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The Meeting Room as Fieldwork Site: Toward an Ethnography of Power

by Huib Schippers

Introduction

While we rightly pride ourselves on great depth and nuance in working with communities as ethnomusicologists, it is harder to claim the same qualities in how many of us regard, approach, and describe power structures. With public-facing ethnomusicology on the rise, there is both room and a need for more insightful approaches to working constructively with those in power, as various forms of structures (public authorities, NGOs, funding bodies, and even businesses) are crucial in turning projects with ambitions beyond academic impact into reality, benefiting musicians, communities, and other stakeholders. This is a critical juncture that distinguishes applied ethnomusicology; in this arena, a project without a clear strategy and support is just an idea. This chapter is based on more than forty years of negotiating spaces between dreams and ambitions of musicians and communities from myriad cultures on one hand, and on the other the ideas, forces and structures that drive those that fund, support, or otherwise enable cultural practices in various parts of the world.

We have come a long way in the six decades since the term "ethnomusicology" was introduced by Jaap Kunst (1959). As seasoned or emerging ethnomusicologists, we have developed a refined set of ethnographic approaches to work with musicians and their communities. Over the past sixty years, we have learned to not only listen to the nuances of the music we study and look at the physical aspects of a music practice; we are now also keenly aware of the cultural contexts of the events we analyze, the people involved, and the (power) relationships between them, as well as the cosmologies and constructs underlying their musical practices (e.g., Merriam 1964; Blacking 1973; Meyers 1992; Solis 2004; Barz and Cooley 2010). With the rise of applied ethnomusicology, the importance of these skills of observation

becomes even more poignant: In order to work with communities to forge musical futures on their own terms, we have to be able to interpret what the people we work with say, but also where it fits in to the wider context in which their wishes are to be realized (e.g., Sheehy 1992; Harrison, Mackinlay, and Pettan 2010; Pettan and Titon 2015; Schippers and Grant 2016).

In some instances, these wishes can be realized entirely within the community, but more often than not, they require negotiations with outside powers, like public authorities, cultural organizations, schools, businesses, or funding bodies. It is here that I feel we may not consistently rise to the challenges before us. While a village or a suburb or an online community is almost invariably depicted as a subtle interplay of people, forces, and agendas, somehow it seems we are often inclined to regard power—or those in power—as giant square blocks of unmovable energy, like a concrete wall, usually hostile or at least insensitive to the needs of individuals, communities, or humanity at large. In this chapter, I argue that such an approach is counterproductive, and frequently incorrect. I feel it is imperative for applied ethnomusicologists to apply our finely honed ethnographic skills to dig below the perceived hard surface of forces that impact the communities we work with.

Essential in this endeavor is to realize that organizations and institutions are made up of people. Some of these people may come across (and even feel) jaded, disenchanted, uninterested, or depleted. However, it is important to realize that many of these people were selected for these positions because they were capable, driven, even idealistic, and that there is almost always a spark of this initial fire left. In addition, on a more pragmatic level, virtually everybody reports to someone, so people are eager to score or look good in one way or another. In funding bodies, for instance, this means giving money to projects that are likely to succeed because the thinking and organization behind them is solid, and they have the potential to make the funding body look good. In public authorities across the world, the mechanisms are similar.

This awareness makes boardrooms and other seats of power fieldwork sites par excellence. Phone calls, networking, meetings, and grant cycles become rituals to study, practice, and try to master. These are not more or less intricate than the customs and rituals we observe in what we traditionally define as “the field.” Being sensitive to these in the context of making things work in the real world does not imply in any way that

we have to sacrifice integrity. On the contrary: I have found that being real and honest are essential ingredients for a sustainable career in applied work; it is also important to find synergies and a shared sense of purpose between stakeholders. This approach involves being strategic and alert, not being opportunistic and unprincipled (although this idea is not shared by all who operate in this space). In essence, I'm talking about using skills in observing, analyzing, and communicating in slightly different ways.

