Applied Ethnomusicology and the Impulse to Make a Difference

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My father was an uneducated man with a world of common sense. His main philosophy in life was that you should always leave a place in better shape than you found it. I remember family camping trips where the ritual cleanup of the entire camping area at the end of our stay seemed almost as long and involved as the camping itself. He was a generous man who gave selflessly and is still remembered by the many people he helped. His obvious mission was to make the world better, even in the smallest of ways.

My father's succinct philosophy has influenced my values, and I believe that all of us would benefit from articulating similar mission statements expressing our purpose in life. A mission statement should be clear, concise, and memorable. It should cover all aspects of one's life, both personal and professional, and guide one whenever there is a decision to be made. It should be practical and reflect the realistic impact of one individual in this world, yet it should also be idealistic, incorporating one's philosophy about the world as it can be.

My own mission statement incorporates service to others, a desire to inspire through teaching and music, and a belief that we should eradicate borders between people, live in harmony with nature, and treat the Earth with care. It reminds me that I will be remembered for things done for others rather than things done for my own personal advancement.

When I discovered ethnomusicology in the 1980s and began to consider a degree in the discipline, its potential to address real social issues attracted me. I had spent several years as a social worker during the day and musician at night and was searching for a field that would combine my love of music and a desire to be involved in activities that resulted in a tangible betterment of the human condition.

As a social worker, I worked with persons with physical, mental and developmental disabilities, persons who were homeless, ex-offenders, substance abusers, and also children with emotional disturbances. Most of these individuals were of limited economic means or from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some were recent immigrants or first-generation Americans. This work was emotionally grueling, often frustrating, and infinitely rewarding. The faces and stories of the men, women, and children that I helped get off the street, into school, into jobs, and into the mainstream of society will stay with me forever.

In ethnomusicology, I saw the same transforming potential. Graduate school introduced me to other students who shared my idealism, who discussed and debated the writings of Charles Seeger (1977), Alan Lomax (1968), John Blacking (1973), and other ethnomusicologists who addressed the role of music in a "sound" society. I was excited to read works by anthropologists like James Spradley, who believed researchers had an ethical responsibility to go beyond studying and understanding their subjects, to address human problems and serve the needs of humankind (1980:19).

But as my involvement in ethnomusicology developed, I became increasingly disappointed and dismayed at the relative disconnect between the field and the problems of the world around it. When I discussed with graduate school advisors my interest in doing ethnomusicology that would make a difference in people's lives, a common response was, "If you want to do social work you should do social work." There was an implication that ethnomusicology is an objective field involved in pure research at an arm's length from the real problems and political status of people.

My experiences in graduate school led me to pose some serious questions concerning the role of ethnomusicological research in society. Should not all research lead to a tangible and quantifiable betterment of the human condition? Should not all ethnomusicology be applied to something and for someone? And would it not be ideal for research to be applied for the benefit of all sides involved—especially for the benefit of our research subjects, who are often poor and oppressed? It seems to me that if the goal of research is *not* to make a difference in the lives of our research subjects, the endeavor reads as a barren and one-sided narrative: Ethnomusicologist studies poor

people's music. Ethnomusicologist goes home and gets tenure-track position. Poor people are still poor. And what has been accomplished?

During my graduate school years I had to work to make ends meet. At the time I felt a degree of ambivalence about my "day job" as a social worker. But in retrospect, this experience had an enormous effect in shaping me as an ethnomusicologist. During those years, while simultaneously working on a degree in ethnomusicology, I was heavily engaged in the problems of the "real world." In a sense, this experience has proven to be more influential than anything I learned in graduate school.

So what are the lessons from my years as a social worker that have shaped me as an ethnomusicologist? In 1995, while working as the Coordinator of Homeless Services for the City of Santa Monica, California, I was struck by a dilemma. If I did my work as well as could be hoped for, and all the persons who were homeless in Santa Monica would attain access to housing in addition to food, training, education, and employment, wouldn't that mean I would be out of a job? Of course, this scenario never happened, and in real life things rarely turn out so neatly. But it became apparent to me that I had to approach my job with the full intention of doing it so well that it would eventually become obsolete. Otherwise, my job would become institutionalized, making homeless services a business: I would be making my comfortable living on the assumption that homelessness was an inevitable fact of life. To me, this was a detestable assumption.

