

Music: My Non-Woke Personal Library and Its Saving Virtues

By Geoffrey Clarfield

Max Weber's classic sociological study, *The Protestant Ethic, and the Spirit of Capitalism*, is still read today by serious students of society. There is an impossibly large secondary literature both for and against his thesis, that the rise of extreme Protestant sects in Europe during the early modern period created a psychological type whose belief in hard work and investment (and reduced spending) as the path to salvation is what fueled capitalism.



Weber also argued that only an uncommon few – like Mozart, Beethoven, or Mendelssohn – who are born with a “gift,” was expanded by Protestantism to include most people, with the view that as an individual approaches

maturity he is “called” to a certain kind of work or profession. This is a secular version of a religious phenomenon.

In Post WWII Western societies this idea became mainstream and

gave birth to “guidance counselors” and various kinds of formal aptitude testing that purports to draw out what configuration of skills and talent will prepare each student for professional satisfaction and success in the working world. World-famous entrepreneurs usually do not do well on these tests. Nor do rock stars.

That was the world I grew up in, but in a sense, I would like to think that I was a modest throwback to earlier times. At the age of five I came home from day camp singing *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* from *The Wizard of Oz*. Soon after I enrolled as a student of classical singing at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto.

This led to a position as a boy soprano in the Canadian National Opera, numerous public recitals, radio jingle work, stage musicals and films. By the time I quit my formal singing career at the age of fourteen, I had professional prospects and three managers.

So from the age of five, I was “called” by music, and although I had a normal upbringing and education in all other respects, I experienced the world through a musical lens, and thought of myself as a musician from an early age. I was fortunate that my puberty coincided with the explosion and reinvention of Anglo and Afro American roots music in the “sixties.”

Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Mississippi John Hurt, The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Jaimie Robbie Robinson, Arethra Franklin, and a host of other baby boomers took ballads, blues, hymns and gospel and created something new and remarkable. With the help of American draft dodgers who fled to Canada, I learned to play guitar and sing these styles of music and performed in various folk clubs around town from my early teenage years on. I also went to a gazillion concerts and clubs and amassed a substantial collection of vinyl.

But this was not enough for me. I discovered the world music section of the Toronto Public Library, and every week I would take a sonic chance on a new musical culture: Egypt, Morocco, Israel, Turkey, Greece, India, Java, Bali, Japan, Mexico, etc. I would take out its representative albums and listen to them repeatedly: ten or twenty times, at least, more if I really liked them. I would read the liner notes on the back of each album to get the cultural context for what I was hearing.

So during high school I was exposed to a wide range of music from around the world. This music is different from the commercial category that has come to be called "World Music." What I was listening to were selections from field recordings made by sonic travelers and serious musicologists. By the time I graduated from high school I had a reasonable vinyl collection of archival music from non-Western cultures, including the folk music of Europe and Latin America.

After high school I was extremely fortunate to be directed to a new, liberal, open-minded, and experimental music program that led to a BFA with a major in music. There I got to study world music, ethnomusicology, the social sciences, and performance in non-Western music, while also studying Western classical music, counterpoint, and harmony. I spent four years dedicated to these studies. In those days, there was not much written material available about the world of non-Western music, but there were some foundational classics.

The first was a dull, but to me endlessly fascinating, bibliography of traditional music research done from the late 19th century until soon after WWII, put together by Jaap Kunst. Kunst was a Dutch colonial administrator in the Netherland's Indonesian empire who became fascinated by both the advanced and the folk gong orchestras of the Indonesian Archipelago. This music is generically called *Gamelan* in the Indonesian language.

There were also the works by Hornbostel and Sachs, two

distinct, brilliant, and creative German speaking scholars and collectors. Eric Von Hornbostel (his father was an aristocrat) arranged the archives of traditional music in Berlin with his colleague, Curt Sachs. Together they established a complex but logical world taxonomy of musical instruments that is still in use by musicologists today: the Sachs Hornbostel taxonomic system.