What I'm describing here is by no means new. Many of our colleagues have taken the needs of communities they work with to heart and given back in a range of ways, from common gestures like arranging recordings or inviting musicians for an international tour, to much more far-reaching—and sometimes utterly unmusical actions—like the Tony Seeger fighting for (and securing) land rights as a logical step in his decades-long involvement with the Suyá/Kidjejdje he worked with in the Amazonian rain forest (2004). For the purpose of this essay, I will use a number of my work experiences from the past three decades in public-facing ethnomusicology. To do so, I will switch to autoethnographic mode, highlighting crucial instances or even transformational moments within the context of a number of projects that I feel have helped various music communities do better for themselves.

By example, this chapter aims to be a guide to approaches to securing goodwill, support, funding, and partners for projects. It does so by applying ethnographic skills: How do we work with a roomful of people to find an approach to a project that will serve their needs? How do we forge collaborations that increase the success and impact of a project from inception to evaluation? How do we interpret funding guidelines and understand vetting processes to increase our chances of success for a project? I will describe five actual examples of small- to large-scale music projects, ranging from $5,000 to $20,000,000, with clear social impact to outline strategies and techniques that respond to these questions: founding a magazine dedicated to world music in the 1980s; establishing world music schools in the Netherlands in the 1990s; the festival series Encounters in Brisbane, Australia, in the 2000s; and the reorientation of an iconic record label in Washington, DC, in the 2010s. Jointly, these projects will hopefully illustrate how one can substantially increase chances of success for applied work in ethnomusicology by understanding and working with power structures.

These trajectories are usually not documented in the ethnomusicological literature. There are many publications that relate to fieldwork experiences and interactions with communities, but, with the possible exception of Nettl's Heartland Excursions (1995), there are next to none that recount even the struggles with power structures within the universities, the home of most academics, in securing travel grants, research assistance, access to library resources, databases, or computer capacity, or space to record, rehearse, and produce, while most of these are everyday realities for many of us. The intricacies of these negotiations intensify when dealing with forces external to our places of work or study, and are documented and communicated even less. The territory tends to become more unfamiliar to many of us as we move outside the walls of the university, into the world of public authorities, NGOs, and corporations. These are places where real change can happen or fails to happen. There is of course a vast body of management literature that touches on corporate culture that can be extended to the types of organizations we deal with in and around culture and cultural diversity (the groundbreaking work of the Dutch sociologist Hofstede [1998] for Royal Dutch Shell comes to mind). However, the purpose of this chapter is much more practical: I will focus here on stories from the field, for the field.

The passages that follow are based primarily on my own experiences from the past thirty-five years across three continents. In the following text, I have anonymized most of the people and organizations involved, and deliberately left out references to particular times and places. These specifics are not the essence of what I'm trying to share here. It is rather the principles of data-gathering, observation, and interaction, within an ethnography of power structures customized for applied ethnomusicologists.

Wereldmuziek Magazine

With my music critic colleagues Peter van Amstel and Renee Heijnen, I'm trying to establish a Dutch-language magazine on what is beginning to be called wereldmuziek (world music) in the 1980s. To secure seed funding, I call one of the large cultural foundations in the Netherlands. It is a bit of a long shot, as the foundation profiles itself as "a fund for Dutch culture." But as music critics, all three of us have been arguing for a while that the culture of the Netherlands is culturally diverse by definition, historically and at present, with close to 50 percent of the children in schools in Amsterdam non-Dutch (as defined by one of the two parents not being born in the Netherlands), the press publishing

regular reviews of music performances from across the world in Amsterdam, and record shops embracing the contestable label "world music" for what used to be called by much worse indicators, including primitive, international, ethnic, and migrant music (Schippers 2010, 17–28).

Before I make the call, I carefully study not only their guidelines, but also their past three annual reports, and the profiles of their board members. It's easy to see that these are smart, high-profile, successful people from the world of the arts and business. I trust them to be able to embrace a strong new idea, but need to make sure it comes to them in a way that appeals to them, and makes them choose it over other worthy proposals. With this type of foundation, the secretary of the application committee usually plays a crucial role, although this person does not vote on the proposals. I listen carefully to the voice of the secretary. From her name and her accent, I recognize that she probably comes from a well-educated Dutch family. She may have studied fine arts or cultural anthropology. Her perception of how the world works is not very far removed from mine, so I manage to connect quickly. We find a common language.

