

## A Conversation with Jeff Todd Titon

*Interviewed by John Fenn via e-mail  
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**JF:** What's been your involvement with applied ethnomusicology so far? You can speak generally on this, as well as specifically on things like the "public interest" issue of *Ethnomusicology*, the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) Applied Ethnomusicology Section, your teaching, or projects you've done.

**JTT:** I've done different kinds of applied ethnomusicology, much of it in connection with my academic work as a professor and research scholar in folklore and ethnomusicology. As a festival presenter for Old Regular Baptists at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival I've been a music-culture broker. As a member of the Folk Arts Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts I've helped make and implement cultural policy on traditional musics in the USA. As an album producer for blues musicians Lazy Bill Lucas and his friends, for old-time fiddler Clyde Davenport, and for the singing of Old Regular Baptists, among others, I've made field recordings and helped publish well-documented LPs, cassettes, and CDs that benefited those people and their music-cultures. As a grant writer I've gotten communities money and training so that they could record, preserve, and transmit their musical heritage. I've produced concerts and given lectures to the general public designed to promote and celebrate various kinds of community music. One of the courses I teach each semester at Brown is free and aimed at the local community: an old-time string band ensemble that is a gift to anyone who wants to learn and play. As a researcher, writer, documentary photographer, and filmmaker, I've aimed many projects at the academic community but others toward those largely outside of academia. At the moment, for example, with support from computer experts at my university, I'm producing a DVD featuring the life and chanted or "whooped" preaching (on video) of

the Rev. C. L. Franklin, the most popular Black Baptist preacher of his generation and the father of singer Aretha Franklin. With assistance from an NEH Fellowship I was able to visit with Franklin twenty-five years ago and record those videos; this is the first time they'll be available to the Black communities and the general public. I'm also interested in university music education, and *Worlds of Music*, the collaborative textbook that I conceived and have edited through four editions (along with translations into Italian and Chinese) has been the most influential and largest selling introduction to ethnomusicology since its publication in 1984. I'm the author or editor of seven books and a Fellow of the American Folklore Society; but at the same time, I practice and advocate public folklore and applied ethnomusicology. Having a job in the academic world helps me do both.

When I studied ethnomusicology in my Ph.D. program at the University of Minnesota (1965-71), applied ethnomusicology was not a part of the curriculum. Alan Merriam and Bruno Nettl had just written major books—*Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964) and *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1966)—and these, which between them attempted, with very different emphases, to map out the discipline, were aimed entirely at research scholars. My academic courses, qualifying exams, and dissertation all were part of a sequence leading to a career in teaching and research—that is, theoretical work; and all this, ironically, came at a time when many of my friends and I took part in the era's sociopolitical activism: Civil Rights, Black Power, the Women's Movement, and the Antiwar Movement.

I fell into applied ethnomusicology during this same period as a consequence of my musical apprenticeship with Lazy Bill Lucas, JoJo Williams, Sonny Boy Rogers, Baby Doo Caston, and Mojo Buford. They were blues musicians who'd had some success in Chicago in the 1950s and who'd come to the Twin Cities in the early 1960s. I thought I could learn from them and was grateful for their taking me in. What, I wondered, could I give them in return for their generosity? Eventually, I figured out I might be able to help their careers. I interviewed them for a course project. Not only was my ethnomusicology professor, Alan Kagan, genuinely interested, but English blues magazine editors

were fervently so; and soon the tape-recorded interviews were published in *Blues Unlimited*. The ensuing publicity got Bill an invitation to play at the 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival, and he earned more money from this gig than he ever had before. The magazine publicity also resulted in two record albums of Bill and his friends that were published in France, as well as a 1974 LP in the USA on the Philo label.