On my bookshelves I have Sach's *The History of Musical Instruments*, which I read avidly as an undergraduate. Before he died, Hornbostel wrote a hard to decipher theory of the evolution of music, called *The Wellsprings of Music*. His research paradigm has been disparaged by baby boomer ethnomusicologists, but he had a disciple, Alan Lomax, who was one of the most colorful and influential ethnomusicologists to have lived and worked in the 20th century. More on Alan Lomax later in this essay.

With regards to the great Jaap Kunst and his disciples, it is hard to put into words the joy and peace that I have gained from what must by now be thousands of hours of listening to the recordings of various Southeast Asian gong and Indonesian *gamelans* that he and his colleagues in the East brought to the world's attention (especially those of frantic Bali, and meditative Java.)

I certainly was not the first Canadian to fall under the spell of Indonesian gongs. The most prominent was Canadian composer and writer, Colin McPhee, an Anglo Canadian child prodigy who came to Toronto from Montreal during WWI to study piano performance with a student of Franz Liszt. Like many other gifted creative types, McPhee ended up in Bohemian Paris during the early 1920s and there heard vinyl recordings of Balinese gongs which changed his life.

He ended up spending much of the 1930s in Bali, studying gamelan, transcribing it, and writing compositions inspired by Balinese themes. Eventually, he returned to North America,

living hand to mouth as a composer and performer in New York City. He wrote a phenomenal memoir of his life, *House in Bali*, and was a foundational influence on modern American avant garde composers such as Terry Riley and Philip Glass.

I am still waiting for the City of Toronto to put up a bronze commemorative statue of this “dead white male” Canadian composer who has had such a disproportionate influence on what is now called “pattern and new age music.” McPhee was “called” to Bali, for which we must all be grateful.

Finally, I cannot write about world music, or of ethnomusicology without reference to Bruno Nettl. He came from an assimilated Czech German Jewish background. His father was a musicologist who authored a book about Mozart and Masonry. Nettl did field work among Amerindians, and it is due to his excellent interpersonal skills, clear thinking, his writing, and his desire to facilitate the careers of younger scholars, that he became one of the central movers and shakers of what came to be called post war North American ethnomusicology.

I saw him lecture once, and had the honor of shaking his hand. He was also a chronicler of ethnomusicology, well read in anthropology and able to articulate themes and trends in that field.

I read his introductory text, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*, as an undergraduate; and as a graduate student getting ready for my own ethnomusicological adventure in the deserts of East Africa, I read his solid survey of the field, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-Three Discussions*, where he outlines the major intellectual themes that have characterized modern ethnomusicological research.

Much later, I read Nettl’s brief history of ethnomusicology, *Nettl’s Elephant*, well worth the read.

In keeping with Alan Merriam’s, *The Anthropology of Music*, an early book by a pioneer in the field, Nettl reminds us that

modern ethnomusicologists are dedicated to a search for the ordered and structural relationship between the structure of musical sound, and the social structure of musical performance and its myriad events, combined with the hard to elicit value and aesthetic system that informs the majority of listeners in any given culture.

Reading Nettl over the years kept me abreast of the intellectual themes of a discipline I had joined and made me aware of the context of many of my own projects. He will be missed, as he was one who saw the forest from the trees. Today so much ethnomusicological writing has descended into postmodern and radical activist gobbledygook. It is a pity and a shame.

Another book that caught my undergraduate interest is *The Ethnomusicologist* by Mantle Hood, a Hollywood film composer whose wife was a dancer. Hood was the head of the Ethnomusicology Department at UCLA in California. He once came to our department in Toronto to give a talk. He was dressed like a character out of Film Noir in a black, well-tailored pinstripe suit and vest. He spoke in a slow semi aristocratic Anglo-American way, the very opposite of an intense New York intellectual.

Hood regaled us with tales of studying and recording Javanese gamelan in the late 1940s while he puffed on a scented Indonesian cigarette. To his eternal credit he found Colin McPhee after WWII, drunk and penniless, in a run-down apartment in Manhattan, and arranged to move him to Los Angeles where he taught world music to undergraduates for four years, secure and with dignity, until he succumbed to the ravages of his incurable alcoholism.

Hood argued that it is not enough to record and analyze non-Western music. He believed that to fully understand it, you must learn to play and sing it well enough to satisfy "native audiences." Hood called this ability "bimusicality." One of my

favorite professors was a student of a student of Hood. He had learned to master the Japanese Koto. Another professor became a famous singer of South Indian Classical ragas.