Ever since that experience, I have approached every task as if it were my role to work myself out of a job. Let's look at ethnomusicology in the same light. Let's ask the question, "Why do we need ethnomusicologists?" Many of us could agree that we need ethnomusicology to preserve, teach, and connect people with musical traditions and to foster understanding between peoples. But let's also look ahead into the future. Don't we, as ethnomusicologists, want to create a world for our students and children where global music is commonplace, native artists and researchers can sustain themselves, technology has preserved all music and oral tradition, and people celebrate and respect the cultures and differences of one another? Can't we look back at the last one hundred years of ethnomusicology and see how far we've come toward that goal? Can't we imagine a time in the not too distant

future when ethnomusicologists won't be as necessary as they are today? If our answers to these questions are even partially in the affirmative, then shouldn't we, as ethnomusicologists, be working toward this positive future instead of merely perpetuating the idea that we will always need institutionalized experts on music and culture?

What does it mean to work toward obsolescence? In ethnomusicology, I believe it means recognizing the equal worth of our research subjects. It means being collaborators rather than experts. It means asking our research subjects what they need help with and being willing to be involved in aspects of their lives other than music. It means working toward helping them to secure their self-determination and rights. It means working toward the independence of our research subjects so that they'll never need an ethnomusicologist to do anything for them again. It means taking teaching more seriously. It means forming partnerships with persons looking to improve communities and having a broad involvement with projects that aim to change the inequities in our world. It means that a day may come in the distant future when ethnomusicologists may pat themselves on the back for a job well done and move on to something else besides ethnomusicology.

Unfortunately, many academics are institutionalized (including myself). We live our professional lives as if the world revolves around our university. We enter the institution at an early age and learn to depend on it for all of our needs; the ivory walls blind us to the problems of the world outside and allow us to imagine that our internal debates on methodological and theoretical issues make the world better. Unfortunately, we interact almost exclusively with other academics that share the same myopic view.

I admit to these tendencies and so am doubly grateful that my graduate education was tempered by my day job. As a social worker I came in contact with a multitude of dynamic, selfless people committed to making the world a better place on a daily basis. Indeed, many of my most rewarding experiences as an ethnomusicologist have come as a result of talking to people outside academia. And the greatest inspiration has often been sparked by an idea from an unlikely source. Three such encounters led to my dissertation research on corridos (Mexican ballads) and the war on drugs (see Alviso 2002).

While researching a dissertation topic, I began by making a list of community leaders I respected highly. I had already discussed potential topics with my university advisors and wanted to get outside input on areas where my interest in global music might intersect with pressing social issues. Many of the leaders I spoke with shared similar concerns: racism, discrimination, fractured families, meager economic opportunities, poor education, and the lack of a voice for the poor and disadvantaged. One memorable interlocutor was the Reverend Cecil Murray of the First African Methodist Episcopalian (AME) Church in Los Angeles. He said that if there was something I could do about the way the war on drugs was ravaging Latino and African-American families, I would be doing something that would make a big difference in our community. This conversation stuck with me, but I could not figure out how to connect it to music—until a student of mine supplied the missing link.

During a presentation on corridos, a student in one of my music appreciation classes discussed the genre known as *narcocorridos:* Mexican ballads about drug smugglers. I had not been aware of this genre nor known of its immense popularity in Mexico and among Mexican immigrants in the U.S. It would not be long before I would find out that my brother also had a close connection to these songs.

It's no secret that many people who go into social work and psychology do so to exorcise their own personal demons. Ninety-nine percent of the social workers, psychologists, and therapists I've met come from dysfunctional families. The call to be a caretaker often begins with one's own struggles: because of my brother I have been acquainted with issues of violence, crime, and prisons for as long as I can remember.

When I was about five years old, I saw my brother and some friends playing ball a block away from home. My brother threw a ball and it missed its target, smashing one of our neighbor's windows. All of the other kids ran, except me. When an upset woman burst outside and asked me who had broken her window, I didn't hesitate for an instant. I told her, "My brother broke it." She asked me where I lived and I took her home with me. My mother was furious. My dad said nothing, but I could see in his eyes that I had done the right thing. My father replaced the window. In many ways, I had already chosen my path in life.

