

Canadian University Music Review

Revue de musique des universités canadiennes

Canadian University Music Review

Theory and Fieldwork

John Shepherd et Beverley Diamond

Volume 19, numéro 1, 1998

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1014602ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014602ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

0710-0353 (imprimé)

2291-2436 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Shepherd, J. & Diamond, B. (1998). Theory and Fieldwork. *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, 19(1), 4–18.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1014602ar>

Résumé de l'article

John Shepherd

This intervention suggests that the recent and welcome emergence of fieldwork as a prominent feature of much current work in popular music studies has deflected attention from an undertaking that characterized the early days of popular music studies: that of developing from within the various protocols of cultural theory concepts to explain the meanings, significances, and affects that music as a socially and culturally constituted form of human expression holds for people. In tracing a shift from theoretical to ethnographic concerns in work carried out in popular music studies by musicologists, ethnomusicologists, social anthropologists, and sociologists, it is suggested that a renewed emphasis on theory in musicological work in popular music studies may be of consequence for the academic study of music as a whole.

Beverley Diamond

In response to the editor's question concerning theory and fieldwork, this colloquy argues that the two are inseparable. Further, the importance of fieldwork in providing "alternative theory" which challenges the consistencies of academic thinking is emphasized. For this reason, the article eschews disciplinary history as a means of tracing important theoretical currents in music scholarship and, instead, presents arguments which confront the hegemonies of any history, any discourse of intellectual continuity, positing incidents which expose the social contingencies of theory.

COLLOQUY/DÉBAT: THEORY AND FIELDWORK

Editors' Note

To inaugurate this feature, we have asked two prominent Canadian music scholars to respond to the following question:

How do you view the relationship between theory and fieldwork in the work that you do, and how do you see them having an impact upon musicology?

While we present the contributions as separate texts, they both complement each other and interact with each other as a type of dialogue, and should be read as such. We invite responses to the following "Colloquy" contributions in the new "Communications" feature.

John Shepherd

My purpose in contributing to the new "Colloquy" section of the *Review* is to suggest that the recent and welcome emergence of fieldwork as a prominent feature of much current work in my own field of popular music studies has unfortunately deflected attention from an undertaking that characterized the early days of popular music studies as a continuing intellectual tradition in the 1970s: that of developing from within the various protocols of extant cultural theory concepts to explain the meanings, significances, and affects that music as a socially and culturally constituted form of human expression holds for people. This undertaking, and the theoretical questions it raises, remain, I believe, of importance to the future of musicology and its place in the academy.

This does not mean, however, that I am arguing for theory at the expense of fieldwork. It was ethnomusicology—a discipline founded on fieldwork—together, later, with popular music studies and its critical approaches, that was responsible for challenging within academic music the notion of art's "autonomy." Further, it has quite reasonably been argued on more than one occasion that to seek explanations for the meanings, significances, and affects that music holds for people without talking to people about their use and understandings of music is to engage in work that in the end can only be speculative. Both theory *and* fieldwork are as a consequence implicated in any attempt to understand the processes through which music is constituted as a social and cultural form of human expression and communication for individual people. Acceptance of this dual role for theory and fieldwork does, however, give rise to two questions: the extent and limits of fieldwork, and the possible ways in which the findings of fieldwork might meaningfully connect with the fruits of theoretical speculation.

It has often been held that the research questions that drive the professional lives of scholars are frequently a consequence of biography, both personal and intellectual. The question that has driven my own life as a scholar is that of music's seeming capacity to instill in people experiences of a quite distinctive order.¹ I have been intrigued from a quite early age by the character of these experiences and the processes that underwrite them. The question that I cannot leave alone is: "how does it all work?" My current interest in the relations between theory and fieldwork is as a consequence motivated by my own biography, both personal and intellectual.

It is important to my polemic to establish that biography can be thought of as a form of fieldwork underwriting theory. The term "biography" refers to an individual's passage through life. "Biography" in its literary form seeks to make sense of this passage. In the course of this passage, and in the context of a series of possibly quite different circumstances, individuals develop preoccupations, concerns, questions, understandings, and sometimes, even, propositions and answers. As a consequence, and whether we like it or not, people theorize. They develop sets of premises about the worlds in which they live which enable them to negotiate everyday realities on the whole successfully. For the most part, these premises remain pretty much taken for granted. They are "routinized" into the dimmer realms of awareness. Premises do, however, come up for examination, adjustment, and even, on occasion, quite radical rethinking, reformulation, and redeployment when people are faced with the unexpected, the paradoxical, the inequitable, and the immediately unresolvable.