So informed by Hood I was determined to learn to play the oud, a fat bellied lute without frets that is common to the Arab and Turkic world. It is used to play the complex modal art music called *makam*, which was and remains the legacy of the ruling classes of the preindustrial Islamic States. The oud is also used for popular and cabaret style music.

In addition to Muslims, it has been played by Jewish, Greek, Armenian and other Christian minorities in the Islamic world to express both the classical styles of their rulers, as well as the sentiments of modernizers that were popular in the cafes and restaurants that emerged in the Islamic world, and abroad, before and during colonialism.

I learned from William P. Malm's short introductory text, *Music Cultures of the Pacific, the Near East, and Asia*, that this "Pan Islamic tradition" was, simply put, part of the soundscape of multiethnic congeries of musicians from the Eastern Mediterranean who performed in public for mixed audiences.

I spent some months as a private student of the Egyptian born Toronto based Kanun player, George Sawa, who taught me the modal theory of *Maqam*, but I will be the first to point out that familiarity is different from mastery. I am not a "master of the *Maqam*," as I did not and have not studied in sufficient depth the classical traditions of Turkey and Egypt, for example. To the outsider it is more like an enchanted version of modal snakes and ladders. It is a feast to the ear and worth cultivating. I should have tried a bit harder to become a master of maqam.

But even then, undergraduates are easily distracted. In Toronto I fell in with a group of Greek speaking Kalderash

Gypsies (Roma who called themselves Gypsies) who played the Cabaret style of this music with other Arab, Israeli, Turkish and Greeks immigrants.

I joined them in playing the Greek and Macedonian owned nightclubs and cabarets on the east side of town, often providing accompaniment for belly dancers. We drank and ate like kings, and I was proud that my playing passed the muster of my Romani hosts and eastern Mediterranean audiences. I played a lot of oud in those days. Surprisingly, I got paid to do so. But I can only say modestly that, even now, at the end of my decades long experiment in bimusicality that I am basically a "bimusical" Eastern Mediterranean cabaret style oud player.

The Voice of Atlas-In Search of the Music of Morocco (1936) by Philip Thornton also helped set me on this path. I found this book on the shelves of the Toronto Public Library when I was a young undergraduate. By that time I was already falling under the spell of some music cultures more than others. Morocco was one of them.

Thornton was an English musician and expert in Arab and Persian music who broadcasted out of London. He went to Morocco for its music. His humorous, lighthearted but fine evocations of the different genres of pre-WWII Moroccan music, including the music of Morocco's Jewish community, whetted my appetite for my own later 20th century adventures.

As a first step, I contacted the Toronto Synagogue of the Moroccan Jews of Tangier in Toronto and made field recordings and interviewed them about their various kinds of music. I still get emails, weekly, from Academic websites that someone has just read my article on the music of the Moroccan Jews of Toronto.

Thornton's book, and later, the recordings of Moroccan folk music made by American ethnomusicologist, Philip Schuyler

(with whom I corresponded), motivated me to spend a few months living and travelling in Morocco, after I finished my BA, to experience the marvelous music of that country firsthand.

I travelled in the north of the country and made field recordings there during a Berber Saint's feast in the Atlas mountains. I also lived for a time in Marrakech, where I spent many afternoons befriending various kinds of musicians and recording their music in Marrakech's massive public square, the *Jmalfna*. I also made field recordings in the courtyard of my Moroccan-style house in Marrakech.

Playing the oud opened many doors for me in Morocco. I remember, as if it were yesterday, being invited along with a friend, to a Muslim Arab family's domicile in the old city of Fez for an evening meal during the month-long Ramadan fast during the day, and feast at night. The grandmother of the family interviewed me in French as she smoked her long pipe of *kif* (local marijuana).

Soon after my arrival, her granddaughter and one of her friends showed up. They were wearing long Moroccan robes. Their heads were covered in the female Moroccan headdress popular at the time that made the women look like Catholic nuns. They took these off and revealed fashionable French outfits underneath. Their facial features were European, attesting to the massive, centuries long Moroccan "white slave trade" which raided the coasts of Spain and France, and even went all the way to raid southern England. They were good looking young women.

