Ethnomusicologists x Ethnomusicologists

A Conversation with Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, Professor Emerita of Ethnomusicology (6 April 2015)

Eileen M. Hayes, Towson University

Lorraine Sakata is the author of Music in the Mind: The Concepts of Music and Musician in Afghanistan (Kent State University Press, 1983, and Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002). She is also producer of Ustad Mohammad Omar: Virtuoso from Afghanistan (Smithsonian Folkways, 2002). From 2006 to 2010, she received two NEH grants to lead a team of RTA (Radio-Television Afghanistan) archivists on a project to digitize the music collection of their extensive archives. Her most recent publication, Afghanistan Encounters with Music and Friends (Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2013) is a memoir of her field research in Afghanistan. Her Pakistan research and publications focus on devotional music and the music at Sufi shrines in Pakistan. Sakata taught in the Ethnomusicology Program at the University of Washington for twenty years, served as chair of the Ethnomusicology Division, associate director of the School of Music at University of Washington, and later, as associate dean of academic affairs, School of Arts and Architecture at UCLA. She “retired” in 2005. The big difference, she says, between being retired and not “is that you no longer receive a salary for the work you do; you continue to work for the love of it.”

EH: Last night, you said that it seemed as though you were looking for the field of ethnomusicology from a very young age. Would you say more about what you meant by that?

LS: Obviously, I didn’t know anything about ethnomusicology until I took ethnomusicology classes at the University of Washington, so when people ask me about it, I tell them that the path that led me to graduate studies in ethnomusicology was seeded by my own family’s cultural heritage. I was born and raised in a small California town called Walnut Grove on the banks of the Sacramento River where my mother was born. The town was racially segregated with separate elementary schools for Whites and Asians until WWII, after which the two schools were combined. The Japanese section of the town contained businesses that served the whole population of Walnut Grove, including my parents’ drugstore that was established by my grandfather in 1907. Although Japanese was widely spoken in Walnut Grove, my parents spoke both Japanese (with grandparents) and English (with children) in the home and at the store. Our family activities were closely tied to the Buddhist church in town. I took piano lessons from age 5 to 18 and played the clarinet in elementary and high school bands, yet my musical tastes were also influenced by the Japanese movies I attended with my grandmother. The main feature was often preceded by a clip of naniwa-bushi, a dramatic story-telling genre accompanied by the shamisen. Although the kids in the audience hated the contorted facial expressions and exaggerated sobbing of female characters, the sound of the shamisen stayed with me and I became a fan of bunraku and kabuki. Years later, when I started teaching elementary music classes in Issaquah, WA, I found a shamisen teacher in Seattle who was teaching university students to play the koto. She suggested that I join her students at the University of Washington where her husband, Professor Shigeo Kishibe of Tokyo University, was a visiting professor at the Center for Asian Arts and in the music department where classes in ethnomusicology were offered. After taking my first few ethnomusicology classes, I knew that I had found the discipline for which I had unknowingly prepared my whole life, quit my day job, and became a full-time ethnomusicology graduate student.

Another reason I chose the path I did was the fact that Walnut Grove was an extremely small town with a population hovering between 725 and 1025. The only place I found an escape from small town living was the county library where I read about far-away, exotic places and adventurous explorers and travelers. It was here in the library that I first read the biography of Genghis Khan, a courageous, ingenious [continued on page 4]
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The “MACSEM Effect”:
SEM Regional Chapters and the Space for Undergraduate Ethnomusicology
Anne Rasmussen, SEM President

Four is the season for chapter conferences and this year I was able to attend MACSEM (the Mid-Atlantic Chapter) in Charlottesville, hosted by our colleagues at the University of Virginia, Michelle Kisliuk, Nomi Dave, Noel Lobley, and their student cohort of helpful volunteers. MACSEM meetings remind me of the proximity of my ethno-neighbors in Virginia and Washington as we renew our vows to “collaborate more.” Our chapter also mirrors the diversity of programs in our field, both public and academic, and of the complementary emphases on graduate and undergraduate ethnomusicology.¹ I hosted my first MACSEM conference in spring of 1997, just a few years after I joined the faculty at the College of William and Mary, so I bristled momentarily when, during our business meeting, someone broached what is for me a sensitive topic.

“Don’t you have to have an ethno program to host MACSEM?”

The question, although innocent enough, implies what I consider to be a continuing bias in our discipline: the idea that ethnomusicology is the concern of graduate students and their professors. The flip side of this assumption has undergraduates participating in the discipline only in survey courses (“Music of X,” “History of Y”), so-called service courses like “Worlds of Music,” and ensembles. This generalized population is peppered with exceptional undergraduates who prove themselves, in the context of a senior thesis or a performance ensemble, to be “graduate student material.”