While I was playing rhythm guitar in Lazy Bill's blues band I learned a lesson in applied ethnomusicology. It was early fall, 1970. We'd been asked to participate in a Black musical revue to take place at the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre. *Dat Feelin'* strung performances together to show the history of Black music in North America. The revue was written by a prominent local Black historian, Milt Williams. Williams staged the blues band performance in a slave hut. During rehearsal I asked Williams if he really wanted a white boy in there, and with some amusement he said that since I was in Bill's band, I'd best accept the consequences. Subsequently I questioned Williams about his knowledge of blues history: after all, no scholar thought blues had existed before the 1890s. He replied that the scholars must have their heads in the sand (though that isn't exactly what he said): since slaves obviously had the blues, the location in the slave hut was appropriate. In this case my attempt to apply scholarship failed, and as a consequence I went on display at the Twin Cities' most prestigious concert arena playing blues in a slave hut. Of course, I understood that the scholars had musical form in mind when defining blues, whereas Williams took a broader view and defined it as a feeling, not a form.

That was applied work, and I suspect it's no different from what a great many ethnomusicologists have done all along as it grows out of our relationships with the musicians and community people we get to know. Even when our primary object is research and the production of knowledge for the academic world, long-term fieldwork does bring us into reciprocity relationships and friendships, as I had with the Sherfey family (the *Powerhouse for God* project) and the Franklin family (*Give Me This Mountain* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989] and a forthcoming DVD with video documentation of Rev. Franklin's preaching) during the 1970s and beyond. But it wasn't until

I worked for the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife in 1976 that I got a good look at a well-funded, large-scale group effort at applied work. Ralph Rinzler and Bess Hawes were the guiding forces of that Festival then, and much has been written about it. I worked as a Smithsonian Festival presenter again in 1991 and in 1997, when I brought a group of Old Regular Baptists from southeastern Kentucky to demonstrate their lined-out hymnody, the oldest English-language religious musical tradition in the United States (see Jeff Titon, "'The Real Thing': Tourism, Authenticity, and Pilgrimage among the Old Regular Baptists at the 1997 Smithsonian Folklife Festival," *The World of Music* 41/3, 1999, 115-139).

In the summer of 1977 I taught ethnomusicology at Indiana University's Folklore Institute and then began the project in Stanley, Virginia, that ultimately resulted in the *Powerhouse for God* LPs, book, and film. After a post-tenure sabbatical, I resumed teaching at Tufts with a joint appointment in English (folklore) and music (ethnomusicology) and also joined the Folk Arts Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts; and from 1980-1983 I played a small part in their well-organized effort to preserve and promote folk arts, including traditional music, in the United States. A few other ethnomusicologists, including Robert Garfias and Judith McCulloh, served on the Panel at about the same time. Our job was to read grant proposals and decide how to distribute \$3 million annually for festivals, films, recording projects, folklife surveys, radio projects, apprenticeship projects, and the like, and to organizations such as arts councils who were willing to hire folklorists as arts administrators.

In the early 1980s, then, I became part of a community of practitioners with a purpose, organization, methodology, and a passion for applied work: Bess Hawes, Dan Sheehy, Bob Teske, Barry Bergey, and Terry Liu at Folk Arts, plus Ralph Rinzler and his colleagues at Smithsonian Folklife. Folk Arts played a proactive role throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, funding folklorists' positions on state arts councils and other public-interest agencies throughout the United States, where they worked hard to preserve and promote the work of traditional musicians and craftspersons and the communities that nurtured them. The vision, strategy, tactics, and reports from the front

involved us in a movement that brought together folklorists, a small number of ethnomusicologists, folk artists, and museum professionals.