They quite quickly realized that this was some sort of surreptitious supervised "date" improvised by their smiling grandma who asked me and my friend to perform on the oud and drum. We complied and I watched them, fascinated by the gentle eroticism of the two girls dancing. This was interspersed with Moroccan tea and sweets, as they talked about how free the women of Spain and France really were compared to their purdah-like existence as Moroccan women.

Thank you, Thornton but if the reader is curious, I left it at that.

Since I began writing for the public some twenty years ago, I have tried increasingly to focus on what it felt like to not know or not understand something that I now know well. Northrop Frye called this remembering your own ignorance as a starting point in understanding younger students.

I apply this especially to writing about music. It is fair to say that I grew up with a musical tension between different genres of music that took me some time to resolve. First, there was my early introduction to what we now call European Art music, both in public school, the Conservatory, TV, and Radio. Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were early companions. As a boy soprano I internalized these composers, or in some way assimilated part of my psychological identity with them. They are in a class by themselves. "The guys" is what one character in the TV series, *Mozart in the Jungle*, called them. I had a direct line to them, albeit at a Junior level. Then there was the music of the sixties, popular North American music, ballads, blues, and Jazz.

And finally, there was the music of the Jewish people. From an early age I was intrigued by the chants I heard in the Synagogue; nasal, oriental, modal to be exact (a bit like Makam). Then, there were vestiges of Yiddish folk songs, a few songs here and there that my mother remembered from her childhood, learned from her parents. They were sung in a quite different vocal style; relaxed, melodic and usually sad. I was intrigued that the soon to be world-famous folk rocker, the Scotsman Donovan Leitch, included one of the ballads that my mother knew in an early album: "Donna donna donna donna."

Until my last year of high school I marveled at the existence of these two, unrelated streams of Jewish and European music, not resolved until a high school teacher introduced me to a book by Eric Werner, a well-known and successful Jewish

composer, musicologist, and world expert on the assimilated German Jewish composer, Felix Mendelssohn.

Werner escaped Hitler's Germany just before WWII and settled in New York. Troubled by the fact that the Nazi cultural commissars drew a line between "authentic" German and "inauthentic" Jewish music, Werner set out to disprove this.

He spent the war years showing that the origins of Catholic PlainChant lie in ancient Jewish Synagogue music. The result was two volumes of densely worded, heavily footnoted books called *The Sacred Bridge*.

By the time I was an undergraduate, I understood that the influence of the Bible on Western civilization which I described at the beginning of this essay was not limited to religion, law, politics and poetry but extended, in the deepest and most unconscious way into the "*cantus firmus*" of European art music, those chants taken from Gregorian plainsong upon which the harmonic structure of much European art music has been built for more than a thousand years. Simply put, a lot of early European art music is unconsciously based on melodies taken from the ancient Synagogue. Quite a sacred bridge indeed.

Reading Werner thrust me back two generations in time, musically speaking. My maternal grandfather, born and raised in the Ukraine, had been drafted into the army of Czar Nicholas II, where he became the official drummer for his regiment. When he immigrated to Toronto before WWI, after having served in the Russian Japanese war, he played for Yiddish speaking Klezmer musicians, a genre of Eastern European Jewish festival music that melodically overlaps with Gypsy (Roma) Balkan and non-Jewish Eastern European wedding and festival ensemble music.

When I was an undergraduate, my brother and I and an Israeli friend of ours began to sing Simon and Garfunkel versions of Yiddish and modern Hebrew songs for "discerning" (Jewish)

audiences in the Greater Toronto area. One day I got a call from the wife of a singing Chassidic Rabbi, Schlomo Carlebach, who like my ensemble, was busy modernizing and modifying the Chassidic songs of his childhood. I became his back up guitarist whenever he came to Toronto. This amplified my interest in the myriad musical traditions of the Jewish people. His songs are now classic in Israel, and in the Diaspora.

Ethnomusicology was an expanding discipline when I was an undergraduate. The archives and the bookshelves of our university began to fill up with recordings and monographs written by mostly English-speaking ethnomusicologists who took advantage of the governmental and institutional largesse of the time and fanned out across the world to record and study the "disappearing worlds" of traditional music.