My parents divorced when I was eight years old. The breakup was most difficult for my brother, who was fifteen at the time. He turned to drugs. Since then, he has spent most of his adult life in prison for various drug offenses. During my childhood, I learned more about prison life than any child should ever know. Once, a friend of my brother's came to my father's house and had dinner with us. After the meal, he helped me wash dishes. I noticed that he used hot water, but no soap. When I asked about it, he said, "This is the way we do it in the joint!" I can still remember the sound of his raspy voice and how angry it made me. I wasn't ready to leave the world of kickball behind and face the harsh realities of life. But I had already chosen my path. I was to go the opposite way of my brother. I was to work hard on my studies, go to college, take care of my family, and be strong. To this day, every single time I wash dishes I hear that raspy voice echo in my head: "This is the way we do it in the joint!" And when I hear it I laugh and feel sad all at once.

My brother has now spent the greater part of his life behind bars. On one visit, I told him about my student's presentation on narcocorridos. He said that he knew of the genre and that there was a group of musicians in his prison who occasionally presented concerts and wrote, sang, and played this music for other inmates. Again I was surprised to find inspiration for my work so close to home, this time from a member of my immediate family. Finally all the pieces were falling into place and I had found a way to connect a pressing social issue—the "war on drugs"—to a music culture. The subject matter of today's corridos and their timeliness and relevance to transnational issues of power, race, domination, economics, crime, and family make them a potentially valuable and relevant research topic, one that could have far-ranging implications for public policy. In retrospect, it made sense that I found this topic close to my own experience. We are likely to be most knowledgeable about issues that have touched us personally. And with issues such as these we ultimately possess a higher degree of investment and commitment in working toward solutions.

I spent nearly a year doing research at Terminal Island Federal Correctional Institution in Long Beach, California. What difference did my research make? So far the main difference has been with the

songwriters themselves. I came to see how these songs were an important vehicle for these inmates to come to terms with their mistakes and find a path to redemption so that they could endure their sentences and begin to rebuild their lives. My interest in their corridos validated their expression and inspired new songs. But a larger part of my "making a difference" will involve telling and retelling the stories and songs of these inmates to a wider audience that will hopefully add to the chorus of voices calling for reform of our harsh drug policies. This part of my applied work still continues.

Recently I became Chair of the Society for Ethnomusicology's Applied Ethnomusicology Section. I began an e-mail group so that ethnomusicologists and others could exchange information, ideas, and research about applied ethnomusicology. In one strand of discussion, Amy Catlin put forward her definition of applied ethnomusicology. She promoted the idea that applied ethnomusicology is "ethnomusicology with a sense of purpose, and the purpose is to engender change, to participate fully as scholars in the world of practitioners, and to collaborate with them in the design and creation of new modes of musical being, using all the intellectual tools available to the otherwise 'normal' ethnomusicologist" (Catlin 2001). I would agree with Catlin and suggest that, as ethnomusicologists, we need to go even further than musical being. When we define ethnomusicology, we talk of it as the study of music as culture. So are not ethnomusicologists involved in the total being (i.e., the total individual, the total culture) and not just the musical being? We study—i.e., work with—whole cultures, whole societies, and whole people. Period. And most of the people we work with are not as well off as ourselves. Many live in poverty and lack the basic resources needed to overcome their precarious existences. Yet, as ethnomusicologists, when we are asked to involve ourselves further in social problems or help our research subjects with the most basic needs, we often shrink back, telling them, "Sorry, I just study music!"

Many ethnomusicologists might respond to this call to be involved in extra-musical activities by saying that working to improve the musical lives of the people we work with will affect their lives in general. That may be true at times, but real change most often involves

more than good intentions—it involves extensive collaboration and considerable planning. If we don't collaboratively design and pursue research projects that are musical *and* specifically directed at the heart of the most pressing issues our research subjects face, real change is not likely to happen.

Thus I would argue that the purpose of research should be toward some end that will benefit humanity, including the people we take from—a concept many call *reciprocity.* Anything less only serves to perpetuate unequal relationships and cultural hegemony. Too often, ethnomusicologists acknowledge and analyze the issues faced by the people they work with, yet downplay a responsibility to help them. It's like studying the interesting sounds made by drowning mosquitoes. As ethnomusicologists, we could document those sounds all we want and even get them heard more widely. But these efforts would do little to change the mosquitoes' predicament. In the end, they are still drowning.

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