

## A Conversation with Portia K. Maultsby

*Interviewed by Delia Alexander  
Bloomington, Indiana, 5 November 2002*

**DA:** Over your wide ranging career, what has been your involvement with applied ethnomusicology?

**PM:** I have applied my knowledge as an ethnomusicologist in a variety of contexts, including public sector institutions, where I have worked as researcher, presenter, consultant, author, co-curator, and program designer in museums; consultant for companies specializing in museum soundtrack and multimedia productions; and consultant/advisor for PBS and NPR/PRI documentaries.

Working part- or full-time in public sector institutions enables ethnomusicologists to influence the presentation and representation of American ethnic minorities and world cultures in public spaces.

**DA:** What led you to do the applied work that you've done?

**PM:** Bernice Reagon, former Director of the Program in Black American Culture (renamed Program in African American Culture) located in the Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, became aware of my research and publications on African American religious and popular musics. Around 1980, she invited me to participate in a colloquia series designed to contextualize live performances of the music of pioneering black gospel music composers. My assignment was to examine the influences of various gospel music styles on African American popular music. Four years later, she expressed an interest in organizing a week-end symposium on African American popular music and invited me to serve as special consultant. In this role and as Visiting Scholar in Residence for a year at the Museum of American History, I conducted research, designed the symposium, identified and wrote biographies of the participants

(music industry personnel, performers, radio deejays, and scholars), and authored the essay for the program booklet. The program, "Black Popular Music: Rhythm and Blues, 1945-1955," held in the spring of 1986, included both panels and live performances. In conjunction with this symposium, the Smithsonian Institution developed a traveling exhibition. I was invited to lecture on rhythm and blues at various museums that hosted the exhibition.

My work at the Smithsonian Institution resulted in invitations from African American and other museums to participate in public programs as a presenter and to serve as consultant and co-curator for exhibitions on history and music, respectively. I really enjoyed working on a funk music project, *Something in the Water: The Sweet Flavor of Dayton Street Funk*, for the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio, for which I served as co-curator. The responsibilities included contributing to the conceptual design, conducting field and library research, and writing the storyboard and essay for the catalogue. On another project, I collaborated with ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin. We researched and selected the music for a soundtrack produced in conjunction with a traveling exhibition, *Bridges and Boundaries: African Americans and American Jews*, produced by the Jewish Museum in New York City.

In the latter part of the 1980s, I became involved in documentary productions for PBS and NPR/PRI. My first major project was the eight-part African American history documentary, *Eyes on the Prize II*, produced by Blackside Production for PBS. Bernice Reagon had served as music researcher/music consultant for *Eyes on the Prize I*. She recommended that I serve in this position for the sequel series because of my knowledge of African American popular music and African American history. This position involved identifying scenes for music, selecting and editing the music, and identifying music embedded in archival footage. The success of this project led to invitations to work on other documentaries produced for PBS on African American popular music, including *That Rhythm . . . Those Blues* and *Record Row: Chicago's Record Row: The Cradle of Rhythm and Blues*, as well as various documentaries on African American popular and gospel music (*Let the Good Times Roll*, *Wade in the Water*), and black radio (*Black*

*Radio: Telling It Like It Was*) for NPR/PRI. Serving as consultant for multimedia documentaries on music requires duties beyond those associated with historical documentaries, such as contributing to the conceptual design and research, identifying on-camera interviewees, and critiquing scripts or storyboards and rough and final cuts of the production.

I have not worked in the context of public celebrations such as festivals and other community cultural celebrations.

**DA:** Would you be interested in doing festivals?

**PM:** No, I prefer attending festivals. Nevertheless, the skills and knowledge that I apply to museum and media projects are transferable to festivals/public celebrations.

**DA:** How have you been able to create or maintain a balance between the work you have to do for public sector and the teaching or other work you have to do as an academic?

**PM:** In most cases, I only accept projects related to my research and publication projects and those that treat topics with which I am very familiar. For me, public sector and academic work represent different sides of the same coin. My academic work provides content for public sector projects and the research conducted for these projects feeds back into my own work and teaching. I expose students to the latest perspectives on issues drawing from my discussions with scholars of various disciplines. Another point—public sector work has made my research accessible to broad audiences and in different formats.

**DA:** When do you work on applied projects? During the summer?

**PM:** This depends on the pre-production, production, and post-production schedule as well as my role in the project. Much of the work is done in phases over twelve to twenty-four months. Then again, some projects can span over four or five years. My work begins when I get the necessary documents and I am obligated to meet deadlines. Since schedules often change, I must “go with the flow.”

**DA:** So you've put together courses in applied ethnomusicology. How did it come about, and how is it constructed?

**PM:** I developed two courses in response to the need for more trained scholars and to the growing interest of undergraduate and graduate students in this area. Ongoing public debates of issues of diversity and globalization have prompted many public sector institutions to include American ethnic minorities and world cultures in their productions and programming. Music, as a marker of identity, is factoring more prominently in the representation of cultures in public spaces. Ethnomusicologists are called upon to serve as consultants, researchers, and curators among other roles because of their knowledge of these issues and training in world music.