I am not sure I can explain why I have since a young age had a dual interest in music and the social. I think that I pushed my interest in music and my quite limited abilities as a musician because I was the youngest in a family of engineers and scientists. It is from this familial background that derives, perhaps, my concern with how things work. My sense of the social came from the relative cultural homogeneity of middle-class England during the 1950s and early 1960s. This homogeneity was on the whole consonant with the output of the culturally and intellectually "highbrow" BBC, as well as with that of *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Observer*, *The Listener*, *The New Statesman*, *The Economist*, and, in somewhat different ways, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*. The cultural and intellectual climate was at the same time grey and sunny, claustrophobic and exciting, predictable yet enriching. It was an atmosphere rendered almost tangible through its imposing density.

With the advent of a younger middle-class generation untouched by World War II—a generation looking to the possibilities of the future rather than celebrating the victories of the past—the sunny, the exciting, and the enriching came to be pitched, at least in our own minds, against the grey, the claustrophobic, and the predictable. The increased disposable income of my class and generation made possible a cultural marketplace whose artifacts and commod-

¹ See John Shepherd, "Music, Culture and Interdisciplinarity: Reflections on Relationships," *Popular Music* 13, no. 2 (1994): 127–41.

ities could be made to give expression to a temporary cultural dislocation. This dislocation was temporary because the Beatles, Carnaby Street, and all the rest of it were soon assimilated by mainstream British culture. Yet, while dislocation had given way to accommodation, mainstream British culture was never quite the same. In the minds of young and old alike, there was a sense of rebirth, of a renaissance in style and culture.

To be a budding student of music and the social at this time was to heighten the sense of dislocation and lessen that of accommodation and rebirth. New forms of popular music—"our music"—seemed to be at one with social and cultural change. "Our music" was being taken seriously by the middle-class press, as witnessed by "William Mann's famous review of the Beatles in *The Times* of 1963 (which put rock 'n' roll for the first time on the arts pages)."² Yet, despite the fact that this review and some others like it "used the critical vocabulary of classical musicology,"³ the study of popular music and its clearly social character was successfully ignored by historical musicology, music theory, and ethnomusicology until the 1980s. Further, historical musicology and music theory approached their objects of study with scant regard for the possibility that music was constituted socially and culturally, that "classical" music's powerful appeal to the personal was just as much rooted in the character of this constitution as was popular music's. Indeed, it was the lack of any social and cultural ground underwriting and providing a pathway between the work of historical musicologists and music theorists that allowed for the continued predominance of positivism in both disciplines. As Joseph Kerman observed of the post-War period in the history of both disciplines, "... if the musicologist's characteristic failure is superficiality, that of the analysts is myopia."⁴ In short, while the world was moving on, and moving on apace, the academic study of music was not. It seemed as if it was stuck in its founding, nineteenth-century German groove.

Apart, that is, from ethnomusicology, which was more of a U.S. invention, betraying the more populist roots of that country's cultural dynamics. However, if the reaction of historical musicology and music theory to the perceived evils of popular music's commercialism was that of castigation and exclusion, that of ethnomusicology was museological preservation. It was not until the 1970s that John Blacking's work⁵ alerted musicologists to the possibility that much could be learned about the musical and social practices of the West from those of other cultures. A jarring, critical note had entered Western discourses of academic music, encouragement to some budding, baby-boomer musicologists wrestling with their doctorates in the void of a cultural dislocation that still, for them, was symbolized by the world of academic music.

²Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (London: Constable, 1983), 168.

³Ibid.

⁴Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 73.

⁵John Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973).

Sustenance for this void was soon to be provided by peers concerned to understand the dynamics of the social and cultural changes that had characterized Britain during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Theoretical protocols were developed to link the broadest of social and economic processes to the most particular details of spectacular subcultural styles.⁶ French theory was invoked to explain that "the key to punk style remains elusive, [that] instead of arriving at a point where we can begin to make sense of the style, we have reached the very place where meaning seems to evaporate."⁷ And fieldwork in the tradition of U.S. symbolic interactionism provided evidence according to which structural homologies could be drawn between the realities and experiences of bike-boy and hippie cultures on the one hand and, respectively, the musical characteristics of rock 'n' roll and progressive rock on the other.⁸ It seemed like a perfect moment. Fieldwork, both of the biographical and the more formal academic variety, had joined hands in a seemingly effortless and seamless way with heady theory to make possible socially grounded analyses of music which offered an explanation of how music could engender significance and affect for people.⁹ This method of grounding analyses of music in wider social and cultural processes was echoed independently in ethnomusicology by Charles Keil,¹⁰ who had previously broken with socially and corporeally ungrounded theories for linking the analysis of music to questions of meaning and affect, and had developed ways of discussing some technical characteristics of music more transparent in jazz and popular music than they were in "classical" music.¹¹

No moment, however, is perfect—particularly in retrospect! For all its gains, and for all the initiatives it made possible in musical analysis, subcultural theory had its problems. It is now easy to see that the political significance of subcultural and countercultural life, both in Britain and the United States, was overemphasized. Spectacular subcultures were analyzed, if not romanticized and glorified, to the exclusion of the cultures of the majority of more ordinary young people. And Angela McRobbie dealt a well-earned blow to the ribs when she pointed out that girls have cultures too.¹² However, most problematically for the use of critical theory in developing socially and culturally grounded analyses for meaning and affect in music, the fit between various subcultures and various genres of music was just too convenient, too tight, and too easy.

