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## RESEARCH REPORT

# Applying and Integrating Ethnomusicology in the Public Domain: Collaboration and Negotiation at Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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In 2004, I was fortunate to undertake a four-month internship at Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, the non-profit curatorial record label of the Smithsonian Institution, located in Washington, DC, in the United States. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings is housed in the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage,<sup>1</sup> within the Smithsonian Institution. The Smithsonian forms a research and museum organisation located in Washington, comprising eighteen museums and galleries (with two museums in New York).<sup>2</sup> It forms the world's largest museum complex, located on both sides of the national mall of the United States, where centres within the Smithsonian conduct research, public education and scholarship in the arts, sciences and history. The establishment of the Smithsonian in 1846 was enabled through funds bequeathed by James Smithson, which are to be dedicated to 'the increase and diffusion of knowledge,' an aim that forms the mission of the Smithsonian to this day.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH) forms a research unit and production office for two major practical initiatives of the Smithsonian: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. CFCH also instigated and administrates the digital downloading site <[www.smithsonianglobalsound.org](http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org)>, co-ordinates educational outreach programs and is active in discussions and formulations of cultural policy both in the US and globally, both through the work of its staff, major initiatives and the employment of rotating Rockefeller Research Fellows.

<sup>2</sup> Also included in the Smithsonian Institution is the National Zoo, astrophysical observatories in Massachusetts, New Mexico and Hawaii, a tropical research institute with numerous sites in Panama and other research units in various North American locations.

<sup>3</sup> For further information, see <<http://www.si.edu/about/mission.htm>>.

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings was founded by Moses Asch in New York City in 1948 under the title, Folkways Records and Service Corporation.<sup>4</sup> Folkways, by the time of its affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution, was an extensive collection of music and sounds from around the world, plus folk music from America and recorded natural sounds, poetry and spoken word other than poetry. In 1987 the Smithsonian acquired Folkways Records, with its two thousand-plus master recordings, and all its production and business files. It has since acquired the Collector, Cook, Dyer-Bennet, Fast Folk, Monitor and Paredon labels, and continues to put out new releases year round. With its inclusion into the Smithsonian, the Asch estate stipulated that all titles must remain in print,<sup>5</sup> a requirement that forms the core of Folkways' production. Folkways generates its income not through taxes or Smithsonian trust funds, but through record sales and grant funding.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout my undergraduate degree in ethnomusicology, anthropology and history, I held a research interest in ethnographical issues of representation. My honours research in ethnomusicology centered on a Yolngu performance of *manikay* in the cross-cultural setting of the 2002 Garma Music Symposium.<sup>7</sup> I have also played cello in numerous orchestral, chamber and contemporary music performances and have performed in rock and folk music, stemming from my interest in rock music and popular culture. Following the conclusion of my undergraduate degree, I went to Folkways records with the desire to learn skills in applied ethnomusicology. I wanted to see how an organisation could apply the benefits of ethnomusicological knowledge, ethics and cultural insight in order to facilitate an applied sonic, cultural initiative outside academia, and how issues in the applied field could fit into the theoretical discourse of ethnomusicology.

I view ethnographic research and knowledge as a valuable form of cultural mediation, a way to assert the cultural legitimacy of a previously less-heard cultural and social group, and to assert the validity, meaning and presence of a particular musical tradition or art form. I value its ability to report on cultural change, revealing how music reflects the impact of different extra-musical factors such as land ownership or migration. Before I continued with postgraduate education, I wanted to explore ways of applying ethnomusicological knowledge outside the university, to learn the ropes of some of the extra-musical structures that needed to be learned and worked within in order for an applied cultural initiative to take place.

Before I left for Washington, I thought I would undertake research assistance at Folkways, which I anticipated would be similar in method and content to my previous academic work. I did indeed undertake this work, but was to learn the importance of other facets that make up the overall operation of the record label. It was the administration side of this business to which the majority of my time was devoted. These administrative tasks arose from the issues that need to be addressed and constantly reevaluated when ethnomusicologists establish and coordinate a non-profit record label dependent on the marketplace that aims to present and

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<sup>4</sup> D. A. Sonneborn, 'Smithsonian Folkways Recordings: A Question of Balance,' *Folklife Forum* 34.1/2 (2003): 113.

<sup>5</sup> Sonneborn, 'Smithsonian Folkways Recordings,' 113.

<sup>6</sup> The Smithsonian pays for housing and staffing the archive only, with Folkways aiming to break even and pay royalties to all legitimate copyright holders by its publishing activities.

<sup>7</sup> Rebekah Plueckhahn, *Revealing Marrpan for Future Generations: Yolnu Cultural Preservation through Contemporary Manikay Performance*, BMus dissertation, University of Melbourne, 2003.

distribute ethnographic, folk and archival material in the most ethical and educational way to the general public.

Washington, DC, provided a great framework in which to be seeking to apply this knowledge in the public domain. Washington is a place where many people, from both within America and abroad, come to apply their skills, thereby contributing to national and international organisations and governance. I found the network of fellow interns and workers to be invigorating, inspiring and supportive. It is also the home of the rich histories of several vibrant musical cultures: African-American, Hispanic and Caucasian. I played cello with several groups, including one that played spoken-word hip-hop, which complemented the American music history that I was learning about, listening to and working with at Folkways.