The generalized professorate of this group is a reluctant one: graduate students cutting their teeth, contingent faculty who have become department pinch hitters, and full fledged professors who dutifully take their turn in the rotation. In one of his presidential columns, SEM past-president Gage Averill recalls that the efflorescence of ethnomusicology at the undergraduate level combined with funding limitations in higher education triggered a collateral swell of “flexible contract instructors.” He writes, “Many departments and schools considered these courses equivalent to service courses and balked at the idea of hiring research ethnomusicologists. And so over time, the ranks of the casually employed ethnomusicologists grew like topsy.”² As SEM past-president Harris Berger recites the merits of teaching such large introductory courses in his SEM Newsletter column, he summarizes faculty attitudes: “In a wide range of colleges and universities, faculty often perceive such classes as a burden, something that administrators foist upon those instructors who lack the institutional clout to resist teaching them.”³

Back to the MACSEM business meeting: I jumped into the conversation pointing out that all-undergrad institutions, for example William and Mary, and the University of Richmond, have not only hosted MACSEM, but that many of us have successfully mentored undergraduates who have presented excellent papers at our chapter conference over the years.⁴ In fact, I remember early on in my career when I canvassed my MACSEM colleagues to take the word “graduate” out of the call for papers as in: “The Mid Atlantic Chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology welcomes paper proposals from graduate students...” etc.⁵

My plea was only partially based on ideology, because undergraduates were all that I had to work with, and I badly wanted the best of them to participate in MACSEM. I wanted my team to be able to play the game too! As for local arrangements at that MACSEM conference in 1997? Our undergraduates stuffed folders, set up the breakfast snacks, and played music for the welcome reception. They attended the sessions and wrote about them critically for class afterwards. The “MACSEM Effect” must have been powerful because from that first cohort of undergraduate volunteers in 1997, three of them went on to get the Ph.D., from ethnomusicology programs at Indiana, Brown, and NYU.⁶

So many of our colleagues at primarily undergraduate institutions — from Bowdoin to Pomona and from Evergreen to Oberlin to Skidmore and Union — make such an impact on our field, both in terms of their scholarship and their record of SEM governance, that a discussion of the merits of ethnomusicology at the must have been powerful because from that first cohort of undergraduate volunteers in 1997, three of them went on to get the Ph.D., from ethnomusicology programs at Indiana, Brown, and NYU.⁶

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1. MACSEM was established in 1981 and includes members from the states of Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, and the District of Columbia.
4. The College of William and Mary has been host to MACSEM three times. Once, along with then colleague Chris Scales, we held a joint meeting with the Mid Atlantic Folklore Society and most recently with Max Katz, then MACSEM president at the helm of local arrangements. Andy McGraw, at the University of Richmond, has also hosted the meeting and served as MACSEM president.
5. I believe that for a decade or more our call included this sentence: “MACSEM strongly encourages graduate and undergraduate students to apply.” See the call for the University of Richmond meeting in 2013. http://www.ethnocenter.org/MACSEM2013CFPposted. The most recent CFP excluded this sentence.
6. William and Mary alumni Sunni Fass received the Ph.D. from Indiana University, Anne Elise Thomas from Brown, and Tes Slominski from NYU.
Sakata Interview [continued from page 1]

warrior and leader of his people. Without knowing anything about Mongolia or about his notorious and disreputable reputation in the West, he instantly became my hero. I felt a kind of affinity to the Mongolians and yearned to live in yurts and ride horses across the wide, open steppes of Mongolia and Central Asia. This young girl’s dream later led me to conduct fieldwork research in Afghanistan among the Hazaras (reputed to be descendants of Genghis Khan) at a time when access to Mongolia and Central Asia were denied to Americans.

EH: You mentioned your early family life. I remember attending the funeral service for your father, many years ago, when I was one of your graduate students at the University of Washington. Can you talk about the formative role your parents played in your early life and how their influence continued throughout your professional life?

LS: My father was an issei, born in Japan in 1902 and came to the US with his parents and brothers to work as farm laborers. He was 16 at the time his family decided to return to their home in Japan; he, however, opted to remain in the U.S. and continue his high school studies and eventually go on to earn a degree in pharmacy at USC. My mother, a nissei, was born in Walnut Grove in 1907. She, as the eldest of three living children (all girls), took on the responsibility of carrying on the family business by earning a pharmacy degree from UC Berkeley in 1929. Soon after, she married my father and the two of them took over the family drugstore, worked long hours every day of the week and raised two children (both girls). Our family’s values were Buddhist values.

My maternal grandfather was a lay Buddhist priest and an early leader of the Japanese community in Walnut Grove. We lived in a house across the street from the Buddhist church/temple where we spent many hours of our social life.

My parents and grandparents have passed almost everything I value in life on to me: the importance of harmony, compassion, and tolerance in life, the need to be responsible for your commitments, and not to be afraid to take risks or to face the unknown. My maternal grandmother lived with us (actually, we lived with her in her home) and she was my closest confidant. She always saw the bright side of things, telling me not to worry if I broke a dish, saying it would make the potter happy. My mother loved being a student and taught me the importance of continuous learning throughout one’s life. And from my parents and sister, I learned to anticipate and welcome the changes and challenges we meet in life.

EH: Your family was interned during WWII, right? I can only imagine that this was a very difficult time for your parents, but I am wondering how you processed this level of discrimination at such an early age.

LS: I was three years old when our family was sent to Amache, an internment camp in southeastern Colorado, and six when we were allowed to leave the camp and return to Walnut Grove. I was too young to understand the pain and suffering that our parents had to endure.

I only remember the horrible winter snow storms, and the hot, dry summer dust and sand storms, as well as the communal aspects of camp life: eating meals in the mess hall, washing and bathing in the common bathroom, latrine and laundry room. My parents, who were then at the prime of their lives, never complained to us about the discrimination they must have encountered, nor the injustice of the imprisonment the family had to endure. The only act of resistance on my mother’s part was her refusal to work in the camp hospital pharmacy alongside my father who worked for a salary of $19 a month. Instead, she used her time in camp to take as many classes as she had time—classes in Japanese flower arranging, sewing, bridge, Japanese poetry, etc.