⁶See John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts, "Subcultures, Cultures and Class," in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, eds. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Hutchinson, 1976), 9–74.

⁷Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), 117.

⁸Paul Willis, *Profane Culture* (London: Routledge, 1978).

⁹See John Shepherd, "Media, Social Process and Music," "The 'Meaning' of Music," and "The Musical Coding of Ideologies," in John Shepherd, Phil Virden, Graham Vulliamy, and Trevor Wishart, *Whose Music? A Sociology of Musical Languages* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1977), 7–124; and John Shepherd, "A Theoretical Model for the Sociomusicological Analysis of Popular Musics," *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 145–77.

¹⁰Charles Keil, *Tiv Song* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

¹¹Charles Keil, "Motion and Feeling through Music," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 24 (1966): 337–49.

¹²Angela McRobbie, "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique," *Screen Education* 34 (1980): 37–49.

The rush to analysis fuelled by the insights flowing from biography as fieldwork had not, with the possible exception of Paul Willis's work,¹³ been measured by more formal and systematic fieldwork, either with respect to youth cultures other than the scholar's own, or, indeed, the scholar's own. The complexities that exist in the relations between music, people, the practice and use of music by people, and the significances, affects, empowerments, and pleasures that people derive from such practice and use—complexities never imagined by subcultural theory and the musical analyses it made possible—these complexities were highlighted graphically by the end of the 1980s in Ruth Finnegan's seminal ethnography of the musical life of Milton Keynes.¹⁴

As Sara Cohen observed at the beginning of the 1990s, "what is particularly lacking in the literature on [popular music] is ethnographic data and micro-sociological detail."¹⁵ Such detail has been provided by Cohen, and also by Deena Weinstein¹⁶ and the "Music in Daily Life" project.¹⁷ It has also been provided by a generation of ethnomusicologists interested in world popular musics.¹⁸ The move away from subcultural theory towards ethnography in popular music studies, and the shift of focus from "traditional" to popular musics in ethnomusicology—together with a joining of these two disciplines—has intellectual ramifications best symbolized by Will Straw in the distinction he has drawn between "musical communities" and "musical scenes." For Straw, a "musical community" "may be imagined as a particular population group whose composition is relatively stable ... and whose involvement in music takes the form of an ongoing exploration of a particular musical idiom said to be rooted organically in that community."¹⁹ A "musical scene," by contrast ("the most appropriate term for designating centres of musical activity today") is "that cultural space within which a range of musical practices co-exist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization."²⁰ The break with previous traditions—not only ethnomusicological

¹³ See Willis, *Profane Culture*, and Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour* (London: Saxon House, 1977).

¹⁴ Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁵ Sara Cohen, *Rock Culture in Liverpool: Popular Music in the Making* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 6.

¹⁶ See Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* (New York: Lexington, 1991).

¹⁷ See Susan D. Crafts, Daniel Cavicchi, and Charles Keil, *My Music* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ See, for example, Peter Manuel, *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World: An Introductory Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Christopher Waterman, *Juju: A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Martin Stokes, *The Arabesk Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Jocelyne Guilbault, *Zouk: World Music in the West Indies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1993); Veit Erlmann, *Nightsong: Performance, Power and Practice in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Tony Langlois, "The Local and Global in North African Popular Music," *Popular Music* 15, no. 3 (1996): 259–73.

¹⁹ Will Straw, "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music," *Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (1991): 373.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

but subcultural as well—becomes clear in Straw's observation that cultural theorists like himself "encountering ethnomusicological studies for the first time after an apprenticeship in the hermeneutics of suspicion may be struck by the prominence within them of notions of cultural totality or claims concerning an expressive unity of musical practices."²¹

The rise to prominence of fieldwork in the study of popular music does not just represent a shift in methods away from the more theoretically informed concerns of the 1970s and 1980s, therefore. It signals also real changes in musical and cultural life across the globe, perhaps well (or badly) captured in terms such as "globalization" and "postmodernism." The restricted cultural politics and ideological battles which characterized Western popular music in the 1960s and its study in the 1970s have been quite rightly replaced by an understanding, not only that the musical world is more complicated than those politics and battles and their study could have revealed, but that since those times cultural commodities including music have in measure been drained of ideological or organically rooted meaning as a consequence of their exponentially increasing number and variety, and of the staggering speed and efficiency with which they are fired across the surface of the globe. Preoccupations with politics and ideological intention have been replaced by those of space, place and locality,²² and ethnicity and identity.²³