In the 1980s the American Folklore Society (AFS) was far ahead of the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) in its commitment to organized applied work. While primarily engaged with teaching and with documentary and interpretive projects involving religious folklife during that decade, I tried to raise the consciousness of my SEM colleagues about applied ethnomusicology. Some ethnomusicologists were doing applied work then, but it was still outside the academic mainstream. After all, only a small number of ethnomusicologists had served on NEA Folk Arts, and, as I recall, no professional ethnomusicologists except for Tom Vennum (and later Charlotte Heth) were on staff in any of the other Washington agencies. Most knew of Folk Arts as a potential funding opportunity, not as an organization to inspire applied work. The occasional open forums on applied ethnomusicology that were held at SEM conferences in the 1980s foundered for lack of commonality and vision. Some scholars misunderstood proponents of applied work as failed academics rather than as people who seek a different path.

When I was asked to be program chairman for the 1989 annual SEM conference, which took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts, from November 9–12, I accepted partly because with the leeway given to the program chair for special events, I could make sure applied ethnomusicology got onto the program. I invited and convened an evening event, a “Distinguished Forum” on music and politics. It featured Alan Lomax, Charlotte Heth, Charles Keil, Alan Jabbour, and Bruno Nettl speaking freely on the topic to an audience of several hundred. In addition, I invited colleagues from my NEA Folk Arts days to get together on a panel. Entitled “From Perspective to Practice in ‘Applied Ethnomusicology,’” it included the following presenters and papers: Robert Garfias, “What an Ethnomusicologist Can Do in Public Sector Arts”; Daniel Sheehy, “Applied Ethnomusicology as a State of Mind”; Charlotte Heth, “Getting It Right and Passing It On: The Ethnomusicologist and Cultural Transmission”; and Bess Lomax Hawes, “Practice Makes Perfect: Lessons in Active Ethnomusicology.” When in 1990 I became editor of *Ethnomusicology*, this panel formed the starting point for the Fall 1992 special issue of the Journal (vol. 36, no. 3) entitled

“Ethnomusicology and the Public Interest,” which featured articles by Dan Sheehy, Bess Hawes, Martha Ellen Davis, and Anthony Seeger. In my Introduction I tried to frame the field of public ethnomusicology, variously called “applied,” “active,” “action,” “public sector,” and so forth, highlighting the nurturing relationship between fieldwork and public ethnomusicology (320–21).

SEM conferences in the 1990s did seem to include more on applied ethnomusicology, often in the context of fieldwork and ethics; but Bess Hawes, the most powerful leader in applied work then, didn’t affect the majority of my SEM colleagues until her brilliant Seeger lecture at the 1993 annual conference, later published in *Ethnomusicology* (“Reminiscences and Exhortations: Growing Up in American Folk Music,” 39:2 [1995], 179–92).

The 1990s were a period of growth for applied ethnomusicology. I increased my own involvement, encouraging applied work within the Ph.D. program at Brown, and collaborating with the Indian Bottom Association of Old Regular Baptists, in southeastern Kentucky, whose community I began visiting in 1990. Their leader, Elwood Cornett, was concerned to conserve their singing tradition. He viewed me as someone who might help him in that effort, and so we collaborated in a number of ways. He thought that as a professor I could aid them by researching the history of their music and making that history available to them, and I did. We decided to record them singing the old music and then to distribute the recording back into the community. During the recording session, Cornett had asked me to speak to the group about the importance of the project and the history of the music. “It would not be wise,” he told the group after I had outlined the music’s 300-plus-year history, “if our generation became known as the one that lost this music.” In the accompanying notes, Cornett wrote an essay about his community and what it means to him to be an Old Regular Baptist, Professor John Wallhausser of Berea College traced the religious history of this group, and I wrote about their music and its history. It was important for this religious community to find a nonprofit organization to bring it out. Smithsonian Folkways consented to publish the album (Smithsonian Folkways CD SF 40106, *Songs of the Old Regular Baptists of Southeastern Kentucky*) in 1997 to coincide with

the appearance of some Old Regular Baptists at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where they demonstrated their singing. As I write, a second Folkways album is imminent.