Referring to some of the projects that the foundation has funded before and room for interpretation in the current guidelines, I explore the potential for including cultural expressions that thrive in the Netherlands, but did not originate there. I point to major venues and festivals that are programming world music, the music press dedicating serious space to what is increasingly referred to as world music, audiences that are growing, and even the striking similarities between certain forms of world music (like Indian classical music) and Western classical music in terms of listening practices. She responds with the formal priorities of the board, but also with reports on discussions among board members, providing what I perceive to be magic words and concepts, key triggers for selecting certain projects for funding over others. These will vary from funding source to funding source, and it is crucial to match them with the narrative of the project in the application. In this case, it is not about celebrating cultural diversity, or greater participation in cultural life by migrants, but rather about quality new artistic expressions on Dutch soil.

A few weeks later I hear from one of my mentors, who runs a theater that programs a lot of world music. He received a call from one of the board members, asking him, "That proposal for the world music

magazine—does that make sense, and can those people actually make it happen?" As he knows my colleagues and me well, his answer probably clinches the deal. We receive about $5,000 to print ten thousand copies of the first issue, which we distribute for free to world music lovers through the mailing lists of three leading theaters programming music from all over the world. While putting address stickers and sorting ten thousand magazines by post code takes us a week, we score eight hundred subscribers with this initiative, an unheard-of result in direct mailings, and just enough to make it viable to run the nonprofit magazine. Without our use of networks and strategy, the magazine probably would not have materialized or survived beyond the first issue. In the end, we had an amazing ride until we moved on to other projects in 1990.

Amsterdam World Music School

Simultaneously, in an exercise of embracing paradox that can only happen in open-minded cities like Amsterdam, a team led by my colleague Joep Bor managed to receive municipal funding for a school teaching Indian classical music in an illegally squatted school building in the west of the city. As word got around, he got to talk with the municipal community music school, which was interested in incorporating our offerings into their program. I was asked to spearhead the negotiations, and suggested that not only Indian classical music should be represented in the offerings of this heavily subsidized music school, but also the Turkish and Moroccan offerings they had developed at a basic level, as well as gamelan, West African percussion, and popular musics of Amsterdam youths with backgrounds in Surinami kaseko or baithak gana. Thus, in the early 1990s, the idea of an Amsterdam World Music School was born.

The timing couldn't be worse, and it couldn't be better. Throughout the 1980s, the government had invested in the cultures of people who had chosen the Netherlands as their home as a result of our colonial history (e.g., Indonesia and Surinam) or our need for low-skilled workers as our economy recovered from the Second World War (e.g., Turkey and Morocco). Many of these initiatives had not been very well thought through, so most projects had failed after organizational, financial, social, pedagogical, cultural, and interpersonal mishaps. There was a sense that intercultural music education was simply too difficult.

At the same time, in the enthusiasm emanating from the World Music Campaign in the UK, a good number of white Dutch people were

interested in listening to and playing music from other cultures. By combining this engagement with the cultural desires of more recent immigrants, a formula for a world music department within the community music school (with about five thousand learners, mostly children) that avoided creating cultural ghettos was developed. At a time when many arts initiatives featuring other cultures did not go well for a variety of reasons, and press and politicians described the sharp increase in immigrants and their families primarily in terms of problems, the news that a substantial world music school was going to be developed within an established educational institution became the good news that many had been waiting for. The opening in 1990 yielded a great deal of television and radio exposure, as well as over one hundred pages of national press.