This is not to imply that theory and a sense of politics has deserted such work. To the contrary, theories of ethnicity, nationhood, identity, the post-modern, and the postcolonial which inform and are developed from current ethnographic studies and analyses of popular music practices are fundamental to elucidating the plays of power which always accompany them. If I am just a touch unsettled by the trajectory of this current work, it is not because its ethnographies are in any way disengaged from theories of politics. It is perhaps because they may be disengaged from a politics of theory. The breadth and range of these studies works to be sure against the myopic tendencies of scholarship rooted in the various experiences of the 1960s and 1970s, but their overarching theoretical terrain—as opposed to the issues at stake in the studies themselves and the musical worlds they examine—seems just a little too comfortable. Maybe a new conformity is emerging?

These questions are not just germane to a relatively narrow corner of academic music: ethnomusicological and ethnographic studies of popular music. As I hope I have demonstrated, this corner has a place and a history in the broader undertakings of ethnomusicology and popular music studies as a whole. Because of this, the questions also have ramifications for other disciplines within academic music. It bears reiterating that it was ethnomusicology—a discipline grounded in fieldwork—together with popular music studies—a

²¹ Ibid., 369.

²² See, for example, George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (London: Verso, 1994); and Andrew Leyshon, David Matliss, and George Revill, eds., *The Place of Music* (New York: Guilford, 1998).

²³ See, for example, Martin Stokes, ed., *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

discipline whose founding period in the 1970s as a continuous intellectual tradition was energized by critical theory—that challenged the notion of the “autonomy of art” that underpinned so much work in historical musicology and music theory in the post-War period. If, in this corner of the world, a politics of theory has now been replaced by a theory of politics, then it may be that the “bite” once afforded to academic music as a whole by ethnomusicology and popular music studies is diminishing.

What does this matter? The cloistered and conformist world of academic music in which “the social” was once anathema has now blossomed into a bright, multicoloured, and multicultural world where the social and the cultural are endemic. The answer, perhaps, is that fieldwork is not just biographical and professional. It can be also, and maybe should be, institutional. When John Blacking sounded his jarring, critical note in the world of academic music in the mid-1970s, he was not only telling us that much could be learned about the musical and social practices of the West from those of other cultures. He was also hinting, I believe, that we had much to learn from music itself, wherever it was practised, if we could only hear it.

Popular music studies is not, of course, just another discipline within academic music alongside historical musicology, music theory, ethnomusicology, and so on (although there are many who would not want to accord it this status). It has a life, in fact, most of its life, in connection with other disciplines. To put it another way, musicology hardly figures in the broader world of popular music studies. As Roy Shuker has observed in his introductory text, *Understanding Popular Music*, “there is an acknowledged absence of textual analysis of rock in terms of the music itself.”²⁴ What this means is that, the initiatives of the 1970s and 1980s notwithstanding, there is still a need to develop (or, perhaps more accurately, a need to develop further, and in more sophisticated ways) theoretical protocols that will enable musicology to speak convincingly to the academic world outside it in ways which are of consequence. As Shuker continues, “rock critics have been essentially preoccupied with sociology rather than sound, and there has been too ready a willingness to dismiss musicology as having little relevance to the study of rock. The arguments have been well rehearsed.”²⁵ Jenny Taylor and Dave Laing put it another way. “Popular music,” they said, “remains a poor relation in cultural theory, usually being tagged onto a list in which film or television takes pride of place.” This is so, they argued, because “music as such poses great problems in the determination of meaning and signification.”²⁶ Although their arguments are nearly twenty years old, there is little reason to think their veracity has lessened. It is difficult to think of any area of cultural theory which has been significantly influenced by the study of music. Further, music is not a discipline which figures prominently in most interdisciplinary graduate programs built around notions of “discourse, society, theory and culture.” Kerman put it

²⁴Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music* (London: Routledge, 1994), 136.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶Jenny Taylor and Dave Laing, “Disco-Pleasure-Discourse: On ‘Rock and Sexuality,’” *Screen Education* 31 (1979): 43.

accurately, if not nicely, some fourteen years ago when he observed that "nearly all musical thinkers travel at a respectful distance behind the latest chariots (or bandwagons) of intellectual life in general."²⁷