For a woman whose life was devoted to her business and career and who worked tirelessly everyday of her adult life, this simple act of saying “no” spoke volumes.

The fact that I grew up in a Japanese community—whether in Walnut Grove, CA, or in Amache, CO—may have spared me from feeling the pangs of discrimination because, for the most part, I was separated and shielded from a world of people who did not know me and who did not want to know me. Even as a student at Berkeley, I lived in a close campus community of students who had little dealings with the off-campus world. In our junior year, six of us decided to live in apartments off campus. To my surprise and dismay, I found that some places for rent were denied to us when the landlord saw that Japanese Americans were part of the group wanting to rent their apartments. I left Berkeley just a few years before the beginning of the Free Speech Movement and the student activism it engendered. I always felt that I lived my life “in between” significant times. I was either unknowingly ahead of the times or behind the times. I viewed the Black Power movement from afar with awe and admiration and felt guilty for not getting more directly involved with efforts to promote Asian American studies on university campuses.

EH: Your formal music lessons began at the internment camp?

LS: I started taking piano lessons in Amache when I was five and continued until I graduated from college. While in elementary school, I was taught to play the clarinet in order to join the school band. My high school band teacher encouraged me to apply to Oberlin (his alma mater) to continue my studies in music, but I was not yet ready to traverse uncharted waters and instead followed my mother’s and sister’s footsteps by enrolling at the University of California at Berkeley. I entered UC as a history major, but changed my major to music soon after taking and acing my music courses.

EH: You are widely known by students for your work in Afghanistan – Music in the Mind really, but Afghanistan wasn’t always the focus of your interest. Wasn’t your master’s thesis initially about the South Indian genre of varnum?

LS: Although it was initially my interest in Japanese shamisen that led me to... [continued on next page]
Sakata Interview [continued from previous page]

ethnomusicology, I quickly became enamored with music from different parts of the world. Aside from taking shamisen lessons from artists from Japan, I took lessons on the mridangam and vina from visiting artists, T. Ranganathan and S. Ramanathan. I developed an interest in the music of South India, and chose the varnam as the topic for my Master’s thesis. While writing the thesis, I learned that Fulbright scholarships were available for study in Afghanistan so I applied. To my great surprise, I was awarded the grant before I had time to finish my thesis. I was at the first crossroad of my academic life. I was advised to turn down the scholarship and finish my thesis before “traipsing” off to Afghanistan. I, on the other hand, felt that I was given a chance to pursue my lifelong dream of living and working among the Hazaras, surrogates for the Mongolians I dreamed about long ago. I opted to follow my heart. My master’s thesis was on the music of the Hazaras of Afghanistan. I later returned to Afghanistan to continue my research on the Afghan concepts of music and musician for my Ph.D. dissertation.

Although my interest in Afghanistan has never lessened, opportunities for research in other areas came my way after I started teaching. I took the opportunities to work in Rajasthan with Komal Kothari, to teach and work in Pakistan with Adam Nayyar and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, and to advise and work with Farogh Azizi in Tajikistan.

EH: You have always been very open about Tom’s (Sakata’s husband and a retired Boeing engineer) contributions to your work. Some scholars aren’t as transparent about that. Would you say more about your partnership with Tom as you have travelled to places as various as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, etc?

LS: To tell you the truth, I don’t think I would have been able to undertake the type of fieldwork necessary for my research in Afghanistan without Tom. From the very start of our marriage, he supported my decision to pursue post-graduate studies and even interrupted his career at Boeing by taking a leave twice to accompany and help me with my work in Afghanistan and a third time at Boeing by taking a leave twice to accompany and help me with my work in Afghanistan and a third time when he, our son and I went to work in Rajasthan. Even though the 1960s and 70s were relatively peaceful times in Afghanistan, it would have been difficult for a lone, young woman to travel in remote regions of Afghanistan because her gender and sexuality would be perceived as dangerous to the men who interact with her. There is something less dangerous about men interacting with older (post-menopausal) and professional (teachers, doctors) women. Tom always took the lead by introducing himself first and secondly me as his wife. As his wife, I could sit, speak and eat with the men and visit with the women, but when my friendship with the women of a family became too intimate, I lost some of my access to the men’s world. I attribute our acceptance into Afghan homes and their communities to the fact that Tom was (and is) friendly and able to put people at ease. Tom was admittedly my opener, basket carrier, photographer, and fix-it man. We were inseparable; we were a team.

I faced the second crossroad of my professional life when I was asked to participate in a multidisciplinary study of Pakistani folk culture and found out that Tom would not be able to go to Pakistan with me. I faced a crisis of confidence; my identity as an independent, strong, female professor of color was to be tested. My work in Pakistan would either affirm my legitimacy or expose me as a phony. With great trepidation, I agreed to go to Pakistan on my own for a period of three months. It did not occur to me then that my status as a young wife and student had morphed into that of an older woman and university professor. This change of identity accorded me a level of respect that I had never before experienced and allowed me access to places and events that are not normally open to outsiders.