That in turn created the perfect basis for securing more funds for the initiative. Approaching funding bodies with the high-profile initiative, several foundations readily gave music for instruments to be used in the school and outreach programs into schools; the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (OCW) gave money for pedagogical training of the new world music teachers, as well as funding a music-in-schools curriculum for the Amsterdam Conservatory; and several donors supported events with children playing music from other cultures, based on the positive—albeit it sometimes a little naïve—idea that in the Netherlands, people from all backgrounds can work and play together harmoniously. Another twelve large municipal music schools emulated the model, and jointly we found several millions of dollars in support by carefully shaping different but consistent cases for support, which were in line with the goals of each funding body, but all contributed to the celebration of diversity as enriching Dutch culture, a much-sought-after ideal until it disintegrated in the shadow of 9/11 (Campbell and Schippers 2005, vi).

Codarts World Music & Dance Centre

Well before the Amsterdam World Music school opened its doors, the Rotterdam Conservatory of Music had started developing degree courses in music from other cultures. Latin jazz, developed from within the jazz department by Jan-Lourens Hartong, formed the basis, but the initiative took flight when director John Floore invited Paco Peña to teach flamenco guitar in 1985, and Joep Bor added Indian classical music, and later tango and Turkish folk music. Integrated in a professional music school with some seven hundred students, the World Music Department became a distinguishing feature of the institution.

Meanwhile, through a series of biannual symposia on "Cultural Diversity in Music Education," an idea was being developed to create a European Center of Excellence for world music teaching. Over a period of ten years, the concept of such an institution developed, as well as tapping into European funds for capital works. We first tried to develop it in Spain, near Cadiz, and then in Serpa, Portugal; but both attempts failed due to our lack of skill in negotiating very complicated politics in both places. Rotterdam, which had a strong track record of supporting cutting-edge arts initiatives, had shown interest. With various small sources of funding, we developed outlines for the conceptual, curricular, and physical building blocks we felt we needed. The lucky break came at the end of a EU funding cycle, when another major initiative had fallen through, and we were in the right place at the right time to receive millions of euros to repurpose two adjacent buildings in one of the most culturally diverse parts of the city to house the World Music & Dance Centre, which combined a range of activities from organizing festivals and facilitating community activities to projects in school, amateur classes, professional training, degree programs, research, and performance.

While arguably the breakthrough for this initiative came with a single meeting with European funders, it was in fact the result of twelve years of discussions and meetings with musicians, scholars, educators, communities, NGOs, administrators, and public authorities, trying to align a wide variety of agendas (from celebrating cultural diversity to stimulating economic development) toward a single goal. In 2006, the queen of the Netherlands proudly opened the World Music & Dance Centre; at its tenth anniversary in 2016 speakers commented how precious it was to have a place where no music or music practice was explicitly or implicitly superior to any other. While it has had to face many challenges before and since, the center still thrives.

Encounters Festival

Going to Australia in the early 2000s to develop a practice-based research center within a conservatorium of music that was part of a large university, I was surprised to find that the impressive national policies on cultural diversity I had read before coming over were hardly translated into practice. In the curriculum of the school where I worked there was barely a trace of cultural diversity, or even of reference to the Indigenous culture that had survived on Australian soil for over fifty thousand years. I felt I could have been in the Leipzig conservatorium. As I was directing a research center, my direct influence on the

curriculum was limited, but I made sure that cultural diversity was part of the research projects I initiated with funding from the Australian Research Council, whether they were about music and communities, music and place, performing arts in prisons, portfolio careers, or cultural sustainability (e.g., Bartleet et al. 2009; Schippers and Grant 2016; Balfour et al. 2019). However, in that context, the most relevant initiative was perhaps a series of participatory festivals called Encounters, which became practice-based research outputs of our interest in the interaction between Australian culture and the cultures in and around Australia.

