

# PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

## **Confessions of a Public Sector Ethnomusicologist**

*Sydney Hutchinson*

For nearly three years, I have been working in a field I had never even heard of a few years ago. Even more surprising, it is a field no one who knew me as a child would ever have expected me to choose. I was a shy, bookish, and largely silent child. I couldn't even make a simple phone call to a stranger, something I must do every day as an ethnomusicologist. So was the transformation easy? No. Was it worth it? Yes. How did I get here? That one will take me a little longer to answer.

My undergraduate degree is in piano performance, so for years I spent most waking moments in practice rooms studying the Western canon of classical music. But at the same time, I now realize, I was well on my way to becoming an ethnomusicologist though I had not yet heard of the field. Among my regular weekend activities were classes in Bharata Natyam, Indian classical dance. Being a starving artist, I worked out a deal with my teacher. We decided on an exchange: in return for dance lessons, I would teach her to play piano and read music. She had studied Indian classical music as part of her dance training, so she was a good singer and quite knowledgeable about tala and raga. At the same time, she enjoyed listening to Western music and wanted to learn more about it.

One day I was teaching her about our scale system and explaining the differences between major and minor modes. I pointed out that each has a different emotive quality. To illustrate, I pulled out a book with some good old romantic period pieces. See? This one is in minor, so it's supposed to be sad. This one in major is supposed to sound happy. At this point, students from the United States nod with understanding as the whole business of scales begins to make sense to them. This major/minor dichotomy of mood and mode was

imprinted in their brains back in early childhood. But here my Indian dance teacher asked, “Really? Why is that?”

Her question stopped me cold. No one had ever asked me that before, and it had never been discussed in the theory, history, or repertoire classes I had taken. But when I thought about it, it was a very good question indeed.<sup>1</sup> I replied that it was just customary, an idea that we grow up with in our culture whether musicians or not. This answer made sense enough to her, as ragas also have emotive associations. Still, I kept thinking about it. Was there a biological basis for such perceptions of scales, was it based on culture and education, or was some combination of the two at work? I began asking such questions, to the delight of some teachers and the horror of others. One professor suggested that because the minor interval is smaller than the major, it is more “closed” sounding and thus more naturally sad. I also read that because the minor interval is more discordant, meaning that it produces more complex vibrations than the consonant major interval, it may inspire a “sadder” response. However, I was not able to find a cross-cultural comparison of emotional responses to these intervals and scales, and I knew the question could not be answered to my satisfaction without such a study.

As I neared graduation, I was reaching the point in my life where I needed to decide what to do next. I was already certain I did not want to continue as a piano soloist for several reasons. First, I did not like the solitude of spending all day, every day in a practice room by myself—I wanted to play and discuss music with others. Second, I wanted to have more of a balance between research and performance, between art and science. I wanted the freedom to pursue questions like those brought up by my Bharata Natyam teacher. Finally, I had grown up with a pesky sense of social service and responsibility. I knew one could do good and positive things with classical music, but it wasn’t direct enough for me. I wanted to make a positive impact on the lives of many people of different backgrounds and I wasn’t sure I would be able to do that as a concert pianist or accompanist.

Unable to think of a field in which I would be able to pursue all of my interests from language to culture to biology to music and dance, I created a couple of fields I was convinced were completely new. One I named biomusicology, as it would search for the foundations of

musical perception through biology, taking into account both humans and animals. I was delighted to find out through subsequent Internet searches on my made-up word that scholars were in fact already working on creating this field by studying bird and whale songs as well as human brain structures. I wasn't quite sure what to call my other invented discipline, but imagined it as a combination of music and anthropology that would study music both cross culturally and in culture-specific contexts. After looking at the web sites of various anthropology departments, I stumbled across the field of ethnomusicology. Amazed to find out that my dream field not only existed, but that I could actually get a degree in it, I made my decision. Less than a year later, I enrolled in the ethnomusicology program at Indiana University's Folklore Institute.

Two of my three concerns were now solved. I would be spending a lot of time talking to and playing with other musicians; I would also be able to combine my interests in research and performance. But the third continued to bother me throughout graduate school: would all this actually make a difference? Or was I selfishly choosing a career that would enable me to have fun without having any discernible effect on anyone's life? Graduate seminars on ethics focused more on how not to make a mess of other people's lives than how to better them, so by the time I finished my master's degree I still wasn't sure of the answers. Although I did have a sense that I could make some positive contribution with all my education, I didn't know how. In that frame of mind, I moved to New York City to see what an aspiring ethnomusicologist could do with her life.

Careers in public folklore were not a hot topic in my graduate seminars, so I entered the field relatively unaware of the options available to me. In fact, I really didn't expect to be able to work in my field at all when I moved two years ago—at least, not for a good long time. Accordingly, I held a series of jobs that were completely unsuited to someone with my artistic temperament and left-wing politics, from serving as a secretary to investment bankers and stockbrokers to working on commission at an Internet apartment listing service. I also spent a number of months unemployed. But after persistent, long-term pestering of the Folk Arts Division of the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), I found that there were indeed jobs available in the City even for a relatively inexperienced public ethnomusicologist.

