposed to be a protest event and a chance to stand in solidarity with the businesses on Mount Pleasant Street in opposition to the live-music ban. The group organized a Karaoke night at Don Juan’s to protest the Voluntary Agreements which prohibited Don Juan’s proprietor, from even holding a karaoke event in his restaurant. The planned protest, however, was drastically changed by unforeseen events and neighborhood politics. A week prior, on Good Friday 2007, at the annual Via Crucis procession down Mount Pleasant Street, a DC police officer was injured in an automobile accident. The officer later died from his injuries. A neighbor, instrumental in creating the live-music ban in the neighborhood, notified the community, via a list-serv, about a vigil for the officer and his family taking place on the following Friday. This was same night as the Hear Mount Pleasant karaoke celebration. In a scramble to be respectful and to keep to their cause, the members of the group transformed their event into a supporting role for the police officers. They delayed the start of the karaoke until after the vigil, and invited the officers to come back later that evening to enjoy a night of music and community spirit.

While the group assembled their table in front of Don Juan’s, one of the group members noticed that the neighbor who notified the neighborhood about the vigil was present in the crowd. In fact, she placed herself at the front of the vigil procession to escort the deceased officer’s family, with the DC Mayor on one side and the neighborhood ward’s city councilmember on the other. It was a trifecta of the powerful in the neighborhood, and this neighbor’s placement of herself at the head of the crowd only underscored her claim to power and privilege. The Hear Mount Pleasant member said to me, “What if she sees you here?”

It was known in the group that I interviewed this neighbor for my dissertation, in my quest to hear all sides of the music-ban issue. During my many attempts to secure the interview, I received emails from the neighbor, suspicious of my aims and confrontational towards my project. We finally sat down to talk, at a Starbucks in a posh section of the city, where I represented myself as a dispassionate researcher. This was partially true. I did want to understand her side of things, but my involvement with the community radio station had already colored my opinion of this informant. And it is in this moment, after the interview, that my bias towards the community proved stronger than my commitment to objective research. I had just sat down with a woman whom many in the neighborhood considered “Enemy Number One.” A woman who creates such a culture of fear that highly educated, independent thinkers who organize in the neighborhood sit back in awe (but never surprise) at the nasty and vindictive actions she takes on behalf of her neighborhood organization. This was the same woman who when interviewed a few months later by the *Washington Post*, was quoted saying, “And I will be damned if people outside my neighborhood come in and do something that affects my property value by worsening the parking situation.”² Surely her objection to outsiders was not solely based on parking spaces. But her quote indicates how activists work in a community and the importance of community-lead solutions to community-based problems. The quote also gave me a justification for what I was about to do next.

In the week following the interview, I went to the monthly meeting for Radio CPR, the neighborhood underground radio station. As we sat waiting for the other members, one of the DJs asked me how the interview with the neighbor had gone. This DJ knew about the progress of my research and knew that I had been trying to secure this interview for several weeks. In the course of telling her about our meeting, I mentioned that this neighbor had been asked by the DC government to organize a series of concerts in Columbia Heights, the adjoining neighborhood to Mount Pleasant. The news made the DJ extremely upset, understandably so, since this neighbor had helped to organize a similar concert series in Mount Pleasant. The Mount Pleasant series was billed as a community event, but in reality it was a tactical move to undermine the idea of a music-ban in the neighborhood. By presenting a summer live music series, this neighbor and her organization could say music was allowed in the neighborhood, although all knew it was only on their terms.

Since I was already an active member in the Radio CPR community and I knew what the fight for live music really meant to those who lived in the neighborhood, I decided to send the DJ a transcript of the interview. At first I only sent her part of the transcript, and months later I sent her the second half. By the time I sent the second half of the interview, I was already literally signed on to the cause of Hear Mount Pleasant, the neighborhood group organizing to lift the ban on live-music. My name and address was on their petition, so there was no doubt where my sympathies resided. Sending the interview transcript to the DJ did not feel wrong or feel as if I invalidated my research. While the action is small, the implications could be large for a researcher. Effectively, I represented myself

² Quoted in “A Counteroffensive on Mt. Pleasant’s ‘Voluntary’ Music Bans,” by Marc Fisher, in the *Washington Post*, B01, 4/12/07.

as the objective researcher and in the end became the biased activist. The transcript really did not shed any new light on this neighbor's view of life in the neighborhood. But it did re-affirm to those involved in battling this ban on music that they were justified in continuing to fight. And for me, the ability to share my research immediately and not hesitate about the 'objective' nature of what I writing was surely freeing.

