"Mr. Flash and Miss Click:"
Ethnomusicology in the Global Village
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I would like to thank Lawrence Houle, Sadie Buck, Sifiso Ntuli and all those who have taught me not only about their music but about how difficult it really is to put one's ideals into practice. I am still learning.

The title of this paper, "Mr. Flash and Miss Click," comes from a colloquial phrase used in Trinidad for visiting anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and their ilk, shared with me by Anne-Marie Gallagher, a colleague who has worked with Calypsonians in both Toronto and Trinidad for a number of years. It is one of many current danger signals in the field of cultural research.

What is the difference between working in a gold mine and talking to an anthropologist?
— the gold mine takes your body, the anthropologist your soul.
— the mine suffocates you with rock dust, the anthropologist with flattery.
— about $5.00 an hour.
— the mine owner makes money, the anthropologist gets degrees.

Ethnomusicologists and other cultural researchers are finding themselves increasingly unwelcome in many of the cultures we seek to study. The rewards of achievement in the western academic world imply that those kinds of knowledge which can be communicated by the written word are considered vastly superior to non-written forms of "knowing." Academic written knowledge is largely analytic and classificatory in nature, whereas non-written knowledge includes more experiential, physical, and artistic expressions, as well as purely oral forms. Historically, these latter have been more highly valued in the non-western world, where, frequently, the written word is of minor importance. Moreover, because of their facility with these analytic, verbal forms of knowledge, even the most "bicultural" practitioners of western-style cultural research tend to accept that certain professional advantages are their rightful property, even when the aims of their own research involve elucidating and giving value to other, non-academic forms of cultural "knowing." This means that, in practice, we in the field of ethnomusicology have yet to accommodate basic issues of knowledge and power which are consistently raised by our own activities.

A relatively young academic discipline, ethnomusicology has been variously explained over the past 80 years or so, almost always using the terms "study," "knowledge," and/or "understanding" of the phenomena of music and human musical behaviour. The simple definition most generally bandied about in my years in the field has been Alan Merriam's, "the study of music in culture" (Merriam 1960), thus establishing ethnomusicology as a sort of musical branch of anthropology. Even in the early days of the field, prominent scholars, notably Charles Seeger, felt that the broader aims of ethnomusicology, or "comparative musicology" (as it was then known), should replace academic musicology as it had been—largely the study of European "art" music. Of course, this has yet to happen in most western-style educational institutions. The two disciplines have continued side by side, making uncomfortable bed-partners at times, differing over focus, aims, methodology, and aesthetics. Moreover, within ethnomusicology, as one might expect when the subject matter is no less than the entire sound-producing behaviour of humankind, there has been a great range of ideas concerning just how and what researchers should "study" in order to gain the "knowledge" and/or "understanding" they seek.

However, for all our lofty aims and enthusiastic attempts to be inclusive of all musical cultures, almost never do our definitions of the field actually address the meanings of such terms as "study," "knowledge," and "understanding." The implication of this silence is that there is such universal understanding of the idea of "understanding" that the concept never need be addressed. And, while no one would suggest that the very concept of "knowing" is limited to what can be verbalized on paper, in the real world, all the rewards of academic success are based on this relatively limited ability—theses, papers, books, articles, &c.

Nowhere is the gap between academic ability and the actual nature of the subject greater than in music. This is not to say that the practice of communicating knowledge of such a non-verbal art as music by means of the written word is not recognized as troublesome. Most of ethnomusicology's leading scholars have discussed the problem at length and almost all general texts in the field devote sections to the scholarly history of that discussion. Moreover, many ethnomusicologists have made admirable efforts in coming to grips with aspects of cultures, belief, and experience that do not lend themselves easily to verbalization and analysis. In fact, professional credibility
in the field practically demands that we wrestle with our non-verbal demons—in print, much as I am doing now. But after all, as Bruno Nettl says, "it is hard to imagine practical alternatives" (Nettl, 1983/83). So the ongoing dialogue is very much about how to accomplish an awkward, difficult, lamentable, but unavoidable task. What it is not is a serious look at the inter-cultural implications of measuring "knowledge" by such a culturally-biased activity as writing.