After returning from Morocco, a new research project on Bedouin music haunted me and I began to negotiate doing an MA in Ethnomusicology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, but was frustrated by a cranky but gifted American musicologist once I got there, Don Harran, who was an expert on Salomone Rossi, the Jewish musical genius of the Italian Renaissance.

My undergraduate degree in ethnomusicology from a new Canadian University was not good enough for this graduate of Yale University. With an arrogant smile (this is a flashbulb memory) he told me that I would need a full year of extra courses to even qualify for an MA from his august institution. I concluded, ironically, that the Professors at the Hebrew University, by their own measure, must be the best in the world. Somehow, I did not mind losing the opportunity to spend time among them. I decided to go it alone, which proved to be the better path. It was one of those early adult lessons that taught me the wisdom of saying no.

So, I embarked on yet another adventure. I spent a year visiting a Bedouin tribe in eastern Sinai. The first thing I

did before moving there was seek out several Israelis who had done anthropological research among the Sinai and Negev Bedouin. Each of these "experts" described a society which differed markedly from that described by any of the others. It was as if they were describing different realities.

Realizing that I was on my own and would have to use my own reason and intuition to find out anything of value I went ahead and moved to the Negev border with the Sinai with my wife and our newborn son. I was hoping to see "something," and see it I did.

I spent time with an Arabic speaking Muslim tribe of Bedouin called the Azazma Sarakhin. I also travelled in and around the oasis of nearby Kadesh Barnea (Kossaima, Ain el Quderat, and its nearby Ain Qdeis, in Arabic), always on foot. There I visited and befriended an endogamous caste of former Black slaves who had been trafficked up from the Sudan in times past. I did participant observation and befriended a bilingual Hebrew and Arabic speaking young Bedouin my age, Suleiman Awd, and spent time with him in Bedouin tents and on long camel-assisted hikes.

The Sinai desert is beautiful, and in those days the Bedouin were approachable. I listened, spent a lot of effort learning conversational (but sadly not fluent) Bedouin Arabic, recorded songs, took photos, and made notes on most of what I saw and heard. When I took my data back to the University of Toronto where I ended up doing my MA, I saw that the pattern in what I'd observed was that of a traditional tribal set of songs being "invaded" by more complex, solo, lyre-accompanied songs coming inland from the towns of the Red Sea. I presented my research at an international conference in Montreal a few years later.

Soon after I left the Sinai, it reverted to Egyptian authority. Researchers associated with Israel, like me, could no longer get access and so I looked south towards the Horn Of

Africa, to do field research for my PhD. But as Ethiopia was embroiled in a brutal civil war triggered by a group of communists who murdered the emperor, Hailie Selassie, I got research clearance, instead, to go to northern Kenya which shares a border with Ethiopia and Somalia. I spent the good part of two years living there among the Rendille, a Cushitic speaking people, who are "Pagan," but tribal, monotheistic camel herders.

I was more systematic in my research there but took the same open-minded approach I had used in the Sinai, looking for patterns where other researchers had not, and I hit the jackpot. Unconsciously, I was influenced by an obscure and hard to fathom article, *Tepehua Thought Song*, by Charles Lafayette Boiles, one of the most colorful of my academic advisers at the University of Montreal.

I managed to elicit from Rendille the terms that they used to describe the stages of their main song, called *ginaan*. By examining the denotations and connotations of *ginaan*, I managed to gain some in-depth understanding of how these people think and feel about the songs that are so central to their lives.

This is a shout out to Ruth Benedict, a student of Franz Boas who early in the 20th century argued that anthropology is not a science, but a humanistic effort to understand a "configuration of culture." Inspired by her, I managed to some degree to figure out the role played by music in the Rendille "configuration of culture."

It is worth telling what a two-week field trip among the Rendille meant for me, as my family was by then based in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. The day before, I would pack my jeep with all that was necessary for two weeks in the Kaisut desert of Kenya's Northern Frontier: first aid, dried food, extra containers of petrol (as they call gas in Kenya), clothes, tape recorders, paper, pens, batteries, cameras, and

film. I would also carry as much fresh food as I could for my first few days in the field.