This is the dilemma which many who want to become more involved in their communities face as researchers and potential activists. The anthropologist Lynn Stephen chronicles how she as an anthropologist dealt with the Human Rights abuses she witnessed in the course of her research. As she studied the Zapatista movement in Mexico, Stephen became more aware of the injustices around her and sought a method for chronicling those injustices in her anthropological research. She concluded that to be an anthropologist in these situations meant that one must bear witness to what has occurred. From her experience she devised this list for fieldworkers, which has a striking impact on the work of applied ethnomusicologists. The list covers situations in which the researcher may not be allowed to record or take notes of field observations for fear of government confiscation. Stephen also stresses that fieldworkers who do research in an environment of 'low-intensity war,' should throw the idea of being objective out the window, instead using ones position of privilege and access to the benefit of those we study. In particular she writes,

“Witnessing, telling and conversing were primary modes of conveying information both ‘in the field’ and on the page-and how and why we become engaged in the research projects we do is an important part of the stories we tell. Finally, I found that I was expected to follow the lead of those I was working with, and to use my skills, resources, and access to make a contribution to ongoing work in what have come to be called the human rights and indigenous rights movement.” (Stephen 2002: 31-32)

While working within in an urban neighborhood is at all not the same as working in a low-intensity war in Mexico, the issues presented by Stephen do apply to all kinds of research environments. To be a witness to things happening in the neighborhood translates into action, insisting that one get involved with groups working to change problems.

This does not stop at the issues for which one is doing research. As Stephen points out, the field is all inclusive. As a music researcher, I can not stop my observations when the conversation drifts away from musical concerns. The way lives are lived in this neighborhood impact the health and diversity of the musical culture. To be an activist for music in a community means that you must also be an activist for people. For my work in Mount Pleasant, this has meant sitting in on a community meeting with the police about the murder of a neighbor or attending a community forum on police harassment of teens in the neighborhood and recording it for later broadcast on Radio CPR. It has also meant being committed to and supporting the underground radio station and its act of civil disobedience by being a DJ, attending meetings and helping out when I can. All of these actions are small actions. They are not resume-ready or worthy of huge accolades. Admitting to ownership of them is ultimately a bit embarrassing-there are

others who put themselves on the line more than I and deserve the attention. But these actions are all a method of conducting research that commits me to a cause larger than academia. It involves me in community and impacts the way I write about my observations. Certainly it creates a bias in my writing, but that is a small issue when I regard the potential impact of my research on those with whom I have worked in the field. The fieldwork experience has taught me that one needs to choose sides and one needs to use the tools gained through hard work in academia for the betterment of others. Even if it jeopardizes the impact of ones research. Because if we do not do these things as applied ethnomusicologists, we will be relegated to writing about musical cultures in the past tense, permanently.

Sharing Skills: The Community Ethnography Class

On the last day of my class at Bell Multicultural High School's summer session, the students huddled around the computer in a make-shift production meeting and one student named Simon turned to me and said, "Miss, this is going to be huge publicity for Nate!" Exactly, was my thought. But of course, being the teacher, I decided to expand on the finer points of music and advocacy: "Well, Simon, Nate is our friend, right? We like what he does and we think that it is important that other people know about his hard work." Throughout the class we discussed the flow of the radio piece, the placement of musical clips, the troubles of being a perfectionist and knowing when to let go of your creation, all, discussions that concerned the presentation of our radio production. Central to all these conversations were two questions "How do we best represent the life story of a musician to people who don't know him?" and "Why do this in the first place?"

The documentary film historian, Eric Barnouw, commented in his history of the genre, "True documentarists have a passion for what they find in images and sounds...It is in selecting and arranging their findings that they express themselves; these choices are, in effect, their main comments...They present their version of the world." (Barnouw: 348) As an ethnomusicologist, I am always struggling with which version of the world I am presenting. According to Barnouw, if I was a 'true documentarist' it would always be my view of the world. The field of ethnomusicology and anthropology have both acknowledged the crisis of representation through the writings of post-modernist scholars. Whose reality are we seeking when we set out to create a documentary? Is it the person talking into the microphone or is it the person pushing the record button? Is it right or fair for a white, upper-middle class woman like myself to document and represent the lives of Latino and African American lower middle-class inner-city youth? In response to these questions, I have reflected that teaching people how to document their own lives reaches toward an equity of representation. It also reaches into realities that I would not have access to through standard research.