One month into my internship, it became clear that the ethnomusicological focus being discussed and practiced by management was a 'theory about applying the theory.' Interning at Folkways challenged me to take a step back from the task at hand and evaluate several key priorities in order to get the job done. It encouraged me to be extremely self-reflexive and to better understand how my actions could assist my supervisors in their guidance of this material in the public domain. Dan Sheehy, the current Director of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, notes that applied ethnomusicology is 'an approach to the approach to the study of the music of the worlds people.'<sup>8</sup> In order to get a recording or curatorial initiative off the ground and best represent the audio material (and the performers and compilers it represents) I found that Folkways' managers deal with several systems of operation and organisation. They are constantly thinking about, evaluating and discussing Folkways' 'approach to the approach.' It becomes a sophisticated juggling act and a considerate negotiation in order to fulfill their roles and responsibilities as the custodians of this material, whilst also maintaining their simultaneous responsibilities as a representative of the Smithsonian Institution and a commercial record label situated in an international music industry.

I am led to two key words that sum up my experience with this concept of the 'approach to the approach.' The first word is mission, the combined mission of the Smithsonian—'the increase and diffusion of knowledge,'—and the mission of Folkways—the responsibility of maintaining the integrity and history of the Folkways archives. The second word is negotiation. This refers to the negotiation needed to ascertain which logistical requirements will enable the articulation of that mission whilst navigating the Folkways collection to the public through CDs or on-line downloading sites.<sup>9</sup> My supervisor, Assistant Director Dr Sonneborn, encouraged me to question how we can best use the structure of the record label to further promote examples of fair cross-cultural representation and increase and diffuse the sonic knowledge that Folkways is entrusted with, simultaneously ensuring a fair compensation to the artists

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel Sheehy, 'A Few Notions about Philosophy and Strategy in Applied Ethnomusicology,' *Ethnomusicology* 36.3 (1992): 323.

<sup>9</sup> In noticing these several systems in which Folkways staff operate, I realised the responsibility that Folkways holds to different stakeholders. In managing a particular initiative you are not only accountable to the cultures and people you represent. You are also accountable for business decisions, for upholding the aims of the people you go into partnership with, for maintaining correct copyright. You are also accountable to the government and civil society that you are a part of and simultaneously represent. This accountability is a part of the 'approach to the approach.' It forms a fundamental part of the skills needed to negotiate with several key knowledge systems and organisations to maintain the integrity of the musicians and the music released under the Folkways recording label.

and communities represented and also simultaneously sustaining Folkways Recordings as a commercially viable non-profit business.<sup>10</sup>

One of my first tasks was to conduct research that would assist management in finding the most suitable digital aggregator for Folkways Recordings. An aggregator is a digital service that takes a label's digitised material and provides the label the service of distributing its music to pertinent online downloading stores. My task was to interview people from sister record labels in the United States, to find out which digital aggregator would be the most suitable for the distribution of Folkways' material.<sup>11</sup> I needed to understand some prior information about online distribution and the priorities of record labels similar to Folkways to gain effective and useful information. It gave me insight into music record label administration and its place in the competitive market and the US music industry, highlighting my need to be able to converse effectively in this business environment. This same business knowledge and savvy was apparent and necessary in all business and related administrative negotiations. In every instance, keen business knowledge was needed to negotiate the sensitive representation of the Folkways content and its cultural significance.

The need for balance appeared in the development of the Smithsonian MSN website. Upon my arrival, Folkways was in the thick of developing its online presence, both through the construction of Smithsonian Global Sound ([www.smithsonianglobalsound.org](http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org)) and the Smithsonian MSN website ([www.music.msn.com/smithsonian](http://www.music.msn.com/smithsonian)). Folkways management and marketing clearly recognised the need to distribute Folkways' content through the most accessible and current online digital mediums, and to find a site that would represent the collection fairly. The online Microsoft Network (MSN) provides Folkways with an overwhelmingly accessible and accessed site.

Folkways then needed to draft the most appropriate representation of this material, using ethnomusicological knowledge and ethical perspectives, to write informative, accessible blurbs that present the cultural content fairly. A great example of the results of this exercise may be seen in the blurb describing the 'Latino Roots' music content. This piece of writing encapsulates the reality of the varieties of sources and cultural groups that constitute this genre, urging listeners to listen for the 'Amerindian, African and European influences in music of Latino heritage.'<sup>12</sup> Thus, management needs to balance the commercial presentation of Folkways content on a popular music site, with its presentation remaining in the method, style and discourse of the museum-curated record label.

Another task required negotiation of an international, diplomatic nature. My supervisor wished to bequeath copies of the Folkways Cassette collection, an analog format no longer being sold in great quantity. Through an established contact with an ethnomusicologist, he wished to distribute the collection evenly amongst several key universities and academic institutions in Morocco. In order to communicate our aim and ensure that it was received by the most appropriate locations possible, we were required to negotiate with an ethnomusicologist, an

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<sup>10</sup> This approach is what Dr Sonneborn calls, the 'delicate process of trying to balance the philanthropic mandates of James Smithson and Moses Asch with commercial realities.' See Sonneborn, 'Smithsonian Folkways Recordings,' 118.