The first of these events was called Encounters: Meetings in Australian Music and traced two hundred years of—often unequal and highly problematic—interaction between the music of Indigenous Australians and the "new Australians," beginning with the notation of an aboriginal "rallying cry" by Lesueur and Bernier in 1802, and ending with the Requiem for orchestra and didgeridoo by Peter Sculthorpe (2004). While the focus of curator Vincent Plush was on art music, the program extended to hip-hop and even coon songs, highly racist compositions about Indigenous Australians from about a hundred years ago. That was quite a risky undertaking: Everybody knew about the existence of these extremely politically incorrect songs, but in the attempt to show the entire history of musical interactions, warts and all, they formed an important component. This led to some of the most sensitive negotiations with Indigenous elders and representatives, who in the end embraced the idea as it provided them with, as Debra Bennett-McLean (2005) put it in the program book, a "Right of Reply."

While we managed to put on this and Encounters: Meeting in the Asia Pacific (2007) with limited external sources (it helped that we had a major performance venue and eight hundred students at our disposal), the two largest editions, Encounters: China (2010) and Encounters: India (2013) required much more elaborate meetings and negotiations outside of the university. We made the rounds of cultural foundations, national museums, government departments, private donors, and collaborators in China for the 2010 edition, and expanded that from the governor of Queensland (who represents the queen of England) to local food, money, and taxi businesses for the India edition. The result of hundreds of meetings was an event focusing on cultural exchange and diplomacy, ranging from a conference on the importance of cultural diplomacy in the Queensland Performing Arts Centre to a Bollywood Night in the

open air theater in the South Bank Parklands featuring Punjabi dancers emerging from Black & White Cabs.

The lesson to be learned from initiatives like this is—besides the fact that no sane person should undertake them with such limited funding—that with a great team (thank you Rhiannon Phillips and all the volunteers) and a willing university bureaucracy, one can make thirty-six thousand people enjoy Indian music and dance and food and yoga on a total budget under $1 million when all the players are sufficiently aligned.

Smithsonian Folkways

A record label is a very different beast than a festival, a research center, a music school, or a magazine. Even a historically left-leaning nonprofit label like Smithsonian Folkways is based on an essentially capitalist premise as my predecessor Anthony Seeger astutely pointed out to me (oral communication): We record musicians, process these sounds, turn them into 78s, LPs, cassettes, CDs, downloads, or streams (to do justice to our seventy-year history with this model), and sell them for a little more money than it cost us to make them. Being curator of a collection of more than sixty thousand tracks that arguably constitute the "National Museum of Sound" for the United States is intimidating enough. But an additional challenge is to keep these tracks commercially available, reaching over 300 million people a year through physical and digital sales, as well as negotiating licensing deals with television and the movie industry. All salaries of a staff of twenty as well as production and marketing costs are completely dependent on commercial income. With a substantial structural annual loss in the aftermath of the collapse of the industry in the mid-2000s, we embarked on an ambitious trajectory to not reduce staff to fit income, which would risk creating a long and slow decline for the label, but rather to redouble our efforts at producing "great music with a great story" (as my other predecessor Daniel Sheehy phrased it) within our mission, streamline business processes, intensify our marketing and outreach efforts, and be inventive in securing alternative sources of funding.

That required more than merely academic and curatorial skills, especially in a business environment where the traditional income-per-track-sold model had been decimated. We started discussions internally with staff, seeing where there were shared visions and dreams and frustrations. Then, building on the work of my predecessors Moses Asch, Anthony Seeger, and Daniel Sheehy, we created a five-year plan

to present to the advisory board of the label. From there, we communicated in concentric circles to other stakeholders, including units of the Smithsonian we worked with. We started signing promising new artists, and we embarked on a number of signature projects that would make clear to the world where the label positioned itself. A crucial factor in this trajectory was working with our public affairs company in New York, impressing on media that Smithsonian Folkways was an active label rather than primarily an archival entity. Over a period of about three years, that convincingly shifted, with major press, from Billboard to Rolling Stone, from Bandcamp to Pitchfork, following and reviewing our releases more closely.

The investment that was needed to do this came from a series of collaborations. Within the Smithsonian, we worked with units like the Latino Center, the Asian Pacific American Center, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture to jointly produce releases, with many of the production costs covered by the partnership. In addition, we collaborated with external partners, either philanthropic donors for a project like The Social Power of Music (2019), or with organizational partners like the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival Foundation, with whom we produced the box set Jazz Fest (2019). Other collaborations included one with the San Francisco Airport Authority for an exhibition on the iconic record label Arhoolie at the airport, and with the pan-institutional Smithsonian Year of Music on a series of events in 2019.

