Confessions of a Theory Skeptic

I wish I could summarize all the elegant formulations I've heard today, but I'll stick with a short script I prepared- the hour is late. I have to confess that I've always been a bit allergic to the word "theory," and don't think I've used it much, if at all, in my writing. This is partly in response to the atmosphere of the 1980s and 1990s, when the term got its capital T and became an almost sectarian system based on a canon of approved thinkers and works. It wasn't what I did. At one point, when I was working on film music, I picked up a book by Noel Carroll, who talked encouragingly about "mid-level theory," and I felt the pleasure of recognition- maybe that was where I lived.

More to the point of my assignment here, I think of the anthropologist Michael Jackson's evocation of that "rhythm between absorption in the world of books and engagement in the world," where one has "to strike a balance between one's involvement in two kinds of lifeworld-the first intimate and immediate, the second more abstract and remote." (Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology, Chicago, 2013, xiii) For me, theory is a working practice with its rhythm of seeing patterns that emerge from ethnography, and then picking up the working tools that you and others have shaped, for use on the workbench. Tools can come from anywhere. I've drawn on insights from many discourses in my day. All of us here have been very flexible in source-hunting for inspiration, once we see the basic pattern of the work at hand. This selectivity goes back at least to Steve Feld's 1982 "Sound and Sentiment," which I've cited with students as the first of our monographs to call its approach "eclectic."

There's one more shaping factor: theory is bent by temperament. I remember the exact moment, driving in our VW beetle across the steppes of Kattaghan, when the scattered impressions I had gotten from visits to several towns fell into place as a pattern about music and urban life. It was a true light-bulb moment. Ever since, I've been drawn to situations and solutions where a number of small musical systems coexist and communicate within a larger, overarching social situation, no matter where. I didn't sit down to write what become "Micromusics of the West" because I was trying to do theory. I felt compelled to formulate some thoughts because I noticed everyone

writing about those kinds of issues tend to re-invent the wheel. It seemed to be helpful to suggest a pattern for what I was reading and observing as people were becoming interested in interactivity rather than hegemony. I threw in a bunch of tools I had noticed weren't being picked up much on our workbench, like code-switching. But I refused even to define the main term of the essay, "subculture." That's not what a theory would do. We all have our familiar ways of making sense of music-cultural information, even if the contexts change radically over time, as do the tools. Despite looking communal, theory is personal.

Let me ground this general viewpoint with some specifics from my career to show the gradations of personal theory. I'll suggest one continuum: distance from the lives and background of the people studied. In Afghanistan, the gap was huge and the people were very reticent to talk analytically about music. That forced me to find my own patterns and hunt hard for any tools of discourse that might apply, in an early period of our discipline. Basically, I had European folkloristics, musicology, Bruno Nettl, and Alan Merriam to turn to for ethnomusicological theory guidance. This was just before the term "ethnic boundaries" came in, when urban anthropology was in its infancy, so I had to turn to tools from linguistics and material culture studies. Organology is hardly theoretical, but proved useful, and now I see the "new material culture" is becoming a theory of its own forty years later.

Next, when I studied the American Cantorate in the 1980s, instead of being a total outsider, I was a semi-native to the traditions and was working with highly educated and articulate people who came from my own background. Partly it was a matter of bouncing my patterns of thinking about their role and repertoire off theirs, a very different sort of theorizing. Thanks to a generous NEH grant, I was able to do something unethnomusicological: generate a large database -questionnaires, oral histories, core repertoire samples—that tended towards the sociological, alongside the historical, ethnographic, and musicological, so no single "theory" was going to fit the data. Often, I had to forecast the very patterns that I might hopefully find, given the total lack of data on the topics at hand. I had to hope that my intuitions would be confirmed by the mass of information I elicited. The middle-distance location I occupied allowed me to find common ground with my collaborators. As in most of the

contexts I've worked in, I felt the strong need to try to integrate the disparate data from ethnography, history, and what we call "the music itself." That's not a theory of ethnomusicology, rather a tenet of practice I urge on my students.

Finally, my most recent project, Detroit in my day, shortened the distance to zero, since my own memory, and that of old friends and acquaintances, became the territory to search. Comforted by my usual inclination to look for micromusical management, I tried to blend this close-up and personal view with data from a broad city survey. That wasn't easy, given the very selective resources and available tools for understanding the life of music in a major metropolis in midcentury. Recent advances in urban and spatial theory were helpful, but I found myself more drawn to metaphors as an organizing principle. Detroit was all about mobility- mass migration and urban transport, especially including the cars that the workers made, bought, and drove around 139 square miles, plus suburbs, vacations, and musicians' touring networks. The imperative of traffic offered me a way to think about musical flow. This helped me to make chapter headings out of very disparate zones of activity within a sprawling city.

Is there a theory there? I doubt it. I think each phase of our personal engagement with musical contexts suggests its own management. I often tell students to let the data speak to them rather than tell it how to behave. Maybe that's a theory of ethnomusicology after all.