The following day, at six in the morning, my bilingual Rendille and English-speaking field assistant and I would drive north from Nairobi through hilly, green, and wooded Kikuyuland, the breadbasket of central Kenya. We would arrive at Nanyuki to see nearby snow capped Mount Kenya and then descend into the desert, where we would stop for the night at the frontier town of Isiolo. The next morning we would drive through the acacia woodland desert of Isiolo to finally reach Rendille land, in Marsabit District. In those days, the Rendille and other tribes in the region dressed traditionally, the women topless and the men with elaborate headdresses.

If the Sinai is dreamlike, the deserts of Northern Kenya are visionary, with enormous skies, vast plains, rivers infested with crocodiles, and forested mountains that rise from the plains like gigantic dinosaurs. The Sinai made me feel as if I were in the world of Abraham, while northern Kenya made me feel as if I were inhabiting even earlier chapters of Genesis. I eventually grew to love every minute of fieldwork.

After completing my study of the Rendille, I spent another two years on the western side of Lake Turkana, working as training an ethnologist among the "enemies" of the Rendille, the extremely martial Turkana. I gave five years of my life to understanding that remarkable part of the world and feel grateful for having had the privilege.

I read scores of books and articles about it, but my favorite remains a PG Woodhouse-like memoir, *The Desert's Dusty Face*, by Charles Chenevix Trench, one of the British officers stationed in that region before Kenyan independence. One of his younger officers later invited me to give a lecture on my musical discoveries at the British Council Library in Nairobi. I felt honored.

Every time I look at Trench's small book on my library shelf I think of the Elizabethan song, *My mind to me a Kingdom is*. I can spend hours remembering that marvelous part of the world and its tribal dwellers. As my maternal grandfather was wont to say, "Lots of stories."

A Note About Alan Lomax

Alan Lomax is now a world-famous name. In his heyday he discovered the likes of Leadbelly, Muddy Waters, Pete Seeger, and recorded the first version of songs like *The Sloop John B* and *House of the Rising Sun*. He was a mentor of Bob Dylan. Lomax was the 20th century's traditional music collector par excellence and triggered both the American roots music revival and the world music scene based on his and other recordings of traditional music that he gathered from around the world. He recorded hundreds of musicians and thousands of songs and wrote scores of articles. His book on the Blues, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, is a literary tour de force.

In mid-career, he asked himself a simple question: is it possible that the almost endless variety of traditional music follows a structure, some hidden grid by which whole repertoires of music can be compared? So he put together a research team of about forty brilliant men and women to see if this was indeed the case.

Using a good representative sample of more than five thousand songs selected from field recordings made around the world, Lomax and his team did for folk music what the Lenskis did for societies and cultures. They discovered that there is only a limited number of song styles, and that they can be compared objectively across a grid of thirty-four features. They found that all other musical traditions are variations of the Ur music of the Pygmies of Central Africa, a basic musical paradigm that is 60,000 years old.

In his collection of essays, *Folk Song Style and Culture*,

Lomax and his colleagues spelled out their method and results. His NGO, The Association for Cultural Equity, has continued his research into what is called “performance style and culture.” Their methods and results can be tracked on their website, The Global Jukebox, which also provides a system for teaching the world’s music to K-12 students, as well as college undergraduates.

Lomax and his colleagues discovered something remarkable: the evolutionary x-ray of musical style, mapping how our ancestors migrated around the world, by tracing the emergence of each new style from previous styles. Curiously, this resembles and tends to support the theories of macro-sociologists such as the Lenskis, about the social types and evolutionary histories of peoples as well as the history of prehistoric and historic migrations around the world.

Sadly, mainstream ethnomusicology is no longer interested in such objective, comparative methods. At best, they have become ethnographic particularists in the style of Franz Boas, arguing that every musical style is different. At worst, they are simply not interested in traditional science, as Lomax and his colleagues were. There is a book to be written here. I would call it, *An Introduction to the Global Jukebox*. I hope to be one of its authors one day. It is a key text missing from my own and thousands of other bookshelves. It needs to be written.

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