The need to focus more strongly than has recently been the case upon a politics of theory derives neither from a lack of good theory in much current musicological work, nor from any intrinsic need to jolt the world of academic music any more than it has been over the last fifteen years or so. If there is a need to nudge this world once again from the point of view of theory, then it is because of a need to strengthen musicology's intellectual and hence institutional position vis-à-vis other disciplines. If music is a form of human expression and communication that is constituted socially and culturally, then it remains a form that nonetheless appears to instill in people experiences of a quite distinctive order. If it did not, it would be difficult to explain why music has become the ubiquitous force it has in the contemporary world. For all its social and cultural character, therefore, music *does* remain irreducible in its understanding to other forms of human life and expression.²⁸ However, as David Gramit has intimated in this issue, this does not mean that the academic study of music should keep these distinctive experiences hidden from view, fearful that exposing them to the glare of analysis and understanding will forever compromise their supposedly pristine and unsullied character, rendering them susceptible to the imperialist designs of other intellectual agendas. Music is of this world, and should be examined as such. It is, paradoxically, a failure to *fully* realise and act on music's worldly character that has resulted in cultural theoretical stances towards questions of significance and affect in music being widely influenced if not dictated by intellectual prerogatives drawn from other disciplines.²⁹

Now, it is true, on the one hand, that to seek explanations for the meanings, significances, and affects that music holds for people without talking to people about their use and understandings of music is to engage in work that in the end can only be speculative. Having said that, however, it should be realized that the study of music can and should be as much about music as a distinctive signifying practice as it is about individual instantiations of this practice—these instantiations being what have customarily constituted the overwhelming majority of objects of study within academic music—in much the same way as linguistics as a discipline has studied language as a distinctive signifying practice rather than just individual instantiations of it, which is what the literary disciplines tend to study. For this reason among others, it has to be accepted that fieldwork alone cannot suffice in understanding fully the distinctive character of the experiences that music holds for people. As Steven Feld has established, we cannot unthinkingly accept that what people say about their musical experiences will provide illuminating descriptions, let alone complete analyses, of such experiences. People, he says:

²⁷ Kerman, *Contemplating Music*, 17.

²⁸ See John Shepherd and Peter Wicke, *Music and Cultural Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 95–217.

²⁹ See *ibid.*, 7–94.

locate and *categorize* musical experiences in relation to similar or dissimilar experiences. They *associate* musical experiences with experiences of other types. They *reflect* on how an experience relates to like or unlike imagery. And they *evaluate* the experience by relating it to their particular preferences. When people say, "It's different from ...," "It's a kind of ...," "It sort of reminds me of ...," and things of this sort, they are creating locational, categorical and associational features. When they say, "Well, if I had to name it ...," "I mean on some level ...," "For me at least ...," "I really can't say but, do you know what I mean?" they are not necessarily tongue-tied, inarticulate, or unable to speak. They are caught in a moment of interpretive time, trying to force awareness to words. They are telling us how much they assume that we really understand *exactly* what they are experiencing. In fact, we do understand exactly what they are experiencing. We take it as socially typical that people talk this way about music, stringing together expressives, and we assume that this confirms what we are supposed to know: that at some level, one cannot say with words what music says without them.³⁰

It is the fact that people "cannot say with words what music says without them" that makes theory in itself a continually necessary exercise if increasing insights into what Richard Middleton has termed the "forbiddingly special character of music"³¹ are to be gained. If theory has not drawn sufficiently on fieldwork, might it not be that case that, for all their intrinsic value in elucidating specific musical practices, and their consequent capacity to offset any tendencies towards creeping theoretical myopia, musical ethnographies seldom look towards the question which sensitivity towards institutional fieldwork raises: "how can we gain increasing insights on the character of musical experiences and thereby render academic music of more consequence than it has been within the arts, the humanities and the social sciences?"

For the reasons that ethnographers have advanced with passion and conviction, this kind of question cannot, indeed, be addressed by theory alone. There is, at the very least, a need to be able to move more smoothly from what people say about the practice of music to the development of theoretical protocols which elucidate more clearly the workings of music as a distinctive and irreducible signifying practice. In this enterprise the experience of ethnography is crucial. There is a need to distill from the theory of politics implicit in much current musicological work concepts which will render more sophisticated, more accessible and more "usable" extant theories of meaning, signification, and affect through music in terms of which musicology can present to other disciplines questions for which other disciplines will feel they need to develop answers. In this context there is one statement made by John Blacking which will remain with me forever:

if there are forms intrinsic to music and dance that are not modelled on language, we may look beyond the "language" of dancing, for instance, to the

³⁰Steven Feld, "Communication, Music, and Speech about Music," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 16 (1984): 14.

³¹Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), v.

dances of language and thought. As conscious movement is in our thinking, so thinking may come from movement, and especially shared, or conceptual, thought from communal movement. And just as the ultimate aim of dancing is to be able to move *without* thinking, to *be* danced, so the ultimate achievement in thinking is to be moved to think, to *be* thought ... essentially it is a form of unconscious cerebration, a movement of the body. We are moved into thinking. Body and mind are one.³²

Theory in musicology is, I believe, in need of a shot in the arm.