I use the term "culturally-biased" because nowhere has the ability to read and write been so closely tied to the very idea of intelligence and wisdom as it has in the European (a.k.a. "western") world of the past millennium. That the bond between these two quite distinct ideas, i.e., that those who write and analyze well are also the most "intelligent" and "learned" among us, is largely unconscious makes the whole situation Eurocentric. In a cross-cultural field such as ethnomusicology, the fact that such a Eurocentric bias underpins the entire academic system is especially dangerous. In a nutshell, we, the researchers educated in western-style institutions whose success within their own culture depends upon a skill that their own culture excels in, attempting to elucidate the cultures of peoples whose "knowledge" and "understanding" are often acquired and communicated in very different ways. All good intentions to the contrary, in this situation, a basically colonial and somewhat exploitive power relationship is practically inevitable between western-style scholarly researchers and their non-western informants.

But does western culture only acknowledge written knowledge? No, but I believe it fair to say that those who analyze music generally hold more secure, prestigious and better-paid jobs in our culture as professors, authors, critics, journalists, &c., than do musicians themselves. The latter, be they composers or performers, generally struggle from engagement to engagement, largely on their own financial resources and the skills of their publicists for whatever status they are able to achieve. Western culture still romanticizes the "starving artist"—it's a good substitute for actually paying them. One could argue that non-verbal artistry is acknowledged in other ways than by salaried positions, i.e., attendance at concerts and sales of recordings. Further, we might say that performance fees, royalties, and good deals from record companies are where artists can achieve their rewards, ever encouraged by the promise of unlimited fame and fortune as achieved by a select few. In spite of this, however, I maintain that our culture consistently rewards the ability to explain art over the actual practice of it, both materially and in terms of social status. Unfortunately, this situation has at least two seriously undesirable consequences in any field involving inter-cultural research.

Firstly, it means that researchers will tend to focus on those aspects of a culture which are easily observed and described, probably without realizing, and almost certainly without understanding, the relative importance of different kinds of knowledge in a culture other than their own. We now know, for example, that much ethnomusicological work on non-western cultures in the past has been misleading at best, flatly wrong at worst. Some musicians, certain Native musicians of my acquaintance, for example, have become so disgusted with the distortions, errors, and irrelevance of much of what has been said about them that they are extremely wary of working with outside researchers in any capacity.

Secondly, the high value we place on writing means that the entire western academic system, as well as arts granting agencies, teaching institutions, and even performance venues, support the careers of purveyors of relatively limited second-hand knowledge, such as myself and my western-trained colleagues, often at the expense of those whose knowledge and artistry is the basis for our supposed expertise. Without some serious rethinking of our value system, I expect this will continue until such time as those whose knowledge of non-western cultures is more profound learn also to explain themselves in print. By silently accepting our disproportionate success, we betray the tribute our work often attempts to pay to these cultures and their other ways of knowing. Furthermore, we do great disservice to students of music at all levels who need to learn about the world's music from first-hand, not second-hand, sources.

So, to add insult to injury, as well as having to answer for a slew of misinformation published about their cultures, the non-western world has to watch us build comparatively lucrative careers out of the crumbs of knowledge we have gleaned about them. As an illustration of both of these problems, imagine the following scenario:

A Japanese researcher wants to learn about urban English-Canadian classical musical culture and comes to Toronto—say, a cellist in a professional quartet. Our Japanese researcher wants to understand what, to her, is an unusual and exotic form of music-making. She calls you up. She asks if she can take lessons on the cello, at the going rate, of course. She explains she is studying western musical culture for her education. She would like to ask you some questions apart from the lessons. Could she come to your house and interview you? Also, when you are performing and can she attend? She discovers that you rehearse once a week with your quartet. Would it be possible to come to your rehearsals over the next few months? Could she videotape them? A few months along, she hears you are having a social party at your house where people may play. If she promises not to get in the way and not bring her tape recorder, could she come? She phones a couple of times a week with questions about various aspects of Canadian musical culture and writes down everything you say. She shows you drafts of her work and asks you if you would mind reading and commenting on them, since she really does want to get everything right. You wonder how she can afford to spend a year in Toronto, and who is paying for it. You find out she has a grant and that this is, in fact, a paying job for her. You begin to question the constant demands
on your unpaid time but not wishing to appear ungenerous, you try to accommodate her as much as possible. After all, she seems to be interested, sincere and intelligent. You even invite her to dinner, where she strikes up cordial relations with your children and family and asks them about music. They are flattered.