EH: How do you deal cognitively, emotionally, philosophically with the fact that many of the musicians and important persons you have worked with and interviewed over the years are no longer with us – that they were killed through armed conflict in the areas in which you worked?

LS: The Taliban’s cruelty toward musicians, women, and the arts in general is what brought the world’s attention to the sad conditions of daily life in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Those of us who had worked with Afghan musicians before the Soviet invasion, the civil war and the rise of the Taliban tried to reach out to the few musicians who left Afghanistan to become refugees in Pakistan, Europe, Canada and the United States. But we were less successful in our attempts to aid those who remained behind.

Many of us were aware of a large collection of music recordings in the archives of Radio Afghanistan and bemoaned the thought of the Taliban destroying the archive tapes in the same manner they destroyed music cassettes found in the bazaars. In 2002, a year after the fall of the Taliban in Kabul, word came that the contents of important cultural institutions (including the Radio Afghanistan Archives) had been heroically hidden and saved by those who were charged to safeguard them in the first place. We all breathed a sigh of relief, but more than relief, I felt we were given a second chance to help the Afghans preserve their musical heritage. Having survived the threat of destruction by the Taliban, the tapes were still at risk from physical deterioration or from natural disasters. I felt the urgency to have the collection digitized. I sought funding from NEH to purchase equipment for the archives and provide training in the digitization process for the archivists. The project began in 2006 and ended in 2010 when the funding stopped, but I am told that the work of digitizing their complete audio collection beyond the music tapes continues.

ES: In the late 1980s, the graduate students in our program clamored for a class on Gender and Music and you were willing to teach it. What was it like to contribute to the Koskoff volume and how do you feel about the progress ethnomusicology has made in terms of gender studies? [continued on next page]
Sakata Interview [continued from previous page]

LS: I knew next to nothing about gender studies when I started teaching at the university, but the interest in women's studies on campus was growing rapidly at that time. As the only woman on the ethnomusicology faculty, I felt that I needed to keep up with the literature and attend conferences and events that would keep me engaged with colleagues who were focusing on the importance and impact of gender studies on their own disciplines. It was at one such conference on women and music where I was introduced to Ellen Koskoff by my friend JaFran Jones (my classmate at the University of Washington). It was JaFran who suggested that I contribute an article for inclusion in Koskoff’s seminal work, Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective. When graduate students asked me to offer a course on gender and music, I still lacked the confidence to teach the course on my own, so I promised to lead a class in which both students and teacher would learn from each other by sharing and relying on each other’s resources, including knowledge and experience garnered from classes in anthropology and women studies. Anthropology professor Sue-Ellen Jacobs became an important advisor to the class.

EH: I will always remember your opening lecture to our music cultures of the world class. What I experienced was a beautiful Japanese-American woman scholar who was an expert in the music of Afghanistan talking about African American music and the blues. It was one of the most inspiring things I had seen. Would you talk about ways you have thwarted the expectations of others throughout your life and career?

LS: I’ve always tried to avoid living up to other people’s expectations of me unless I felt that those same expectations were of my own making. I was often asked to take on extra committee work that involved interdisciplinary programs or advisory committees for minority faculty or students but I always felt honored rather than put upon to have a chance to have input on university policies that affected us all.

EH: We spoke earlier about things you miss about your spacious, welcoming home in Seattle. It sounds as though, at this point in your life, your regrets have nothing to do with career or research.

LS: I’m happy to say that everything did not go the way I expected or wanted in my career—how boring that would have been. Instead, I led (and continue to lead) an exciting, eventful, and rich life surrounded by family, friends, and strangers who become friends. I am even happier to say that I have no major regrets about my life as an ethnomusicologist. I still remind myself that I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to make a career out of doing what I love the most—being an ethnomusicologist, or less grammatically correct, but more heartfelt, “doing ethnomusicology.”
The Myth of the Lonely Only

Complementing the bias that favors graduate ethnomusicology is the "lament of the lonely only." I have little tolerance for the myth propagating the falsehood that ethnomusicologists can most effectively practice ethnomusicology in graduate programs among lots of other like minds. I thrived as a "lonely only" for the first decade of my career during which I had free rein to create a family of courses at various levels, many of them cross-listed in Anthropology, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, and American Studies. As the new kid on campus, I was generously embraced by senior, (and I might add quite distinguished, male, and potentially intimidating) colleagues in Middle Eastern Studies, a program that I eventually directed and helped to reimagine and revise. Much of my public face was due to the Middle Eastern Music Ensemble that I taught (stubbornly, and for much too long without compensation). In other words, my solitude encouraged my collaboration with an interdisciplinary cohort of colleagues. Eventually, in what I still consider to be a clever coup, I convinced my department to hire an “Americanist-ethnomusicologist” in 2004, when we had the opportunity to search for a new colleague who could “cover” our courses in American popular and jazz music. With an ethnomusicologist in this position, I argued, we could deliver the curriculum that was “on the books” and benefit from new (ethnomusicological) expertise, in terms of both geographical region and methodology. Did we have a program? No, but we did get another ethnomusicologist.

In his interview with Bruno Nettl for the SEM Newsletter, Dan Neuman asked about program building. To preface his question to Nettl, Neuman outlined three models in the United States.