Beverley Diamond

I agreed to contribute to this "Colloquy" because—and here I'm overstating my position for the sake of debate—I am skeptical about the effects of asserting and inscribing continuity in music scholarship. In my experience, the dialogue between cultural constructs and folks who constitute specific musical milieux invariably reveals the partiality and contingency of those constructs; fieldwork posits competing theories at every turn.

But perhaps I need to clarify my terms. In the past decade, I have found myself gradually redefining theory as a result of a certain amount of distress about work (some of my own included) in musicology, ethnomusicology, and music theory that seems to apply critical theory like paint rather than to engage it, shape it and work with it (like clay?). But rather than argue for better abstract thinking or a clearer articulation of intellectual history, I now insist that we cannot write or speak (nor compose, nor play music, nor listen to it) without "theory." It is hardly innovative to say that theory is what shapes our approach, our practice, and our values. Theory is what filters our perceptions and ideas, making some things doable or thinkable and others impossible and unthinkable. But it may shift the debate if we insist that, while we can be naive and ignorant about theory, we cannot be atheoretical.

Having said that, what then is the role of fieldwork in relation to this position? For me as for many others, fieldwork is not bracketed by travel, or by Otherness with a colonial "O." Fieldwork is engaging with practitioners, not just in words but in music and dance and participation of many other kinds. Ethnomusicologists are perhaps prone to keep the "fieldwork lens" on too much of the time! Every time I attend a concert, discuss a recording with a student or colleague, or provide a recital report, I regard this as "fieldwork." Every time I bring a community member to a class or take a class to a community, it is fieldwork. And this article is also fieldwork—a socially situated attempt to stimulate debate within our profession. In short, fieldwork is engaging in multiple expressive worlds.

So, what is the relationship between theory and fieldwork? I find it problematic (impossible?) to think of them independently. There are just so many instances of new questions and answers arising from the disjunctures between one cultural experience and another. Current questions about negotiating

³²John Blacking, "Towards an Anthropology of the Body," in John Blacking, ed., *The Anthropology of the Body* (London: Academic, 1977), 22–23.

identity, for example, which concern me are sometimes irrelevant to First Nations scholars who think in terms of broader environmental relationships. Their theorizing takes a different turn. Experiences of exclusion shaped feminist and post-colonialist ideas and political agendas. Theoretical debates obviously take different shape depending on the languages, nationalities, or musical worlds, etc. of the participants. If one of our theoretical aims is to answer the question, as Foucault posed it, "what governs statements" (read "statements" to include performance, composition, improvisation, rehearsing, instrument making, etc.), I would argue that theory, devoid of fieldwork, is going to be myopic and merely self-referential. The best theory, for me, emerges in the dissonance between what we think we think and what we find ourselves encountering.

I find John Shepherd's candid and eloquent biographical sketch a compelling and helpful step toward understanding the heady forces that shaped his scholarship, giving the profession such impressive gifts as *Music as Social Text* and *Music and Cultural Theory*.³³ While British middle-class youth could sense a rebirth and renaissance in the 1960s, it seems no less important to me that many Canadian youth could scarcely see themselves mirrored anywhere, neither in the mainstream press nor in the commercial music products of the day. Or did we find something of the same spirit of creative experiment in the flourishing of the modernist movement? Or did we feel quite secure in the folk traditions and values of our communities, and the languages of our parents? Perhaps, unlike John's, the "we" of my biography is inconsistent and, to a large extent, unrecognizable and indeterminable. There have been intellectual attempts to define the social basis of musical modernism in Canada but few to explore the sense of erasure, or to frame the imaginings of Carnaby Street and the Beatles which shaped the selfhood of Canadian youth, few to argue the legitimacy of non-rebellion as a cultural construct. It is perhaps what makes me skeptical of grand theory, leading me to regard the scholarly struggles over the social meanings and affects of music simply as one part of a complex network of "interpretive moves" (to use Steve Feld's 1984 label).³⁴

It is perhaps not surprising then that I feel inclined to dispute the wholeness of any one disciplinary history and to posit alternative transformative moments. In ethnomusicology, who were the foundational thinkers? While Blacking is indeed a central figure in alerting musicologists to the lessons of non-Western music with regard to Western institutions, I would suggest that Merriam's querying, ten years earlier, of the very disciplinary boundaries which contain the questions we ask about music was equally fundamental.³⁵ Or, still earlier, that Charles Seeger's enormous vision of music within other systems of communication, and his problematization of the relationship of speech and

³³John Shepherd, *Music as Social Text* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); and John Shepherd and Peter Wicke, *Music and Cultural Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

³⁴Steven Feld, "Communication, Music, and Speech About Music," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 16 (1984): 1–18.