Radio is a format that is uniquely suited to the field of ethnomusicology. As a concentrated aural experience, the listener can be drawn into the world of the ear and the world of the mind. Like the ancient verbal art of storytelling, a visitor enters your

home, sits down by the fire and spins out a tale of mystery, suspense, adventure...a small snapshot of an unknown world. In radio, we can tell those stories that we find in the field, but with the actual voices of the ‘informant’ as well as immersing ourselves in their aural existence, their musical world. As ethnomusicologists, we already spend much of our time in conversation with informants, gaining insight into the lives of musicians and the role that music plays in everyday human existence. We record these encounters for our research, to be examined and then reworked into a theoretical text that speaks to our colleagues, but usually does not translate past that audience. As Jeff Titon has written about in his work with blues musicians, these conversations lead to relationships which have their own requirements.³ Relationships established through the fieldwork experience also lead to new ways of understanding the place of music in a person’s life. Titon suggests that this all works toward a greater connectedness within the human community. For the students of Bell High School, engaging in conversation with their classmate, Nate Allen, not only allowed them to learn more about him and his music, but also to become advocates for his music (ie Simon’s realization that the radio segment will be free publicity) and for the community. They have entered into a deeper relationship to their neighborhood and the place of music here. I argue that if researchers conducted their recordings in ways that not only collected information for academic audiences but also secured the stories that people tell about their lives, then radio could work as a format for the presentation of ideas that ethnomusicologists explore in their written academic texts to lay audiences.

The radio documentary allows the informant to explain his or her world in his or her own voice. As Barnouw stated, the choices made by the documentarian determine which kinds of stories are told. Often, the stories that are told about music in society are not informed by ethnomusicological thought and theory. The ethnomusicologist is often brought in as a ‘talking head’ dispensing knowledge about the musical community under discussion, but the production of the documentary is usually handled by others. Why is it important that ethnomusicologists have a larger and louder say in the production of radio explorations of musical communities? Through our training, we are especially attuned to issues of representation, identity, and presentation. Instead of being the talking head or the expert, why not train others to examine the world as we do, giving those who act as our informants another tool toward representing their lives to others? It is not enough to hand the microphone over to those we ‘collect’ from and say, ‘Ok, tell your own story.’ How many times have you encountered this response to your well-crafted and thought-out question, ‘Well, I’ve never really thought about it that way.’ Days later, your friend has ruminated on your question and gives you a thoughtful answer, expressing a view of their life that they may not have reflected on before in such a way. This is where theoretical training aids methodology-in the structuring of questions. But it is not the answers to theoretical questions that illuminate radio documentaries-it is the stories. Just as in a social situation, stories draw people into one another’s worlds. What documentaries can do is situate these stories within a context. As opposed to most journalism, which relates facts and some analysis about an event, documentaries can feature the

³ See Titon 1994, p. 263.

stories that give those facts a context. The great American oral historian Studs Terkel has taken this form, storytelling, and shown how stories tell us more about the world than just one person's experience. In his collection of stories on death and faith, Terkel comments that his informants, 'heroes of the ordinary,' as he calls them, were always more eloquent expressing their feelings about death than he or they themselves expected. He writes, 'The storytellers here, once started on the subject, can't stop. They want to talk about it...' (Terkel 2001, p. xix) And nothing encourages a person who of wants to talk about something more than an attentive listener. Learning when to listen, when to ask questions, when to give someone space, all of these are methods of fieldwork or what I call 'mindful fieldwork.'

By thinking of fieldwork as a way to collect stories, as folklorists did in the early 20th Century searching for tale-types, the researcher not only has a plan for the kinds of questions that will be asked, but also knows that the encounter will develop into a conversation. Following the model of oral history, where the researcher gathers up the threads of someone's existence in a historical time through the stories of their lives, ethnomusicologists can more deeply explore the relationship between everyday life and music in our informants lives. Asking questions that generate stories is the key to doing such fieldwork. Starting a question with, 'So, tell me more about how you got involved in such group....' Or 'Tell me how you got started playing the fiddle...' can easily settle the informant into a storytelling mood. Through this type of questioning, we begin to engage the person in a conversational mode that will unconsciously invite them to tell us a story. The job of the scholar is to listen and follow-up with questions that extend the story or lead to others. Some of the best material can come from spontaneous questions and engaging conversation. The documentarian's job is to translate that conversation to a meaningful and concise vision of the speaker's existence, re-working the conversation in a light that presents an insight into this person's life in music.