At one extreme, ethnomusicology is organized as a track in a musicology department (with possibly a way via an anthropology department) as at the University of Illinois, and at the other extreme, a wholly separate department as at UCLA. In between there are various ways of “belonging” but keeping a somewhat separate identity as at University of Washington, Texas, Indiana and Wesleyan to mention a few examples.

In Neuman’s outline, undergraduate ethnomusicology is invisible. Shouldn’t we make a little more conceptual space for undergraduate ethnomusicology in our profession?

Lonely No Longer

It is true that when I got my first and what has turned out to be my only tenure track job, I thought William and Mary would just be a place-holder: a job where I could develop my chops until I could land a real position in a real ethnomusicology program with graduate students. Given the radical adjustments that are going on in the academy, with our junior colleagues wondering if they are ever to going to get any job, there is no question that today a job in an undergraduate-centered department is a “real position.” To return to Bosse’s rejoinder to the CMS Manifesto: “These programs are where some of the most innovative undergraduate educational initiatives are taking place, and I urge faculty of doctoral programs… to explore these programs, draw upon them for models, and to encourage

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1. These non-majors include many student musicians from the Middle Eastern Music Ensemble whom I work with or mentor in various capacities.

2. SEM Newsletter 49/3, 2015:4-5.

your best graduate students to take positions in them.”

Right now at William and Mary we have four ethnomusicologists (one of them in Anthropology, one of them in Latin American Studies) along with four credit-bearing ensembles that are peripheral to the Western Art Music canon. Potentially, the undergraduate bon vivant of ethnomusicology could pursue as diverse a portfolio of coursework in our undergrad curriculum as they could in certain graduate program scenarios. Yet, in spite of robust undergraduate ethnomusicology at institutions of all kinds, and in spite of the many undergraduate-oriented texts by the best thinkers in our field that have canonized the study of world music, I think we still suffer from the bias that the real thinking in our discipline happens primarily in the context of the graduate seminar and in mentorship toward the Ph.D. dissertation.

With apparently shrinking opportunities for Ph.D. ethnomusicologists to fully join the academy in tenure track positions, how should our mission change? Rather than reactive victimization by the corporatization of the academy, how can we proactively participate in the changing political economy of academia? I believe that making ethnomusicology absolutely central to the undergraduate experience and making the experience of undergraduate pedagogy, performance, and research part of our profession may be part of that answer. There is no question that graduate students are more mature, and perhaps better partners in the intellectual projects that we operationalize. And there is no question that those grad students need to perform their research in the context of our regional conferences, but I wondered after the MACSEM meeting last month whether we could not think forward about how to make a somewhat more welcoming and imaginative space for our undergraduate colleagues at that most important of our community’s rituals, the academic conference.

If becoming an ethnomusicologist is something that can only happen through graduate study with the Ph.D. as the final stride, I think we’re missing out on an important market and a crucial branding opportunity. Crude though it may sound, in the corporate culture of the academy it is imperative that we name what we do at every turn and that we cultivate undergraduate students whose ultimate goal may not include the Ph.D. but who nevertheless choose to identify with our discipline. In addition to those of my students who have gone on to pursue a Master’s or Ph.D. in ethnomusicology and related fields, there are also many who, having self-identified as ethnomusicologists as undergrads, have gone in complementary fields including arts management, music production, instrument design and construction, library sciences, digital humanities, and, of course, performance.

If we want to think forward to careers that build on a strong foundation in ethnomusicology but don’t necessarily culminate in a tenure-track teaching position, I think we need to embrace the impact that we can have nurturing our youngest colleagues and acknowledge that their strong foundation in ethnomusicology may begin and may end with the undergraduate experience. The conspicuous absence of undergrads at our recent chapter conference got me wondering if we are doing enough to invite our youngest colleagues into our world. Call it: “The MACSEM Effect.”

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2. Jonathan Glasser is an anthropologist specializing in the music of North Africa. Michael Iyanaga is on the faculty as a two-year Mellon post-doc in Latin American Studies. At this writing, our ensembles include the Middle Eastern Music Ensemble, the Appalachian Music Ensemble, the Music of India Ensemble, and the Brazilian Ensemble.
Greetings from Washington, DC

Clifford Murphy
Folk & Traditional Arts Director, Multidisciplinary Arts, National Endowment for the Arts

It may seem strange to think of ethnomusicologists working for the government, but I’m one of three here at the National Endowment for the Arts, and we have a fourth ethnomusicologist working upstairs from us at the National Endowment for the Humanities. That’s more ethnomusicologists in our building than in most music departments, and less than our federal peers (the American Folklife Center and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife & Cultural Heritage).

Ethnomusicologists have a long history with government, from our disciplinary ancestors, such as Frances Densmore, to our founding scholars, such as Charles Seeger, and onward into the present with Dan Sheehy and a multitude of others. My own personal journey was inspired by the work Alan Lomax carried out in service of the Library of Congress and has brought me into a professional sphere — that of the state folklife programs, and the National Heritage Fellowships — created largely by Bess Lomax Hawes (Alan’s sister) at the National Endowment for the Arts.

I’m a former working musician. From 1994 until 2003, I was a singer, songwriter, and guitarist for a rock band that — to borrow a phrase from Alejandro Escovedo — earned more miles than money. Still, we were able to see a good portion of the world and the miles between shows were often occupied with the collective questions: “Why are we doing this? Why do we care so much about this?” (And sometimes, “Why did you book this gig?”) Eventually, the wheels came off (literally) and I chose to build a life around music in a different way.