Her year up, she leaves, taking her notes, papers, tapes, and videos with her. You hear that she has subsequently landed a well-paying job at an educational institution in Japan where she now teaches cello to Japanese students and coaches string quartets. She lectures on the cultural practices of urban English-Canadian musicians. She publishes a book with an accompanying tape, which, to your horror, you realize she taped at a rehearsal when your quartet was reading through a new piece for the first time. You find someone who can read Japanese to tell you what the book says and find that there are many errors in it. It is full of statements such as, "according to my research, Canadians like to lean on their cellos in moments of rest, as if hugging them" (this is a particular quirk of yours), or "Canadians take breaks frequently when rehearsing to go to the bathroom; one wonders if cello playing has a laxative effect?" (you drink a lot of coffee when rehearsing). You realize that the book is full of such overgeneralizations, continually emphasizes irrelevant details, and avoids any discussion of the quality of musical performance. In fact, it assumes that all performances are equally good and equally important.

Although the playing of your Japanese researcher is fairly pathetic by professional standards of your culture, she is invited to international conferences, both to perform on the cello and to lecture on its practice and use in Canadian culture. Sometimes, she arranges for you to come and perform with your group, but you are not invited to the performances where the papers are read, even though you speak some Japanese, on the pretext that an artist such as yourself might be bored by the analysis. Most people at the conference keep a respectful distance, or ask you how your trip was, while addressing all serious questions about the practice of cello playing to your researcher.

A few years later your situation at home has changed. There is little work for cello players any more in your culture as more and more people are listening to the new Japanese popular music which is flooding the radio. You can no longer make an adequate living in your own culture. "Ah," you think, "as at Japanese schools, they are interested in Canadian cello playing. Perhaps they will hire me to teach there." You call your researcher. She explains that you cannot teach at a Japanese university without a Japanese degree such as she obtained for her research on Canadian cello playing. She acknowledges that you would be a much more suitable teacher of cello and the cultural practices surrounding it, but alas, there is nothing she can do. She wishes you well.

Facetious as this scenario is, it’s not far removed from my own research with Métis fiddlers in Manitoba about ten years ago, which was praised at the time for maintaining current standards of political correctness. I worked with a Native collaborator/consultant who was paid the same field wages I was; we made commercial recordings of the musicians; musicians were paid session fees and royalties; I wrote extensive liner notes, including biographies of, and quotes from, each musician; I arranged paying performances for the fiddlers, as well as appearances at international festivals. But the fact remains. Not only was I given money to go there and spend time with the fiddlers and their families while they, for the most part, were not paid for the time they spent with me; ultimately, I benefitted a great deal more in professional and economic terms from our association than they did.

As so many researchers do, I have rationalized this in several ways: many of my informants were old, somewhat unwell, they had time on their hands anyway; I was an interesting novelty for them; most of them are too shy to participate in events outside their community anyway; my work gave them a greater sense of pride and self-worth, &c. In retrospect, I think I got by on naivety the first time. Certainly, consciously counting on the theory that there will be enough people—perhaps older and retired, or merely saintly—who have the time, means, and goodwill to share what they know with outsiders for the dubious returns of flattery, is a shaky basis for scientific research.
I would venture that most researchers are ill-prepared for the more practical requests for money, jobs, help in immigrating, professional opportunities, &c., that come their way. My sense is that many informants see this lack of practical help as evidence that their relatively more privileged researchers are really just engaged in another form of plunder. Tourists, pirates, or anthropologists, it's all the same; they take without giving in return. I have had the good fortune to become acquainted with musicians from widely differing cultures over the past ten years, including Trinidad, South Africa, Native Canada, and Latin America. Some of my new musical compatriots view all cultural researchers as hypocrites—they talk of respect, but, in reality, mine the world for cultural "gold" which they take away to build their personal fortunes. Moreover, as did their more obviously mercenary predecessors, they use the largely unrewarded labor and knowledge of locals. Given this attitude, should we be surprised that we are no longer welcome in many areas?