³⁵Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

music discourses were foundational.³⁶ A third vision emerged during a session on disciplinary history at the 1997 Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) meeting when a senior colleague targeted 1987 as the beginning of contemporary ethno/musicology. She did not specify the work she had in mind: perhaps the new emphasis on discursivity and on plural methodologies in Anthony Seeger's *Why Suya Sing*³⁷ or the earliest anthology on gender and music edited by Ellen Koskoff,³⁸ or important turns toward the exploration of the social groundedness of European classical music (and music institutions) with the appearance of Leppert and McClary's *Music and Society*,³⁹ or Kingsbury's *Music, Talent and Performance*.⁴⁰ The point here is obviously that we define the moments of import differently, even within our own subdisciplines. But I do not want to pursue disciplinary histories here.

Beyond that, however, as I said above, it is often the tensions between socio-musical practices and theoretical concepts which effect, in my view, still more transformative turns in scholarship. While many of us in the 1990s are looking at cultural reinventions, at musical practices shaped by newly imagined cross-cultural alliances, many of the musicians we work with may continue to be interested in preservation, in making their often ignored voices heard or safe-guarding their distinctive community histories. Competing definitions of important issues and consequently of social responsibility don't always mesh. I too am excited by the distinction between "musical communities" and "musical scenes" which Will Straw has recently drawn.⁴¹ It contests the totalizing tendencies of both subcultural theory in popular music studies and ethnically bracketed studies in ethnomusicology. It engages new emphases on travel and mobility, gives new significance to diasporic communities, and contributes to the rethinking of cultural diversity in urban contexts. But at the same time, a huge turn to the "scenes" concept may overdraw public domains at the expense of private ones, and further marginalize the dislocated. (I'm inclined to think that Straw's fieldwork on collection practices will prove even more significant than the community/scene distinction.) Each disciplinary turn carries with it a new crisis.

While John Shepherd argues that "cultural commodities including music have in measure been drained of ideological or organically rooted meaning as a consequence of their exponentially increasing number and variety," I suggest that same variety enhances the urgency of the discourse on meaning; as many

³⁶Charles Seeger, "Music as Concept and Percept" and "Toward a Unitary Field Theory," in *Studies in Musicology, 1935-1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), respectively pp. 31-44 and 102-38.

³⁷Anthony Seeger, *Why Suya Sing: A Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

³⁸Ellen Koskoff, *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

³⁹Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition and Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁴⁰Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, and Performance. A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

⁴¹Will Straw, "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music," *Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (1991): 368-88.

have argued at this point, globalization intensifies the processes of localization. These disjunctures are the very social/intellectual crises which make music not simply meaningful but essential for human survival. Why does a shift toward fieldwork in popular music represent a shift away from “more theoretically informed concerns”? I would think the opposite: fieldwork extends and raises the stakes of the dialogue. In this regard, I am particularly excited by the wave of multi-site ethnographies (Sugarman or Lortat-Jacob, for instance)⁴² which are emerging in the last few years. They begin to theorize both the large-scale mediating inter- and intracultural forces that shape music, as well as very local or individual strategies for negotiating those forces.

It is true, of course, that we build and refine our thinking of human expression in relation to the work of our peers from within. But “within” what? The global music academy is neither cloistered nor whole. I still contend that there are contexts in which some sophisticated theoretical concepts may simply be the wrong ones. I first made some notes about this Colloquy on the plane home from one such context, a conference in Dublin on “Music and Nationalism,” where the debates were charged in unique and (for me) unanticipated ways. Organized, partly to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Royal Irish Academy of Music, local presenters were eloquent about the ironies of the history of an elite institution founded with “royal” reference in a country which sought to escape the colonial embrace, in a country in the middle of the worst famine of its history. The intensity of the political struggles within which music has played a role in that country rendered different issues “thinkable” than if the conference had been Canadian-based, I would argue. My attempts to theorize music and nationalism in Canada have emphasized the positioning of diverse musics and the contingency of constructions of regionalism, ethnicity, class, and gender. My position, which seems politically as well as intellectually urgent in Canada, seemed strangely self-indulgent in Ireland. The vitality of “trad”—vernacular or folk musics that different parts of the Irish artistic community have variously regarded as an embarrassment to nation building or its very soul—contrast so fundamentally to the non-threatening position of folk-based traditions in Canada. On the other hand, the authenticity debates are perhaps more highly charged in Canada; the freedom to adapt, popularize, change a music “at home” may become much more threatening when that same music is performed in the context of a diasporic community. I kept thinking how the amazing border crossing between folk, popular, and concert music worlds in Maritime Canada which are partially congruent with and partly a challenge to the development Ian McKay identifies as “anti-modernist,”⁴³ has taken very different forms than the film and concert scores of Seán Ó Riada who is often viewed as a sort of saviour of Irish classical music. The theorizing about modernism or nationalism, the exploration of genres and their technical