As a kid in high school, I had heard some of Alan Lomax’s field recordings. The barking dogs and slamming doors, the sounds of trucks driving in the background or of the musicians’ breathing — this all sounded familiar: less like the stage and studio driven performances I’d been so focused on and more like the way music sounded when I was playing with friends in our homes. Making those kinds of recordings was the type of job I wanted to get — whatever it was called. I learned it was called ethnomusicology (though it is also called folklore), and I learned that many of the questions ethnomusicologists were asking were the same ones we discussed in the band over long drives between shows.

As a prospective grad student, I sat in on one of Jeff Titon’s seminars on the history of ethnomusicological thought — they were discussing/debating Lomax’s “The Land Where the Blues Began” — and I was sold. Just prior to starting my graduate studies at Brown, I attended the first-ever conference on applied ethnomusicology, where I met three longstanding ethnomusicologists from federal service — Dan Sheehy, Anthony Seeger, and Judith Gray — and was moved by the notion that ethnomusicology and public service were not only a professional possibility, but an aspiration.

Before embarking on my fieldwork on New England country music — which became the focus of my dissertation — I followed the advice of Jeff Titon and served a summer internship with Maggie Holtzberg, the state folklorist at the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Maggie — who received her undergraduate degree in Ethnomusicology from Wesleyan, and her PhD in Folklore from Penn — not only trained me to make high quality field recordings, she reminded me that music is but a slice (if an important one) of folklife. She also showed me — by example, not by lecture — that the work of a state folklorist was a sustaining, fulfilling occupation. It not only provided a window into the expressive culture of seemingly every cultural community imaginable — from cranberry farmers and auctioneers to oud makers and iconographers — it was also a window into the enormous complexity of civics and the role that real human beings play in making government work for the people.

As my dissertation neared completion, I started the process of pretzelyzing myself — twisting my own interests and background via hand-crafted cover letters to fit into a multitude of university job descriptions. I wanted a job, but I also needed one — my wife and I had two kids by this point — and I was not always applying for positions that were well suited to my strengths. Still, with each letter, I would imagine our family living in New York, or Illinois, or Virginia, or Nova Scotia. This was alternately fun and depressing. The one letter I wrote where I really, truly believed I might actually get the job was for the state folklorist position in Maryland. It was a good hunch.

In the spring of 2008, a few months before defending my dissertation, I moved to Baltimore and began working as the Co-Director of Maryland Traditions, the folklife program of the Maryland State Arts Council (and the longest-running such program in the nation). I spent my days working as a public folklorist, and my nights editing my dissertation between innings at Orioles games at Camden Yards. Working in such a hyper-diverse region as Maryland was like going through grad school all over again, only instead of driving towards a finer point of specialization, I was required to develop a geographic breadth that, like Whitman’s poem, contained multitudes. In this professional setting—where I was doing fieldwork with fox hunters, Malian griots, Mennonite bakers, African-American gospel quartets, quilters, boatbuilders, and Cambodian pinpeat musicians—I learned that one is only doing one’s job when they are off-balance, and using their knowledge deficiencies as a positive point of cultural inquiry.

Last summer when I left my position at Maryland Traditions to join the NEA, I was reminded of what a big country this is, and how many different cultural narratives it contains. Many of these narratives overlap, some conflict, and still others are barely known beyond their immediate communities. I’ve recently spent [continued on next page]
Greetings from Washington  [continued from previous page]

some time at the Pine Ridge Reservation, home of the Oglala Lakota nation, which sits adjacent to that community’s sacred mountains, Paha Sapa (the Black Hills). In the Black Hills, competing narratives are most visible in the carvings of four American presidents at Mount Rushmore and in the emerging carving of Lakota military hero Crazy Horse in Custer, South Dakota. A less majestic, less controversial, and far more elastic mashup of cultural narratives can be heard on the Pine Ridge community radio station, KILI. Deejays speak a mixture of English and Lakota, and a Lakota drum group is as likely to be followed by David Bowie’s “Golden Years” as it is by some contemporary country or hip hop recording.

Listening to hosts Arlo Iron Cloud and Santee Baird on KILI’s Friday morning Wakalyapi Chit Chat Show, you can hear the community hash out issues of cultural and racial identity, debate the role that traditional language might play in revitalizing the community, lampoon cultural appropriation, and explore the dual identity of tribal sovereignty and American patriotism. While this all might sound like a grad school seminar to you, in the hands of Arlo and Santee it is both hilarious and insightful. On a recent Friday, the hosts discussed The Revenant and Hollywood’s history of casting wasichu (non-indigenous) actors in indigenous roles, all while laughing that they were so colonized they couldn’t even imagine a Lakota actor playing the role of General Custer or a British secret agent. Also up for debate was JK Rowling’s new History of Magic in North America, which links a legendary Navajo skinwalker to Harry Potter-style magic. The hosts rejected the notion that this was mythology, recoiled at the idea that their traditional stories were up for grabs for the international culture industry, and then played Jackie Wilson’s “Higher and Higher.”