Since many ethnomusicologists, myself among them, prefer to see themselves as idealistic folk who are trying to right some of the wrongs of the colonial past by praising and supporting indigenous culture rather than trying to eradicate it, we are generally hurt by being lumped into the same category as the stereotypical western capitalist exploiter. But why are we so unprepared for such attitudes towards those educated in western-style institutions?

To be kind, the sheer pace of westernization throughout the world surely plays some part. Until recently, the participation of many of our informants in western culture was either not an issue at all or a much more minor one than it has suddenly become. We just haven't caught up to the new reality of globalization, which, for much of the world, means westernization. Yes, there are still places in the world where people have little interest in travelling outside their homeland or in partaking of the fruits of western society. But these cultures are becoming increasingly rare. It seems that much of the world is hungering for a piece of the western economic pie. A greater and greater proportion of the populations of Africa, Asia, and South America, as well as of the indigenous peoples of North America, attend western-style schools, where they learn to read and write in English and, if opportunity allows, go on to western-style universities. Whereas, in the past, people were often forced to learn western ways as part of an oppressive and overbearing colonial system, in the present, western education is more likely to be eagerly sought as a ticket to a better life. Many are already caught in the schizophrenia of living between two worlds—a western one with its promise of material advantages versus a local tradition that may value other forms of knowledge more highly, but doesn't keep food on the table. Increasingly, if people want to eat, they must dance to the west's tune. So they struggle to achieve according to western standards.

In my work with Native, African, and Latin American musicians, I see two contrary cultural trends resulting from this increasingly rapid exposure to western ways. Firstly, many people, including musicians, begin to look down on their older traditions as backwards, to distrust their older forms of knowledge and belief, thinking these traditions will hold them back in their rush towards "modernity." Unfortunately, supporting indigenous culture as an educated westerner in this climate easily takes on repressive overtones. Even when not explicitly stated, ethnomusicological work often implies the following: stay isolated, resist western influence, keep your traditional culture (so I can study it). When we reinforce this by openly discouraging our informants from participating in western culture, or even by just proclaiming ourselves powerless to help them, we may be judged to be actively trying to exclude them from the benefits of western life. As an admittedly extreme case in point, in South Africa under apartheid, "locals" (the indigenous black population) were similarly encouraged to maintain their traditional cultures and were denied western education. There were conscious tactics of oppression, designed to keep all native Africans split into small, easily controlled tribal units who were ignorant of western ways. This allowed the European minority to continue to become wealthy from the cheap labor they provided. It was only in becoming more western, in demanding western education and the privileges that had always gone with it, in rejecting their traditional heritages, that many black South Africans felt they could overcome their oppression—beat the oppressors at their own game, so to speak. Whether we wish to acknowledge it or not, there is an uncomfortable parallel here to cultural research which, implicitly or explicitly, encourages the maintenance of traditional culture.

The second and opposing trend, however, is the realization by many that their traditions actually have value in the western market. In Toronto, for example, there are many musicians and performing artists among recent immigrants, some lured by the seeming western interest in their cultures and art forms, a situation for which ethnomusicologists must take some responsibility. Even artists who stay at home look to western markets for the sale of their recordings. In this situation, the ethnomusicologist/cultural researcher is likely to be seen as a kind of broker, distributor, publicist—the classic "middleman." And like middlemen in any commodity exchange, if they seem to be taking more than is their due, they are deemed to be exploitive.

It comes down to this. Whether or not one wants to participate in western society, why would anyone willingly share knowledge about their culture with someone who stands to benefit disproportionately from that knowledge? And for the vast majority of musician/informants who do have career aspirations, how can initial goodwill not turn to bitterness as they watch someone they thought had their best interests at heart receive international recognition for a couple of years of work on something which is deeply rooted in their culture? Some may accept that the researcher is being rewarded for a particular skill which is highly valued in the west and which the native musicians themselves may not have, i.e., that very ability to analyze, talk about, and write about music that we have described. But I would venture that far more do not make the distinction between knowledge on paper and what they recognize as real knowledge; nor do they understand why writing something down, in itself, is
considered a mark of wisdom. They also see researchers, and even the students of researchers, performing, teaching, and recording their music, often for money. These, at very least, are jobs which could go to them. As a South African writer and musician friend says frequently (in turning down yet another request for his unpaid time and knowledge by yet another Euro-Canadian who is getting paid to be an "expert" on South African culture): "It's about where my next job is coming from."