⁴²Jane Sugarman, *Engendering Song. Singing and Subjectivity at Prespa Albanian Weddings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Bernard Lortat-Jacob, *Sardinian Chronicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁴³Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk. Anti-Modernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal: Queens-McGill University Press, 1995).

or aesthetic discourses in relation to both communities and scenes, the systems of circulation or the political economies of the arts—all these topics emerge differently even in two national situations as closely related historically and musically as Ireland and Canada.

Let me bring the issue into a still more local context: music schools. I have been privileged to teach in four Canadian universities, each with very different ideologies and social contexts. It often amazes me how the conversations differ among the students and faculty at those institutions. At York University, for example, where the proportion of the student body whose primary interest is European classical music is only about 33 percent (this is a guess, not a reliable statistic), we cannot *not* talk about cultural difference, or about hierarchies of class. I often do a classroom exercise at the beginning of my course in North American music; I put a timeline on the blackboard and ask the students to write their families onto it, the approximate date they came to North America and the reason for coming here. In some classes, the exercise has yielded a largely British-based, United Empire Loyalist profile while in other instances, a huge number of students were post-World War II families from Eastern Europe. In those classes, a few students felt decidedly “other” because they were marginal to the majority picture. Giving those few confidence to speak in that context is a specific type of teaching challenge as I am sure the readers of this journal are well aware. Of course, if the music they are learning is exclusively one type—whether jazz or European concert music, or some other practice—the hegemony of those values and views is strongly reinforced. The last time I did this exercise at York, the range extended from Arawak-descended Caribbeans, to families who had just arrived from Iran and Hong Kong in the past year. The class saw a wide swath of history in about one hour, and they were it. We could begin to discuss our discrepant perspectives, the fact that neither our repertoires (including our popular music repertoires) nor our vocabularies for thinking about music align, as well as the narratives that emerged in the gaps between one hearing or the next. Their experiential reflections, like ours, are not at all self-evident or “authentic.” And there are stumbling formulations, of course. But these are not simply a failure of words to articulate the experience of music; they are often a struggle to articulate what others do not expect to hear about the experience of music. Am I arguing that the reflexive, experiential anecdotes of undergraduate students are theory? Perhaps not, but they surely constitute the groundbed for theorizing. They represent an opportunity for we who have privileged full-time teaching jobs to find and, to some extent, legitimize the energy of other theories. So, I am simply arguing that our theoretical interests and abilities are shaped by our “fieldwork” in spaces including the cultural communities that we encounter in the classroom. I think the Canadian musical academy would come alive if we shared stories about such things.

I too argue for deeper, better informed theory. But my motivation is mundanely practical. Without it we simply do not know the negotiations of power in which we participate. The alleged “autonomy” of art is no less dangerous, in my opinion, than an alleged “autonomy” of theory. In either case, we do not

know whether we are enabling creative agency, developing strategies for social betterment, or reifying the old boxes by training students in systems of adoration.

AFTERWORD

The process of preparing this colloquy was a very interesting instance, in my experience, of how academics may either come to know something important or be deluded into thinking they do. Our positions began somewhat further apart than they ended up. As a result of friendship and mutual respect as well as argument, we modified points that were too raw at the outset. But popular music scholars and ethnomusicologists do this rather easily. We read the same work and think about the same issues. This “Colloquy” will be more successful if colleagues with less possibility for consensus join the fray. I hope they will.

Abstracts

John Shepherd

This intervention suggests that the recent and welcome emergence of fieldwork as a prominent feature of much current work in popular music studies has deflected attention from an undertaking that characterized the early days of popular music studies: that of developing from within the various protocols of cultural theory concepts to explain the meanings, significances, and affects that music as a socially and culturally constituted form of human expression holds for people. In tracing a shift from theoretical to ethnographic concerns in work carried out in popular music studies by musicologists, ethnomusicologists, social anthropologists, and sociologists, it is suggested that a renewed emphasis on theory in musicological work in popular music studies may be of consequence for the academic study of music as a whole.

Beverley Diamond

In response to the editor’s question concerning theory and fieldwork, this colloquy argues that the two are inseparable. Further, the importance of fieldwork in providing “alternative theory” which challenges the consistencies of academic thinking is emphasized. For this reason, the article eschews disciplinary history as a means of tracing important theoretical currents in music scholarship and, instead, presents arguments which confront the hegemonies of any history, any discourse of intellectual continuity, positing incidents which expose the social contingencies of theory.