You will also hear local music — such as the Pine Ridge-based rock band Scatter Their Own, Lakota hip hop artist Frank Waln (from the neighboring Rosebud Reservation), and the late, great Lakota country singer, Buddy Red Bow. These artists have sought international recognition, while using their touring work as an opportunity to educate the public about contemporary indigenous communities. Pine Ridge Reservation is home to approximately 35,000 residents spread across a space the size of Connecticut. Fortunately, an exceptional community radio station, whose original purpose is to connect people across vast rural stretches, stitches together a multitude of identities, ideas, and narratives that coexist within any community. Often this form of community building takes place through songs or the things we discuss in between them.

Certainly, not every ethnomusicologist would enjoy being a public folklorist. But I would encourage all ethnomusicologists — whether graduate students looking to develop fieldwork techniques or tenured professors seeking to connect with diasporic communities — to reach out to their state, regional, and federal folklife programs. These programs — which exist in most states in the USA — contain deep ethnographic resources that have been underutilized by ethnomusicologists.

In the fall of this year, we will have an opportunity to explore these ideas more in depth at the SEM Annual Meeting in Washington DC, where the intersection of public folklore and applied ethnomusicology will be on full display. I look forward to seeing you all there!

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Member News


2016 Cudamani Summer Institute. 28 June-18 July 2016 in the village of Pengosekan, Bali, Dewa Putu. Berata and Emiko Susilo offer a comprehensive program designed for both advanced and beginning players. Study on their seven-tone gamelan Semarandana within their family compound, guest lectures, field trips, and opportunities to play within a village setting. Apply on-line. Deadline: May 1, 2016

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SEM 2016 Prizes Deadlines

The deadline for submissions for the below SEM prizes is April 1, 2016. For more information about prizes and submission procedures, please visit the Prizes area of the SEM website.

21st Century Fellowship. To further excellence in ethnomusicological research through support to highly qualified Ph.D. students for dissertation fieldwork.

Japp Kunst Prize. To recognize the most significant article in ethnomusicology written by a member of the Society for Ethnomusicology and published within the previous year (whether in the journal Ethnomusicology or in another journal or edited collection). The Society will make every effort to draw upon the language expertise of the membership to evaluate submissions in languages other than English.

Judith McCulloh Public Sector Award. To recognize the valuable impact of many types of ethnomusicological work that benefits the broader public and typically engages organizations outside academic institutions.

Alan Merriam Prize. To recognize the most distinguished, published English-language monograph in the field of ethnomusicology.

Nadia and Nicholas Nahumck Fellowship. To help support research on a dance-related subject and its subsequent publication.

Bruno Nettl Prize. To recognize an outstanding publication contributing to or dealing with the history of the field of ethnomusicology, broadly defined, or of the general character, problems, and methods of ethnomusicology.

Klaus P. Wachsmann Prize. To recognize a major publication that advances the field of organology through the presentation of new data and by using innovative methods in the study of musical instruments. The publication may be a monograph, an article, a unified series of articles, or a video/electronic media item.

SEM: Sound Matters

Hosted on the SEM website, Sound Matters offers content on a variety of subjects related to music, sound, and ethnomusicology. We seek lively and accessible posts that provide stimulating reading for both specialists and general readers. We encourage authors to consider this an opportunity to transcend the boundaries of traditional print with brief writings that may integrate hyperlinks and multimedia examples. To submit blogs for consideration, please contact Jim Cowdery.

- Matthew Harp Allen, “Interview with David Park McAllester” (24 August 2015)
- Peter Cooke, Sound repatriation in Uganda “And…er…of course, I…we didn’t just leave it at that.” And a saga from the pre-digital archiving age." Supplementary materials for Cooke’s “A response to Sylvia Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Andrew N. Weintraub’s 'The audible future: Reimagining the role of sound archives and sound repatriation in Uganda’” (Ethnomusicology 69/3). (5 October 2015)
- “2015 in Review”
- Thomas W. Ross, Amir Khan and the South. I (28 March 2016)

SEM: Ethnomusicology Today

Ethnomusicology Today is a podcast series that features stories and interviews aimed at engaging a broad audience of educators, scholars, musicians, and a listening public interested in contemporary issues in global music studies. Ethnomusicology Today Editor: Trevor S. Harvey.

- Episode 1: Tribute Bands and Historical Consiousness with John Paul Meyers.
- Episode 2: Swedish Klezmer and Jewish Identity with David Kaminsky.
- Episode 3: Copyright and Indian Popular Music with Gregory Booth.
- Episode 4: Bollywood Dance Economies with Anna Morcom.
The Education Section continues its annual outreach and in-reach events, evidenced again in Austin 2015 and now in planning for Washington DC 2016. We are chronicling these events and can now verify well over 30 years of SEM conference activity with teachers and their students. The Education Section sponsors three annual outreach events that serve three unique local populations: middle school students, high school students, and local music teachers interested in the pedagogical applications of ethnomusicology.