Another collaborative effort with the Indian Bottom Association of Old Regular Baptists resulted in a musical self-documentation project. In the early 1990s I wrote a grant proposal to get them good recording equipment and instruction in how to use it, so that they could visit with and make recordings of the older people who, now too old or ill to attend church, nevertheless were in possession of the oldest melodies and, in particular, the melodies for the lined-out portion of the songs. In some instances there was only one person who knew the correct lining tune for a particular song. The proposal was unsuccessful with one folk arts foundation but in the following year it was funded by the NEA. I taught them how to use the equipment and then retreated to the role of consultant. The project was launched mid-decade, and as a result several tunes were rescued and preserved for the community in this fashion.

I'm pleased to see the recent growth in applied ethnomusicology within SEM. A few years ago some of us, including Martha Davis, Doris Dyen, Dan Sheehy, and Tom van Buren, got together to establish an interest group which eventually became the Applied Ethnomusicology Section. The number of panels and papers on the subject, particularly now that they can be sponsored by a section, has increased. Recently the president of SEM, Ellen Koskoff, editorialized in the *SEM Newsletter* in favor of applied ethnomusicology. It's been rewarding to see that applied work is being done in Europe and other parts of the world as well, and that the Smithsonian's folklife office remains deeply involved. Tony Seeger, and now Dan Sheehy, both with long backgrounds in applied ethnomusicology, committed Smithsonian Folkways to applied work. The recently-launched Save Our Sounds project, a collaboration between the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center, promises not only to preserve some endangered recordings in their possession, but also to raise the profile of applied work in the media and among the general public. There are many other contemporary currents, including the first conference devoted to applied ethnomusicology, scheduled for the spring of 2003 and sponsored by my institution, Brown University;

and as world music becomes a more important consumer commodity, ethnomusicologists will have an increasing advisory role—if we want to take it.

**JF:** It seems there has been a recent surge in interest in applied ethnomusicology, especially among graduate students. What do you attribute this to?

**JTT:** Most important, the graduate students I know aren't satisfied with the discipline's confinement inside the academy. "Knowledge for its own sake" seems sterile and unproductive, even selfish. Besides, in many human communities it's no longer possible for an outsider to do research without some *quid pro quo*. The days of colonialists studying the colonized are over, thank heavens. The new fieldwork, with collaboration as the relationship between the fieldworker and the people in the community, is another reason (see Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley, eds., *Shadows in the Field* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997]). More graduate students are working with nearby music-cultures, where reciprocity is facilitated by proximity. The satisfaction of practical results is another reason. In the United States, an increase in so-called "American minority" ethnomusicologists, with consequent commitments to community work in the world outside the academy, is another. Also, the increase in ideologically conscious theory (Marxism, feminism, Afrocentrism, etc.) has led, in many instances, to ideologically committed community work.

**JF:** What are some directions you see applied ethnomusicology going in?

**JTT:** One direction is community work combined with advocacy. The ethnomusicologist can be a problem-solver, a kind of consultant applying knowledge about music in the public interest in order to assist people and communities to reach their goals. The applied worker can provide information to communities about their music and its history, and can aid music-cultures in their efforts to document, interpret, and promote their music. But applied ethnomusicologists shouldn't function as a police force, making sure that people stay



within the boundaries of their traditional music; indeed, the idea that each community possesses a single distinct music has become obsolete in a world where people grow up with access to all kinds of music at the flip of a switch, and where they consequently often have to make a conscious effort to acquire “their own” music. Applied workers can enter the music industry and deal with such issues as intellectual property rights and copyright law. They can form their own music companies.

How can music be put to use to help solve sociocultural problems and bring people closer together? Alan Lomax’s goal was to open the media stream to all musics—for musical and cultural equity. Let everyone’s voice be heard on the media; let all music-cultures be represented in the global media jukebox. This is a noble goal, yet it operates on a capitalistic model in which music is packaged as a commodity, performed by professionals for an audience of consumer connoisseurs. I prefer a vision with far less commodification, one in which amateurs are making music chiefly for the love of it. Bluegrass or old-time pickers in the parking lot, old friends getting together to play jazz, amateur string quartet players, local rock bands practicing in the basement, churches with their amateur choirs, community bands, doo-wop reunions, family gospel music groups, computer music composers—an enormous amount of amateur music-making goes on in the United States. It doesn’t get reported in the media, and it doesn’t require the media to support it.