Why does music need advocates? The music genre we explored in our documentary, hip-hop, is surely not endangered. Misunderstood, perhaps. The students at Bell High School are all conversant in hip-hop, understanding the culture in deeper ways than their teacher could hope to since it surrounds them in their everyday life. As an advocate for Nate and his music the students disprove stereotypes about DC public school students: that they are disorderly, inarticulate, violent gang members, the list goes on. They have created a positive view of DC public school students, showing how creative hip-hop is as a musical genre and thereby giving it and its artists the respect it deserves. In the District, funds for the public schools are appropriated by the United States Congress as part of a larger appropriations bill for the city. Because of this, Senators from across the country have a say in the use of this funds-or at least feel entitled to express their opinions about the DC public school system, which is usually overwhelmingly negative and disparaging of local administration. In this action, the documentary not only gives voice to the creator of the music, but also works toward a social justice of representation. These students have the tools to think critically about the life of culture in their neighborhood, as well as the ability to speak out.

Learning from Communities: The Mount Pleasant Mural Project

Large boards of plywood lined the fence of the Peace Park next to the 7-11 convenience store. It was Celebrate Mount Pleasant Day and the boards, painted with many colors and figures, looked as if they were just another one of the several artist displays found on Mount Pleasant Street that day. But a closer look revealed this wasn't just any art, but graffiti art. The colors swirled and popped, vibrant and pulsing as images immerged from the chaos: a DJ spinning tunes, a library surrounded by barbed-wire, a microphone and a spray paint can. The line-up of art turned out to be a preview of work done by the Midnight Forum, a community group dedicated to giving youth life-skills through hip-hop arts.

In collaboration with the neighborhood economic group Mount Pleasant Main Streets, the affordable housing non-profit MANNA and the neighborhood youth organization YARG (Youth Action Research Group), Midnight Forum's artists created the boards to mask broken windows on an apartment building on Mount Pleasant Street. The building housed lower-income tenants until it was damaged by fire in 2002. In the summer of 2004, the building's owner donated it to the non-profit MANNA, which intends to renovate the building for those same displaced residents, a move which is contrary to the normal trend in the neighborhood. Most apartment buildings are either turned in to condominiums or redeveloped into luxury apartments, effectively shutting out the previous tenants. These actions have impacted the diversity of the neighborhood, as the lower income residents move to other parts of the city or into the Maryland and Virginia suburbs.

This collaboration is a perfect example of the importance of activist work in music and its involvement in other aspects of community activism. It is also a prime example of the good work that grassroots organizations are doing within communities for communities. Midnight Forum used its talents as a location for the artistic expression of DC youth and channeled that energy into a project which not only benefited the neighborhood but also raised awareness among its residents to the artistic nature of graffiti art. In a neighborhood where residents often see graffiti as a criminal act of property defacement, these artists contributed to the beautification of a scarred building and also used their canvas as a platform for community issues. This is not unusual for a group like Midnight Forum. The teens who participate in its programs learn a variety of music and art skills, all within the context of hip-hop expression. In the midst of their training as artists, the students also learn about community issues and the representation of their ideas. The Mount Pleasant Street Mural Project was a prime example of how the students used their emerging skills as artists for the community in which they live.