This year’s Ethnomusicology Goes to Middle School event, in existence since 1994, brought nine scholars to the Bertha Sadler Young Women’s Leadership Academy in Austin, Texas. The presenters shared musical traditions from Haiti, Ireland, Lithuania, the Caribbean, South Africa, the Southern region of the United States, Sicily, and Hawaii with more than 150 sixth-grade girls. Throughout the day, students participated in a series of workshops, engaging with teacher-scholars through song, dance, listening, and instrumental activities. The event was well-received by students, sixth grade teachers, and the hosting music educator, Mr. Louis Alarcon. (See picture)

The third annual Day of Ethnomusicology brought students from Eastside Memorial High School (teacher, Meghan Buchanan) and Stephen F. Austin High School (teacher, Brian Frock) to the conference to participate in workshops, engage in discussion, and learn about ethnomusicology. Dedicated sessions featured ethnomusicologists Michael Bakan (Florida State University) and Patricia Shehan Campbell (University of Washington), as well as UT Austin graduate students Juan Agudelo and Myranda Harris. Education Section leaders Amanda Soto and Sarah Bartolome also engaged students in participatory music-making sessions.

The World Music Pedagogy Workshop is an on-site workshop featuring participatory pedagogical clinics open to local music educators as well as conference attendees. This year, we featured Dawn Corso (University of Arizona), John Lopez (Texas State University), John-Carlos Perea (San Francisco State University), and Sammy Lopez (Texas State University). Participants were treated to interactive sessions on the pedagogy of multicultural song and dance (Corso), Mariachi music (J. Lopez), intertribal powwow music (Perea), and music of the Hispanic Caribbean (S. Lopez).

These annual events continue a critical mission of SEM membership by engaging local children and youth (and their teachers) through participatory music making events. In working in local communities, SEM members are growing a consciousness among musicians and teachers, far beyond the field of ethnomusicology, of music’s presence and power in world cultures. These events also provide graduate students of ethnomusicology and education with opportunities to hone their pedagogical skills and think creatively about considerations for disseminating their research through educational channels. These annual Education Section outreach events have continued to grow and serve both the communities in which SEM gathers and the members of our scholarly society. If you are interested in getting involved with the Education Section or would like to submit a proposal for any of the events described here, please email Sarah Bartolome or visit the Education Section website. The Call for Proposals for the 2016 Education Section events will be issued in April of 2016.

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Colin Harte working with 8th graders on Irish traditional music.

Michael Bakan working with high school students on Balinese Monkey Chant as part of the Day of Ethnomusicology.

Photos by Sarah J. Bartolome
Conference Calendar, 2016-2017

- The Midwest Chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology Annual Meeting, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 8-10 April 2016.
- The UBC Southeast Asia Graduate Student Network, Graduate Student Conference on Southeast Asia, University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver, Canada, 14-15 April 2016.
- “New Currents in Ethnomusicology,” British Forum for Ethnomusicology: Annual Conference, University of Kent, School of Music and Fine Art, 14-17 April 2016.
- Department of Music at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), 19th Annual Graduate Students in Music (GSIM) Conference, New York City, 22–23 April 2016.
- Society for Ethnomusicology, Southwest Chapter (in conjunction with Rocky Mountain Chapters of the AMS and the SMT), University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 22-23 April 2016.
- The Southwest Chapter for the Society for Ethnomusicology spring 2016 meeting held jointly with the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the American Musicological Society and the Rocky Mountain Society for Music Theory, the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 22-23 April 2016.
- American Hungarian Educators Association 41st Annual Conference, University of Maryland, College Park Marriott Hotel & Conference Center 3501 University Blvd E, Hyattsville, MD 20783, 28-30 April 2016.
- The Northeast Chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology, University of Massachusetts, Boston, 7 May 2016
- “Music and Human Mobility,” Faculdade de Ciencias Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal, 7-9 June 2016.
- Popular Music Study Group of the American Musicological Society, Case Western Reserve University, 2016 Junior Faculty Symposium, Cleveland, OH, June 14-16, 2016.
- Nineteenth Biennial IASPM Conference, 26–30 June 2017, University of Kassel, Germany.
- National Women’s Studies Association, Montréal, Québec, 10-13 November 2016.
The Society for Ethnomusicology
Sixty-first Annual Meeting
Washington, D.C.
10-13 November 2016
The Society for Ethnomusicology’s 61st Annual Meeting
Hosted by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings &
The George Washington University

Ethnomusicology Internet Resources

The SEM Website

SEM-L and SEMNotices-L Electronic Mailing Lists. Moderated by Hope Munro Smith, Assistant Professor, Department of Music, CSU Chico, 400 West First Street, Chico, CA 95929-0805, Phone: 530-898-6128, Email: hmsmith@csuchico.edu

Ethnomusicology Websites
American Folklife Center
Association for Chinese Music Research
British Forum for Ethnomusicology
British Library, World and Traditional Music
Canadian Society for Traditional Music / Société canadienne pour les traditions musicales
Comparative Musicology
Ethnomusicology OnLine (EOL), (home site)
Ethnomusicology Review
International Council for Traditional Music
Iranian Musicology Group
Smithsonian Institution: Folkways, Festivals, & Folklife
Society for American Music
Society for Asian Music
UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive
University of Washington, Ethnomusicology Archives
Fondazione Casa di Oriani, Ravenna

SEM Chapter Websites
Mid-Atlantic Chapter
Midwest Chapter
Niagara Chapter
Northeast Chapter
Northern California Chapter
Northwest Chapter
Southeast-Caribbean Chapter
Southern California & Hawai’i Chapter
Southern Plains Chapter
Southwest Chapter

SEM Section Websites
Applied Ethnomusicology Section
Education Section
Gender and Sexualities Taskforce
Popular Music Section
South Asia Performing Arts Section