Reflections and Conclusions

All of this may seem a little bit more simple than it is in reality. What I describe above are highlights over forty years of many ideas, hard work, long hours, numerous missteps, and failures, but always a naïve yet invigorating sense of optimism that anything can be done if we don't have compelling evidence that it can't. Different organizations, public authorities, countries, and cultures have different structures and modi operandi. The experiences here are primarily in Western democracies. One should have no illusions about their universal applicability: Each specific situation requires different insight, method, or approach. But the underlying principles can be applied widely.

It is also important to realize that initiatives do not necessarily self-propel after the initial work is done. The magazine Wereldmuziek failed in 1990, as its income could only sustain direct production and distribution costs, no salaries or honorariums for editors and

contributors. The Amsterdam World Music School lost much of its shine once it was integrated into the regular offerings of the music school. Before the World Music & Dance Centre opened in Rotterdam, there were years of dedicated work and investment in energy and time in Spain and Portugal with little success. After four editions of Encounters, there have been no more major intercultural festivals at Queensland Conservatorium. And Smithsonian Folkways is doing well at the time of writing this, but by no means secure from the vagaries of an ever-changing music industry and a bizarrely bureaucratic environment that is not conducive to supporting a nonprofit business.

Nevertheless, I would argue that the principles of the ethnography of power I sketch here point toward critical success factors in project management on the boundaries of and outside academic contexts. Each of these requires skills in close reading, careful analysis, communicating with people from a wide variety of backgrounds and with different cosmologies, and staying alert and clear-headed at crucial moments. All these are qualities of the expert ethnographer, whether knee-deep in a leech-infested swamp or dressed in a smart suit in a corporate boardroom.

Summary Points and Suggestions for Practitioners

- Realize that institutions can be understood and approached as cultures; visualizing them as such provides an opportunity to utilize ethnomusicological training to develop and implement successful projects with benefits to communities.

- Carefully identify individual, institutional, and community needs and drivers, followed by strategic planning on how these can be best addressed and integrated into a plan; that is a critical success factor in developing successful projects.

- Have a very clear concept of what you want to do, and be able to communicate simply and succinctly what it is and why there is a need for it in a way that aligns with the organization from which you are seeking support. You can either position your project at the core of the organization's goals, or as an expansion or innovation in a direction they may be considering.

- Put serious effort into understanding the people, principles, and actual workings of the organization. Just reading the guidelines for applications is generally not enough. Always be honest and don't

overclaim; that is not only unethical, but likely to backfire in the short or long term.

- Create a convincing organizational structure, budget, and timeline for the project. People judging your proposal will look very critically at this, as it is their job to decide where the money or support is likely to be best spent. The budget has to be realistic and transparent and clearly linked to the actions and goals you outline in the text of the proposal. Carefully choose the people and organizations you work with. In addition to having the right personnel, with most projects it is useful to build a support structure behind the project: advisory boards, steering groups, experts, and committees with people who command respect will greatly improve your chances. And smart people can make your project better.

- Always approach the people you negotiate with as people, not as mere functionaries or machines. Establish personal contact with somebody involved in the process, either a present or former member of a board or advisory group, or the secretary, whose job it is to make sure you are well informed. If the fit does not seem to be good, don't pursue the partnership or application. Do not waste your or their time; people appreciate that.

- With large projects, do not hurry. Be strategic and pragmatic, not opportunistic. Take your time and wait for the right moment or circumstances, even if you are understandably eager to see your great idea put into practice. Keep your mind clear and be aware of how ideas, people, and opportunities move over time, and only act when there's a real opening. Or, as Lao Tsu (1972, ch. 8) puts it so admirably succinctly: "In speech, be true / In ruling, be just / In business, be competent / In action, watch the timing."

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