On various occasions I've had to decline offers to work on projects because of other commitments. When this happens, I frequently am asked to recommend advanced graduate students who could work under my supervision. However feasible this solution may appear, it involves more than mere supervision, given that many projects involve budgets ranging from several thousands to millions of dollars. Paid consultants are expected to bring knowledge and a variety of skills to the table. Therefore, students need both formal training and practical experience provided through a combination of course work, volunteer services, practical study, and internships. Much of my earlier work in the public sector was done in conjunction with fledgling African American museums and the Program of Black American Culture located in the Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. In both settings, we experimented with new concepts for research, presentation, and programming, which now have become standard to the methods employed by many African American museums.

The public sector curriculum at Indiana University emphasizes scholarly approaches, which involve the study of theory, method, and practice. Although the curriculum provides for practical application, some courses devote more attention to theories and methods; others critique the application of theories and methods through the examination of production materials and through work on actual projects. The curriculum also offers opportunities for extended work experience through volunteer services, practicum study, and internships.

**DA:** What about goals of the course—specifically what you’re hoping to teach the students?

**PM:** I teach two introductory courses, “Ethnomusicology and the Public Sector” (Parts I and II) with a focus on (1) examining the work of ethnomusicologists, folklorists, anthropologists, and humanists as researchers, consulting scholars, curators, producers, music supervisors, filmmakers, authors, and developers of public and outreach programs as well as educational materials for K–12 instruction in a variety of public sector contexts—museums and archives, public media institutions, festivals and other forms of public celebrations; (2) introducing students to the mission, history, ideology, and practices of public sector institutions/organizations and to theories related to concepts of presentation and representation; and (3) critiquing the application of these theories using production materials from actual projects. In essence, these courses are designed to provide students with a broad overview of the field and expose them to the type of knowledge and skills necessary to work effectively in the public sector. My classes also stress the importance of collaboration and the need to develop negotiating skills.

Negotiation is central to collaborative work and important to debating ideological positions regarding institutional traditions and practices. Working as music consultant for *Eyes On the Prize II*, for example, I negotiated the use of songs that contained lyrics, a practice contrary to traditions of documentary filmmaking. In most cases, lyrics are avoided because of their potential to editorialize or influence the interpretation of content. Even though this potential does exist, I believe that song lyrics, if strategically placed in appropriate scenes, can help reinforce important issues introduced in the narrative. Through several discussions supported by a rationale, the producers eventually gave in to my position, which in turn influenced changes in perspective on the role of music documentaries. This is significant because (and unlike many cultures) vocal and instrumental music is central to African American community life. It expresses a range of emotions and reveals the level of resilience and creativity of African Americans under changing social conditions and as a marginalized group in society. Therefore, music can be effective in multimedia narratives on African American history and culture if used appropriately.

Negotiation skills also were an asset to my work on a multimedia project for which I served as consultant for the production company. An issue was the length of a documentary video, *Music as Metaphor*, created in conjunction with a permanent history exhibition (*From Victory to Freedom: Afro-American Life from 1945-1965*) for the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, Wilberforce, Ohio. The first rough cut of the video was forty minutes in length, much longer than the five to fifteen minutes standard for museum multimedia productions. Empirical and anecdotal research had shown that documentary films are less captivating and that visitors, especially children, have limited time in museums, as well as short attention spans. Nevertheless, the producer and I were in agreement that the musical history of a twenty-year time span could not be represented adequately in five to fifteen minutes. Our task was to convince the museum staff of the need for a longer version of the production. We succeeded by negotiating a twenty-two minute version based on the proven power of black music to engage people. I later learned that video indeed did engage the museum's visitors—many watched the production twice. This experience convinced me that ethnomusicologists can influence changes in long-standing practices and perspectives of public sector institutions in ways that contribute to effective presentations and appropriate representation of cultures, especially those of American ethnic minority and world cultures.

**DA:** What should graduate students interested in applied work look into in terms of building skills and getting experience?

**PM:** Although certain positions—curators, researchers, consultants, music supervisors, producers of multimedia projects, developers of public programs, educational materials, etc.—require specific skills, students should possess a broad set of core skills and knowledge. They should be familiar with the history, mission, and practices of public sector institutions/organizations; processes of production; and theories of presentation and representations. Students *must* know content. An understanding of musical genres of given culture groups and related social histories is *absolutely* essential. My knowledge of various African American genres and styles as well as African and African

American history (my Ph.D. minor), for example, has been key to my participation in various roles on museum and media projects.

Students also should possess solid research, analytical, and interpretive skills as well as original ideas. Good interpersonal or “people” skills and the willingness to work collaboratively with staff and scholars across disciplinary boundaries are equally important. Most of all, the virtue of patience and flexibility is absolutely necessary. Public sector work is very demanding and involves frequent changes in schedules, periods of inactivity followed by periods of intense activity, and last minute requests, etc. In essence, this work can be very intense, sometimes frustrating, but very rewarding. In addition to developing various skills, students must acquire practical experience and develop portfolios. Whereas I learned the job by doing it, paid consultants are now expected to bring experience as well as a broad knowledge of content to the table.

**DA:** One final question: What would you say is the scope of applied ethnomusicology?

**PM:** All kinds of work related to presenting, interpreting, representing, and educating broad audiences about different cultures in various contexts, such as schools, museums and archives, public media, public celebrations, and community culture events. Educational activities include public programs, community outreach, curricular and educational material development, teacher training, etc.