In no way did I anticipate the range of options I found: besides accepting a paid internship at the Center for Traditional Music and Dance, I took on contracts to organize a series of festivals for the Southwest Yonkers Planning Commission, coordinate a folklorists' meeting for NYSCA, and write interpretive materials for various arts councils. Even more surprising was the fact that I was earning a living wage. I began independently doing my own field study of Dominican accordion music, and I also pursued my second career as a performer by joining various salsa/mambo dance companies and a salsa/cumbia band. I found that folkloristic skills were in demand even outside of the workplace: my interviewing abilities have been called upon by my dance company and even by some Dominican entrepreneurs.

On the plus side, self-employment as a contract folklorist is enjoyable and it pays well. On the minus side, it offers no health insurance and no job security. Luckily, only a year into my stay in New York, Long Island Traditions (a nonprofit traditional arts organization located in Port Washington) offered me my first permanent position—with benefits—as staff ethnomusicologist. I gladly accepted.

My job is a great conversation-starter, since most people—folklorists and lay people alike—have no idea what a public ethnomusicologist does. In truth, there is no short answer since my duties vary so much from day to day; the constant change is one thing I love about the job. But in general, I can divide my work into three areas: education, research, and development.

During the school year, education occupies most of my time and energy. We organize maritime and ethnic folk arts programs for a number of Long Island public schools from elementary through high school, though principally at the fourth grade level. LI Traditions director Nancy Solomon developed the maritime program over the past decade. In four or five class periods, a half-day workshop, and a field trip, children learn about Long Island's history and environment through interactions with professional fisherman, clammers, decoy carvers, fishing pole and lure makers, and a variety of folk artists working with marine materials and themes. My general duties as part of this organization include teaching the program introduction as well as overseeing workshops to make sure they run smoothly.

The ethnic folk arts program continues to be developed as I discover new artists through fieldwork. We see this program as being particularly necessary because of recent hate crimes against immigrants in the area. The current roster of artists includes Peruvian, Mexican, and Jewish musicians; Portuguese and Paraguayan dancers; an Islamic calligrapher; a Puerto Rican gourd carver; and Native American and East Indian storytellers. In general, artists each will make two class visits, the first to discuss their culture, the tradition they practice, and their experiences of immigration; the second to answer interview questions prepared by the students. Occasionally, artists carry out longer residencies as after-school programs. For example, last year junior high school students spent five weeks learning to play steel drums with a Trinidadian music group. This year, planned activities include workshops on Peruvian cumbia, Mexican mariachi, and salsa and merengue dancing.

My role in these programs runs from supervision and teaching to planning, scheduling, and organization. I work with teachers and principals to select dates both for artist visits and the staff development workshops we require; mail artists their contracts and directions; compose and distribute student handouts; help the teaching artists to prepare their presentations; and supervise workshops. I even teach an introductory class on folklore—what it is and how we study it—to prepare the children to conduct their own “interviews” of the visiting artists.

I also work on developing new school and public programs and funding them through grant proposals. We receive funding for our in-school, after-school, and public programs from agencies like the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, from foundations like Rockefeller, and from various corporations and local government entities. Most of these must be reapplied for each year, a process which may entail anything from writing new artist biographies or obtaining and compiling recordings, to inventing budgets, finding expert consultants, and researching the histories of various communities or artistic genres. Thus, I have not only learned to fine tune my grant writing skills but have had to learn a lot about topics from South American musical instruments, to the six styles of Islamic calligraphy, to the three main dance types of Portugal’s Minho region.

During the summers, and on any available days in between, I do research, mostly in the form of fieldwork. In some cases I start 'from scratch,' going into communities with which I'm unfamiliar and where I have no contacts in an attempt to identify new traditional artists. In the process, I often become friends with community organizers and business owners, which serves a second purpose of building community relations and support for our programs. Other times I follow up on contacts made by previous fieldworkers employed by the organization temporarily, such as summer interns. I tape record interviews, index them, and enter them into our archives. Sometimes photographic documentation or audio recording is also necessary, and I have had to acquire these skills as well. Bits of the interviews then find a way into everything from the newsletter articles I write four times a year to concert program notes, from press releases to the artists' web pages found on our site ([www.longislandtraditions.org](http://www.longislandtraditions.org)).