When Dominic Painter, a teacher at Midnight Forum, talks about the Mural Project, he laughs, especially if you ask him about the ethics of graffiti art or the students original plans for the project. Painter considered the mural project an opportunity for the students to use their training to think big: what are the issues that affect their daily lives and how would you translate that experience into an image? The students confronted all these ideas when they started on the murals for the building in Mount Pleasant. How-

ever, their first idea for a board needed to be finessed, since their client was ultimately a neighborhood organization which wanted to encourage business in Mount Pleasant. Painter recalls that moment with understanding and humor,

“I can think of the first idea they had that they were really excited about, ‘Yeah, I want a bunch of cops, around a guy that’s wearing a hoodie and some jeans and they’ve got their clubs out.’ I was like, ‘ah man, I don’t think that is going to happen,’ (laughing)...that’s not going to happen man, we’ve got to think of something a little different...(laughing)...how about education? I know you have certain views of your school and what you are lacking, go in that direction.’ We’d been talking a lot about gentrification and how Bell was about to get closed and they were about to put up a new one. Kids aren’t stupid. These youth are smart enough to realize that that building is not for them. Yeah, they’ll get to go there for a year or so, but in the long run it is not for them. So they went in that direction and they came up with a way...it’s kinda funny how that picture came out because their depiction of it was...they had a kid running down the street and he looks happy, but in the background it’s like a McDonalds and a Starbucks getting put up. And it has two arrows, one with money leaving the community and none coming back in. So if you are not really looking at it, you’re like, it’s cool, it’s a kid running in front of the McDonald’s and he’s happy, but no... (laughing).” (Painter interview: 03/06)

Under the guidance of their teachers at Midnight Forum, the students were able to get out a message which represented how they felt about the community while also using their graffiti art skills to express that message. Painter feels that if residents in the community look at the mural and only see graffiti, they are relying on an old definition of the art style, one associated with criminal defacement. Through the Mural Project, students re-appropriated the style of the art form and employed it with messages about life in their community.

Projects like Midnight Forum are good examples of grass-roots responses to community issues. The teachers are engaged in the topic in such a way that all issues about community life are moments of learning. In Midnight Forum, the students learn how to hold an aerosol can, how to spin a record for a party and how to write as an MC. These skills are the artistic medium within which each of the students work, however the teachers understand that they also have a responsibility to engage the student beyond the skill. It is not enough just to have a canvas, but what are you going to say on that canvas? As Painter explains, “realizing the impact of what their art is on a broader spectrum whether it is social activism or how having a voice can be used. So the music usually comes from a place where they talk about issues that affect them or anything that is in the news during that time in the semester.” (Painter: 03/06). This is the root of grass-roots work: understanding that individuals have a voice in their communities and working to employ that voice in different forms and forums.

By studying the work done by grassroots organizations, applied ethnomusicologists can begin to understand what elements of the culture are important to communities. Often scholars look at a community and seek ways in which they can contribute, looking at the large picture without seeing how individuals in those communities are

already doing good work. Grassroots organizations respond to specific needs within the community and most times, are started by residents within that community. In the field of folklore, public folklorists label these community activists as community scholars, a term which gives scholarly authority to those who live these issues everyday. Community scholar’s work for the betterment of those they live with, as stewards of the neighborhood’s history, as teachers of artistic skills, or as residents concerned for the cultural life of their community. They know what the issues are immediately and can seek creative ways to address them. While the individual can be the catalyst for action within neighborhood, a community scholar can not be effective by operating as the lone voice in the wilderness.

Folklorists have made efforts to assist community scholars in their activities by holding summer workshops in grant writing and documentary skill training. For example, in South Carolina, community scholars gather every other summer for a two-week workshop in which they learn how to navigate the state’s arts grants, how to document their communities through photographs and audio recordings, and how to archive their materials. The Institute for Community Scholars was initiated by independent folklorist Lesley Williams in conjunction with the South Carolina Arts Commission to not only develop community documentation skills but also widen the field of potential candidates for grant awards from the state.⁴ In the piedmont section of the state, this workshop inspired attendees to start the Piedmont Harmony Project, which sought to document musical traditions in that part of South Carolina. The project is now part of the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor, one of several National Heritage Areas created by the US Congress in 1996 (Missouri Folk Arts Program: 2003). All of these skills are part of a public folklorist’s *modus operandi*. By sharing these skills with community scholars, folklorists become collaborators with the communities they study. The origins of projects in this model come not from the academic scholar, but from the community. In this relationship, the community scholar takes the lead and the academic works as consultant.