And so, I call to myself and my compatriots in the field of cultural research to heed the danger signs around us. Our informants are becoming savvy to the inequities of working with western-style researchers far more quickly than researchers themselves, it seems. If we must also learn how to be fair and decent from our informants along with other aspects of culture, then so be it, but let us do it quickly, before we lose all credibility. It is essential for the survival of the field, not to mention the self-respect of those of us who would work within it, that we abandon our silent acceptance of the current situation and look for more inclusive and cross-cultural approaches to the idea of "knowing." We must find ways of sharing the privileges and respect that the western world gives to those who are deemed to "know" with those who really know. If we do not, I believe our work will become more and more limited in scope as fewer "informants"" the world over will be willing to co-operate with a system that seems to have no place for them within it. Furthermore, as more artists find their own voices in the global milieu, they will increasingly make their anger known.

I believe this is the most basic and important issue facing ethnomusicology today. Cultural researchers in any discipline tend to champion the differences between cultures, including the non-analytic kinds of knowledge and experience they discover in their travels. But lip service is not enough and may, in fact, as in the South African example, contribute to maintaining current inequities. Whereas western researchers, musicians, and teachers who involve themselves in cultures other than their own may not be accountable for the historical roots of the present situation, as beneficiaries of these inequities, we are all personally responsible for implementing change. If we truly believe other cultures are equal to our own we must learn to put our money where our mouths are in terms of who gets the jobs, who gets the recognition, who is considered the expert. This means finding ways to reward knowledge and skills apart from people's ability to write essays, theses, grant applications, promotional materials, and resumes. It means giving opportunities to teach and to performers whose knowledge of culture is first-hand, and being willing to learn from them in the ways that they see fit to teach us.

Many will argue for maintaining the status quo in the name of "academic standards." Without doubt, we need to move thoughtfully on these questions. But there are some very obvious, simple, and relatively painless steps that could be taken immediately on both individual and institutional levels. First, informants can be credited as co-authors in published work, even if their contributions are purely oral. (I recently reviewed a book of Native songs, adapted from a PhD thesis, in which fully three-quarters of the text was made up direct quotes from informants. Neither they nor the translator/transcriber of the 34 song texts were given title page credit.) Second, a special category of credit, perhaps an honorary degree of some sort, can be established for major informants in PhD work. Both of these measures would indicate that we actually believe orally maintained and communicated knowledge to be worthy of recognition in our culture. Third, serious consideration of the analytic/academic capabilities of audio-visual technologies would create much wider access for many people for whom the mastery of electronic media is not nearly so daunting as the mastery of the written word in a second language. After all, we already have models in other fields of academic endeavour which make current ethnomusicological practice seem somewhat backwards by comparison; composers, for example, receive PhDs partially based on scores or tapes of their compositions; similarly, sculptors, artists, writers, and filmmakers receive academic credit for their work in non-verbal media.

And finally, we must create respected professional opportunities for non-western musicians if we wish to learn about their cultures, perhaps, not least of all, so that they have some reason to want to maintain their cultures at all. We must overcome the western assumption that we have the right to all knowledge for knowledge's sake alone and that other cultures have some sort of obligation to share their knowledge with us. Western-trained musicians and ethnomusicologists must give up the notion that their work is universal and begin to see themselves as merely one more culturally-determined voice in an international dialogue about music. We must question the power and privilege that comes to us automatically as inheritors of a historical system that assumes its "superior" reasoning power and "higher" forms of knowledge, especially as that system is coming to dominate the world more and more. If we do not meet this challenge, I believe we deserve to find more and more doors closed in our faces.

Notes
1 See B. Nettl's "In the Speech Mode" in The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts (82-103) or A. Merriam's "The Study of Ethnomusicology" in The Anthropology of Music (3-16) as two examples of several.
2 See Blacking, Feld, and Diamond, Crook and Rosen for significant examples.

Bibliography