**JF:** What’s the role or place of applied ethnomusicology in the university/academic setting?

**JTT:** Those who, like Ivan Illich, would de-school society, view universities as the enemy. It’s not possible to work in, or with, a university and hold that view for very long. And so although at times I’ve been frustrated inside the university setting—at the moment my frustration is directed at inappropriate institutional review procedures in human subjects research—I do wish that the academic disciplines I work in wouldn’t habitually discredit amateur work. Some of it is very good and much of it has been useful. In fields like astronomy and ornithology the amateur is respected. Amateur collectors, biographers,

discographers, and historians have contributed mightily to our understanding of music and folklore. Regardless, universities can and do support graduate students and professors doing applied ethnomusicology. We should enlist their aid. Universities, at least the enlightened ones, do want to support the work of their graduate students and junior faculty—how better to nurture them? And they do support the work of their senior faculty. Graduate students will find that faculty are more engaged in applied work than they think.

Many people within the university, whether faculty, administration, or students, care about good relations with the surrounding communities and work to foster them. It used to be that one had to be more on guard against *noblesse oblige*—the notion that those in the universities are bringing the gift of culture to the masses—but most people who work in universities and deal with arts and humanities organizations and community groups and their leaders understand that local partnership is the best way to go. The people making music may not be anxious to be studied, but they are willing to be studied if they can take advantage of our expertise.

Another role for the university is to teach applied ethnomusicology, but here things are a little more difficult. Until applied work is recognized as an accepted part of the discipline it won't be taught, but unless it's taught it's not part of the discipline. Establishing the Applied Ethnomusicology Section of SEM will help. I've been teaching a graduate seminar on the history of ethnomusicological thought for nearly 20 years, and applied ethnomusicology always has been one of the themes and units of the course; but I haven't written much about it. I hope to. I've developed and taught a course in applied ethnomusicology itself, focused on the local music-cultures. Carol Babiracki also taught it when she was at Brown; she'd done applied work in Minnesota. I'm sure other ethnomusicologists have been doing the same kind of teaching, but not many people know about it; no one is chronicling it. Then, too, universities can sponsor conferences, museum exhibitions, festivals, and so forth with genuine community involvement.

**JF:** What do you see as the crossover between applied ethnomusicology and public folklore? What about the divergences?

**JTT:** Applied ethnomusicologists and public folklorists have similar motives, methods, and goals. One obvious difference is that most academic folklorists aren't much concerned with music. Public folklorists do more work with music-cultures than their academic colleagues, but they're also very much involved with folklife and other forms of expressive culture. Folklorists are attempting, with occasional success, to influence mainstream cultural and economic policy. Today, public folklore promotes cultural tourism. That is, folklorists are showing communities concerned with economic development, particularly in light of the decline of manufacturing jobs, that tourist attractions such as folk festivals, ethnic food fairs, exhibits, and the like which feature expressive culture can bring a good deal of money into the local economy. For example, the National Folk Festival was held in Bangor, Maine, last summer, the local community supported it strongly, and after it was over the *Bangor Daily News* editorialized that the festival combined business and pleasure, concluding that it was also a great economic boon to the city.

Ethnomusicologists should consider promoting music-cultural tourism, but do we really want to encourage communities to think that the best use of their music is as a display for tourists? Do we want to encourage competition among musical groups as they try to be the ones chosen for display to outsiders? We know that if the primary audience is outsiders, the musicians will learn how to play for that audience. Of course, in many parts of the world, as among the Gorale of the Tatra Mountains of Poland, musicians have been doing this for many decades. They have a music for tourists and another for themselves—and they can negotiate the boundaries perfectly well, thank you. Still, as I contemplate the situation in the United States, professionalization in music is encouraged when cultural tourism is the goal, and professionalization quickly becomes commercialization. For those of us who, like me, prefer to encourage musical amateurism, this is not where I want to concentrate my work.