I most enjoy the time I get to spend on my own current research interest, merengue típico or traditional accordion-based music from the Dominican Republic. I have now spent over a year documenting this tradition in New York City through interviews, recordings, and photographs. I mainly concentrate on East New York in Brooklyn, which has an unusually large and tight-knit community of típico musicians, though I work with artists in all parts of the city. I have been organizing concerts and lecture-demonstrations to educate the public about this exhilarating, improvisatory, and highly danceable but little-known musical genre; I have also written some articles on the subject and plan on producing a book eventually. The musicians are supportive of the idea, as they have a lot to say on the topic. Several have stated that they often thought of taking on the task themselves, though their efforts are hindered by the fact that most do not have more than an elementary school education.

By this time I have met most of the típico musicians working in the area, and they know me, too, at least by reputation. We have a good working relationship: sometimes they even go out of their way to set up interviews for me with friends they think I really ought to talk to. It is always a surprise to find out how they have explained my role to the newcomers. Because of the variety of my activities, each

of these musicians have their own understanding of my job. Some describe me as a journalist; some as an agent or promoter; some simply a fellow musician, albeit one with an awful lot of questions. They are all correct in one way or another, since depending on what needs to be done, I take on each of these roles. Sometimes I write articles about the musicians or collaborate with newspaper reporters to give these artists some much-needed press. Sometimes I am able to book well-paying performances for them, increasing their exposure among non-Dominican audiences. Other times, I just play and/or talk music with them.

I have found myself surprised by many things during my two years as a public ethnomusicologist. First, as I have noted, the amount and variety of work I was able to get even without a Ph.D. astounded me. There *is* demand for public folklorists and ethnomusicologists—at least in New York, where there is strong state support for the arts. One must have realistic expectations, however: this is not a field to choose for the money.

I have also finally found some peace of mind regarding my chosen discipline: ethnomusicology does serve a useful purpose, and my efforts are appreciated both by the students and the artists I work with. This type of work can be especially useful in suburban areas like Long Island, where some of the mainly white longtime residents have had difficulty adjusting to the arrival of large numbers of recent immigrants, and where language barriers prevent much everyday intercultural interaction between diverse groups. It is exciting to watch children of all backgrounds learn to play Peruvian percussion or Trinidadian steel drums, and it is gratifying to see the older generations take an interest in learning more about their neighbors. Facilitating such interactions in neutral zones like schools and libraries helps pave the way for increased tolerance and cooperation.

And while there is something selfish about being able to spend so much time at work doing things I would do on my own time anyway, I feel that I am of much greater use to the world now than I was in my days as secretary to stockbrokers, both practically and personally speaking. I was recently invited to participate in a career day at the high school where my sister teaches. I sat on a panel with a lawyer and a magazine editor, who each later expressed remorse that their

careers did not sound nearly as exciting as mine. (On the other hand, I don't make nearly as much money.) The students were amazed that one could get paid to study something like bachata or merengue music, which they all listen to anyway, but were discouraged that to do so one needs at least a master's degree. I explained that it was worth it to make this sacrifice: we all have to spend at least forty hours a week at our jobs whether we like it or not, so you might as well try to get a job you love. You will be happier and more productive, and that will rub off on everyone around you. It has certainly been true in my case.

Finally, our work as ethnomusicologists has a real benefit for the artists with whom we work. In a genre like merengue típico, which seldom if ever receives any attention from mainstream media, simply getting the word out and introducing the music to a wider audience is worth a great deal. Newspaper articles and public programs help musicians to increase their listening audience while opening the door for future performances in other communities. Such public recognition also boosts musicians' spirits by showing that their efforts are valued.

Ethnomusicologists can also help to preserve styles and instruments that have fallen into disuse because they are no longer commercially viable. Though preservation is a somewhat passé idea in academic circles, it is still a valuable function that public sector workers can serve, and one that is appreciated by many musicians. Those with whom I have worked have enjoyed being given the opportunity to resuscitate old songs seldom requested by today's youthful audiences and to pull out old-fashioned instruments that cannot be used in nightclub settings. For example, during an interview with one accordionist, I learned he had constructed his own marimba (a box-shaped bass instrument with metal keys, directly descended from the African mbira), which was sitting in his storage room, never having been played. My interest in the instrument inspired him to get it out of storage and begin performing with it, to the delight of many other típico musicians and fans.

Many social scientists who are working in communities to which they are not native experience some amount of ambivalence or even guilt and self-doubt over their role as cultural translators, as they try to represent a culture which is not their own. Certainly, there are complex ethical questions that can and should be raised—but it is possible for us



to do good. I think the situation was best expressed at a recent New York folklorists' roundtable. All were invited to bring as guests any community scholars with whom they had collaborated. One of my colleagues brought a leader of the Indo-Caribbean community in Queens. After he had sat through several sessions of papers and discussions, he spoke up: "I don't know why you people are always whining and worrying. You are *helping* us! You should be happy!" To me, that's what makes it worthwhile.

### Notes

1. In fact, a character in James Joyce's *Ulysses* asks, "Why minor sad?" (Bloom in Chapter 11, "Sirens").