<sup>11</sup> At the time of writing, Folkways has completed a contract and commenced delivery to the Orchard, one of the candidates I identified.

<sup>12</sup> <<http://www.music.msn.com/smithsonian/latinoroots>> (accessed 27 June 2006).

academic, and diplomatic personnel. It required, on our behalf, constant reevaluation in order to communicate our aims and consider the aims and needs of others. As a guiding principle, we remembered the need to adhere to the mission of the Smithsonian, and to divide the content evenly amongst several key recipients. This project required me to learn how to communicate these goals, using diplomatic etiquette in formal letter writing and in telephone conversations. This resulted in me gaining skills in another knowledge and communication system, which needed to be understood, respected and worked within in order for effective decisions to be made and carried out.<sup>13</sup>

Similar consideration is needed in CD production. Folkways CD proposals are received as unsolicited project proposals, and some as academic proposals. Some proposals are submitted by amateur compilers who have significant ties to a community, and some by cultural trusts or organisations. For a project to be considered for production, it must contribute to the perpetuation of a musical culture, or a musical, traditional phenomenon. I contributed to the editing of liner notes for a proposed CD of music from South Asia. In doing so, I was alerted to the sensitive negotiation needed in order to receive the material, and to communicate the aims of both the compilers and the community in question, while adhering to the curatorial methods and ethnographic standards of Folkways.

The skills required for a successful coordination of an audio initiative surfaced in a different way when I assisted in creating a mock-up of a compilation folk-music CD. Constructing this mock-up required choosing lists of tracks from various suggested compilations made by several folk musicians, experts and archivists, whilst creating a list that also complemented itself sonically. It required taking suggestions, combining several different visions or ideas, and then submitting the project to marketing and other staff members so that their suggestions could also be incorporated. This circulation of ideas must happen as many times as is needed for a suitable album to be produced. It requires both outside and in-house discussion, collaboration and consultation.

The larger marketing perspective of Folkways provides an example of this continued need for mediation but, in a business sense, on a much larger scale, revealing how Folkways incorporates its work into a more 'macrocosmic picture.' In order to cover production costs, Folkways needs to produce titles of stellar, well-known artists, such as Lead Belly, Pete Seeger, Dave van Ronk, Ella Jenkins, Woody Guthrie and Mary Lou Williams. These are titles that will sell a considerable number of CDs. The production of this renowned material allows the production of smaller lesser-known titles of cultural significance and thereby enables the rest of the extensive archive to remain in print.

An ethnography of a Folkways CD thus forms a fascinating cultural, ideological and methodological amalgamation. This combination of music business management, ethnographic knowledge and theoretical approaches results in a Folkways record being a cultural representation of the sum of its parts. It is not only a representation of the culture or tradition that has been recorded, but of an applied ethnomusicological initiative, which consists of connecting and amalgamating cultural ideologies, methods and frameworks. Simultaneously

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<sup>13</sup> The work led to formal arrangements with a Moroccan university consortium, an American-Moroccan sister-cities organisation's aid, and efforts by the foreign ministries of the US and Morocco to affect the transfer of materials. The entire cassette collection was delivered to the Moroccan Embassy in Washington on 24 July 2006 for carriage to Casablanca.

a Folkways CD must fulfill the aims of academic scholarship and ethics, CD production and distribution, and business management in an institutional context, and all within a framework of the underlying mission of the Smithsonian.

Whilst living in Washington, working at Folkways provided an excellent point for musical conversation. I had musical discussions with the rock musicians I performed with. These musicians were strong articulators about their music and musical influences, they themselves being part of a strong urban music tradition that borrows and stems from an earlier era in American popular music history. We listened to and discussed Lead Belly's *In the Pines*, a song which is now more well known in Nirvana's version, *Where Did you Sleep Last Night?* Instances such as these caused me to appreciate further the immensity of the American folk music tradition, its appropriation by and contribution to contemporary rock music, and the links that resulted from my previously hearing it in Melbourne.

Learning how Folkways fulfils the multiple roles of a musical 'culture-broker,' a custodian of this sonic material and a manager of its dissemination and representation, has led me to be keen to pursue the process of ethnography, whilst understanding more broadly the systems within which it occurs. The methodological collaboration I witnessed and participated in is not unlike other ethnomusicological work. I look forward to applying this broader, macro perspective to combining future ethnographic research with cultural policy development and the development of appropriate initiatives, where I can acknowledge how extra-musical parameters that surround musical practice can be just as fundamental for a deeper understanding as the music itself, potentially contributing to its significance, and to the viability and the cultural identity of those who practice it.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> I would like to thank Dr Sonneborn for this internship opportunity, for his informative and unwavering support as my intern supervisor and for comments on drafts of this report. I would also like to extend a warm thank you to the wonderful staff at Smithsonian Folkways Recordings and the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.