The American Folklore Society was founded primarily as a scholarly society but in the past twenty-five years it has come to reflect the strong presence of public sector folklore, to the point where some lament that many older scholars no longer attend the annual meetings. This rise

of public folklore has coincided with a decline in the number of college and university positions for academic folklorists, and concern about the future of folklore studies in the American academic world. Ethnomusicology, on the other hand, has a growing base in the better music departments and schools of music, and SEM does not have to worry about a decline in the number of academic positions. Instead, that number has increased in the past twenty-five years and promises to increase in the near future as well. Applied ethnomusicologists are finding a place in SEM. Rather than opposing the scholars in the Society, I hope that applied ethnomusicologists will learn a lesson from AFS and find ways to engage the scholars in productive dialogue under the same tent.

**JF:** What's the scope of applied ethnomusicology? (A big question, I know . . . )

**JTT:** Yes, a big question, and an important one because definitions always tend to exclude. To me, ethnomusicology is the study of people making music. Applied ethnomusicology, then, is the application of that study: beyond mere documentation, beyond interpretation, beyond theory-building, and toward the solution of practical problems in the world outside the academy. It's not helpful to ask of applied work, "But is it really ethnomusicology?" That is not an innocent question; it's a strategy for marginalizing applied ethnomusicology. Some anthropologists make distinctions between *applied anthropology* (that is, the applied work that is done by academic anthropologists) and *practicing anthropology* (that is, the applied work done by people who are employed outside the academy). The practicing anthropologist may not be called an anthropologist in his or her job, or be "doing anthropology" per se, but anthropological training is brought to bear in solving practical problems. The distinction could be useful in ethnomusicology, also, as ethnomusicologists increasingly move into positions outside the academic world.

Many six-ply, steel-belted ethnomusicologists in my generation have been doing applied work ever since we started in the 1960s: Charlie Keil, Steve Feld, Tom Vennum, Dan Sheehy, Tony Seeger, Robert Garfias, Charlotte Frisbie, and Charlotte Heth—just to name a few, and not to mention those who straddled the boundaries between

folklore and ethnomusicology, like Bess Hawes, Herbert Halpert, Ken Goldstein, Bill Ferris, Loyal Jones, Ralph Rinzler, and Alan Lomax—laborers in the same applied ethnomusicological vineyard. And then some in the next generation, like Amy Catlin, Gage Averill, Martha Davis, Doris Dyen, and a host of others, many younger. My apologies to those I've overlooked. It's truly quite a list when you think about it, and although I've confined myself to scholars from the United States, there's a lot that could be said about applied work in other continents, with many practical accomplishments and a history that deserves to be written.

Coming back to add to the definition, then, applied work doesn't just involve participant-observation research in musical cultures, but also collaborations as people in the community take a major role in practical problem-solving having to do with the place of music in the life of the community. Applied ethnomusicology sometimes is a gift and it usually results in some kind of tangible result or product. Examples include musical apprenticeships, cultivation of musical skills, and the transmission of music; musicians-in-the-schools, festivals, radio, television or computer programs; written histories of the music-culture; policy-making on arts councils and other political and cultural agencies; community musical documentation projects; films and videos made for the music-culture and, often, the general public; festivals, parades, and public concert series; arts consultancies; surveys of traditional music with a view to bringing the musicians into contact with one another; museum exhibits and demonstrations; and archival preservation initiatives coupled with repatriating music from archives back to the original communities. With the increasing interest in globalization and the increasing commodification of world music in the marketplace, applied ethnomusicologists have a role to play as never before.