Cultural theorist George Yúdice comments that agency, commonly thought of as the power of those in weaker positions to resist structural pressures, is not something that we have to ourselves as individuals. As an individual, we can identify a problem in a community but we can not change the situation on our own. Working with groups of like-minded individuals, our thoughts and efforts have a much more substantial impact. To prevent our individual voice from being squelched in the process, as Yúdice writes, “...rather than a frontal action against a single source of oppression, it requires working in a range of groups and organizations, working with and mediating to help provide interfaces among diverse agendas...” (Yúdice 2003: 157). In the case of the Mount Pleasant Street Murals, the youth organization YARG made sure to stand its ground, impressing upon the neighborhood economic group that the students of Midnight Forum must be allowed to create murals using their own voices as community youth. All three of the organizations, as grassroots, community-based groups, each had different agendas but

⁴ When I attended the Institute in 2003 at Clemson University, in South Carolina, the attendee’s projects ranged from creating a writer’s retreat in the Piedmont to documenting and reinvigorating jubilee singing in Coastal Carolina churches. Most of those in attendance were not familiar with folklore as an academic discipline prior to their involvement in the workshops.

could negotiate with each other and respect each other. And in the end, a building got a needed facelift and students developed their artistic skills and political views.

Conclusion

In the end, to be an applied ethnomusicologist is to be conflicted: about methodology, about ethics, about objectivity. All of which are concerns of academic research. The field where we make observations is not isolated and nor is it singular. When working inside an urban neighborhood, one starts to understand the inclusivity of fields and people. It is the multi-layered sense of place and being that creates community. In order to be an activist for music in a community, one must also be an activist for the community. This idea impacts the manner in which I conduct my fieldwork. It means that I need to stand up and be counted when called upon by my neighbors. Signing a petition, attending a rally or protest, getting involved in the mechanics of community building are all methods of being an activist. These are not empty involvements or the accidental results of participant-observer research. I am not attending the protest just to observe but to lend my voice and assistance.

My help should not stop when the topic diverges from my research. Music is not created in a vacuum and its survival is affected by everyday social issues all over the world. To be an advocate for music means that one must also be aware of all sorts of issues that affect a community. Established voices are usually privileged over new voices, for better or worse. As a result, applied ethnomusicologists need to understand what type of commitment they are willing to make toward the community they are studying. How long will you be involved in the community? What kind of assistance is most useful under the constraints of your project? For a dissertation project, these aims are very high and not always achievable. I struggled for awhile with the ethical dilemma of commitment and time. Seeing the good work of the activists around me, I knew that their level of commitment was in direct relation to how long they had been residents (or how long into the future they assumed to be residents.) My own ability to stay in the neighborhood was finite. This is a very important point if one is going to be an activist. It takes a long time to build up relationships in a community, and as such, one must be ready to make a long-term commitment to that place before engaging in applied work. As a result, the work one does will actually have a greater impact and respect within that community.

Maybe this seems like a very common sense idea, but I think that it is not stressed enough in applied work. Most times, applied ethnomusicologists work within institutions, either academic or governmental, in which involvement in a community is dependent on the funds and time allowed by that institution. Applied ethnomusicologists who work within institutions must also deal with ideological constraints. Surely a university would have problems with a university-based project which assisted radical political elements in documenting and preserving their musical traditions. Governmental institutions are less likely to involve themselves in politically dangerous topics which might bring the eye of congressional appropriation committees to their activities and the potential

of funding cuts. Because many scholars will continue to do this work in spite of lack of support by institutions and governments, the role of grassroots organizations becomes an important aspect of applied ethnomusicological method. By working on this level, scholars have a direct involvement with the communities they study as well as a direct responsibility to those whose lives their research is based. Assisting and working in grassroots organizations allows the scholar to support work already occurring in their field of study, instead of reworking and undermining the work of the community with institutional and governmental imperatives.

With all these types of constraints, to be an applied ethnomusicologist is to be political. These scholars decide to take a stand for the music and musicians they study. By taking a stand and acknowledging that there is no apolitical act, applied ethnomusicologists deal directly with the issues of everyday life, instead of hiding behind an academic veil of objectivity. As a method of research, applied ethnomusicology informs decisions made throughout the fieldwork and research process, from gathering interviews to participating in protest rallies. The scholar becomes part of the community and acts with the community. It is with this set of ethics, to become involved and aware, that I seek to become an applied ethnomusicologist.

Bibliography:

Primary Sources:

Interview with Nate Allen. July 2005.

Interview with Dominic Painter. March 2006.

Fieldnotes 2005-2007.

“A Look at Urban Music with Nate Nice” Radio Documentary, produced by students at Bell Multicultural High School, Washington, DC. July 2005.

Secondary Sources:

Barnouw, Eric. 1993. *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Chambers, Erve. 1985. *Applied Anthropology: A Practical Guide*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

D’Andrade, Roy. 1995. “Moral Models of Anthropology,” *Current Anthropology* 36(3): 399-408.

Feintuch, Burt., ed. 1988. *Conservation of Culture: Folklorists and the Public Sector*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press.

Fisher, Marc. 2007. “A Counteroffensive on Mt. Pleasant’s ‘Voluntary’ Music Bans,” *Washington Post*, B01, 4/12/07.

Graves, Bau. 1992. “Ethics and Ethnics: Public Sector Ethnomusicology and the Mediation of Culture.” MA thesis, Tufts University.

Hawes, Bess Lomax. 1992. “Practice Makes Perfect: Lessons in Active Ethnomusicology.” *Ethnomusicology* 36 (3): 337-344.

Hood, Mantle. 1971. *The Ethnomusicologist*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press.

Hufford, Mary, ed. 1994. *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1988. "Mistaken Dichotomies", *Journal of American Folklore* 101: 140-55.

Lomax, Alan. 1985. "Appeal for Cultural Equity", in *1985 Festival of American Folklife*, ed. Thomas Vennum, Jr. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 40-46.

Merriam, Alan. 1964. *The Anthropology of Music*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Missouri Folk Arts Program. 2003. "A Sampling of Folklife and Cultural Tourism Projects in the United States" <http://maa.missouri.edu/mfap/articles/folklifesampling.html>

Nichols, William. 1995. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Nettl, Bruno. 1964. *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.

Nettl, Bruno. 1983. *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Payne, Jessica. 1998. "The Politicization of Culture in Applied Folklore". *Journal of Folklore Research* 35 (3).

Rice, Timothy. 1997. "Toward a Mediation of Field Methods and Field Experience in Ethnomusicology" in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. G. Barz and T. Cooley. New York: Oxford University Press.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1995. "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology" *Current Anthropology* 36 (3): 409-440.

Sheehy, Daniel. 1992. "A Few Notions About the Philosophy and Strategy in Applied Ethnomusicology." *Ethnomusicology* 36 (3): 323-336.

Spitzer, Nicholas and Robert Baron, ed. 1992. *Public Folklore*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Stephen, Lynn. 2002. *Zapata Lives!: Histories and Cultural Politics in Southern Mexico*. Berkely: University of California Press.

Terkel, Studs. 2001. *Will the Circle Be Unbroken? Reflections on Death, Rebirth, and Hunger for a Faith*. New York: New Press.

Titon, Jeff. 1992. "Music, the Public Interest, and the Practice of Ethnomusicology". *Ethnomusicology* 36 (3): 315-322.

Titon, Jeff. 1994. *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Yúdice, George. 2003. *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

POVZETEK

Aplikativna etnomuzikologija predstavlja tak filozofski pristop k študiju glasbe v določeni kulturi, ki je istočasno družbeno odgovoren in pravičen. Znanstveniki uporabljajo svojo akademsko izobrazbo za to, da se zavzemajo za glasbene skupnosti in da delujejo kot posredniki med glasbeno kulturo in širšo javnostjo. Taka naravnost omogoča raziskovalcu, da opazuje, kako ljudje v skupnosti že sami delajo tisto, kar imenujemo aplikativna etnomuzikologija. S tem da so priče temu, kako določena skupnost na podlagi kulturnega dela reagira na probleme, lahko raziskovalci odkrijejo pota lastnega vključevanja, ne da bi pri tem vztrajali kot vodje projektov.

Aplikativna etnomuzikologija se mora spopasti z metodologijo, etiko in objektivnostjo, kar je skrb vsakega akademskega raziskovanja. Polje naših raziskovanj ni niti izolirano niti edinstveno. Ko raziskujemo znotraj urbane sošeske, se začnemo zavedati vključenosti polj in ljudi. Če hočemo biti glasbeni aktivisti v določeni skupnosti, moramo aktivno delovati v prid skupnosti. Aplikativna etnomuzikologija pokriva vse odločitve, do katerih znanstvenik pride med terenskim delom in raziskovalnim procesom: od zbiranja intervjujev do soudeležbe pri protestnih shodih. Znanstvenik postane del skupnosti in deluje skupaj s skupnostjo.