

The Liminal Researcher in Ethnomusicology: An Approach to the Study of Latin American Migrant Music

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This article reflects the author's experiences in seeking a methodological framework for an ethnomusicological study of Latin American popular music in Australia. This process involved an examination of some ethical considerations posed by ethnomusicological fieldwork, especially in relation to the role of the researcher. Researchers involved in ethnography—from the ethical theorising of Clifford Geertz¹ to the ethnomusicological approaches of Feld, Barz and Cooley,² and the cultural studies approach of Arjun Appadurai³—advocate that fieldwork should be conducted from a liminal perspective, that is, a position at the point where their own culture and the culture of their research subject intersect.

In the case of Latin American music in Australia, the point of intersection is in live performances by Latin American migrants in the public domain. Unlike many other migrant musics, Latin popular music styles are disseminated well beyond the migrant community, performed by migrants from other places as well as non-migrant Australians, and should be considered in both the migrant and the non-migrant context.

This article begins with an overview of the area of study before discussing a variety of theoretical approaches which could be used to assess the music culture in question. I hope to demonstrate that all of these approaches rely on a liminal viewpoint—that is, the ability to view the music from a performers perspective as well as the audience perspective—in order successfully to document and represent the music culture. A liminal approach is well applied to Latin American migrants in Australia, as their collective identity and cultural success in mainstream Australia depends on their ability to interact with other cultures. The relatively small number of Latin American migrants in Australia do not have the social benefits of the post-migratory cultural institutions that larger migrant groups have managed to establish.

The term 'Latin American Popular Music' encompasses a wide variety of styles from a continent that is shared by more than twenty nations. In this paper, Latin American Popular

¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

² G.F. Barz & T.J. Cooley, eds, *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³ Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,' *Theory, Culture & Society* 7.2/3 (1990): 295–310.

Music, or just 'Latin' music, refers only to the genres of Latin dance music which are performed in nightclubs and other live music venues in Melbourne. Salsa, cumbia, and merengue styles predominate in the repertory of Latin American migrants in Australia, but others such as mambo, rumba, and various Latin and jazz fusions also appear from time to time. These styles are all characterised by sustained patterns of interlocking rhythms on hand percussion, electronic bass and keyboard, horn sections of trumpets and trombones or saxophones, and alternating solo and chorus vocals. All of these styles fulfil the social function of popular dance music in their countries of origin, and this function is shared in the Australian context because the Latin American migrant community is comprised of small numbers of migrants from a large number of countries. Owing to the popularity of many of these styles on commercial radio, many of the local performances are frequented by mixed audiences of Latinos and non-Latinos.

My own involvement with the Latin American music community in Melbourne began a few years ago as a freelance trombonist in Latin bands. I had previously travelled throughout southern South America, performing with a variety of popular music groups, and had developed an interest in many genres of Latin American popular music. My undergraduate dissertation in Music at the University of Melbourne, entitled *Music of Multiple Migrations: Salsa, Cumbia, and Merengue in Melbourne*,⁴ provided the opportunity to write about the musical activities of Latin American migrants in Australia, and the results of my research have also appeared in the popular music journal *Perfect Beat*⁵ and in the forthcoming *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia* (in press, 2001).

Latin American popular music occupies a special place in the listening repertoire of mainstream Australia. It features in Australian film and television, as backing music, live or otherwise, and in venues ranging from five star hotel restaurants to fast food outlets. Famous Latin American acts who visit Australia sell out months before their arrival. Cities like Melbourne, Sydney, Wollongong and Adelaide are home to vibrant communities of Latin American migrants from all parts of Central and South America. These migrants add to the diversity of Latin music in Australian cities through their own performances, occurring within the close-knit migrant communities as well as in the wider public domain. In recent times, some of these performing groups received increased exposure through events such as the 1992 Melbourne festival, which focussed on Latin American culture in a commemoration of the quincentenary of Columbus' voyage, and the annual Moomba festivities which included a Latin American quadrant for three consecutive years.

Latin music often radiates from the audio systems of record shops, enticing shoppers with its rhythmic dance styles and percussive accents. This was the case late last year as I walked past *Discurio*, a record boutique in central Melbourne. The sales staff and customers could be seen rocking back and forth to the pulsating bass and percussion beats from New York trombonist Jimmy Bosch's latest album. Little did they know, however, that the Spanish lyrics of the song they were listening to had just finished a verse with the words 'I'm crying as I write this song. My brother is dead, and I've got to accept that he's not coming back.'⁶

⁴ Dan Bendrups, 'Music of Multiple Migrations: Salsa, Cumbia, and Merengue in Melbourne,' BMus (Hons) thesis, University of Melbourne, 2000.

⁵ Dan Bendrups, 'Melbourne's Latin American Music Scene,' *Perfect Beat* 5.2 (2001): 19-29.

⁶ From the song 'La Noticia' (The News), from the album *Salsa Dura*, Jimmy Bosch, Ryko Latino, 1999.

Such cases of mistaken identity serve to illustrate the peculiar circumstances under which Latin American popular music culture exists in Australia. On the one hand, it is consumed with voracity by an Anglo-Australian audience of music lovers, despite this audience's limited appreciation of the many themes and cultural subtleties entwined in its lyrics or performance style. On the other, it is performed, danced, and taught by Latin American migrants who have made their home in Australia. The Latin American communities of urban Australia embody, in many ways, the concept of a liminal existence. They are not white Australians, yet neither are they completely like the southern Europeans with whom they are generally associated by white Australians. Coming from twenty or so different countries, they share no single unifying cultural force,⁷ yet certain styles of their music are so popular in the Western world that separate categories for 'Latin' music exist in the Grammy awards of the USA. There are too few Latin American migrants in Australia for them to make a significant cultural impact on any of Australia's capital cities, yet their music culture is recognised throughout Australia.

In the public domain, Latin American popular music is a cultural construct which exists in the parallel contexts of 'migrant' and 'mainstream' culture. It is appreciated in different ways by culturally diverse audiences in urban Australian society. These audiences range from Latin American community events, Italian dance clubs, weddings, and corporate functions, to mainstream nightclubs, Concert Hall audiences, and municipal festivals. The cultural trajectories of these groups intersect each other at various points, yet each group has its own interpretation of the music's meaning—a conceptual multiplicity which differentiates Latin music from the 'general paradigm of migrant music.'⁸

The analysis of this music culture requires an intricate balancing act from the researcher. In order to gain a complete understanding of the social significance of Latin American popular music in Australia, the music must be approached from a variety of cultural, social, and political angles, each with its own set of theoretical and methodological prerequisites. A convenient starting point would be to assess Latin American popular music purely as Migrant Music—a facet of multicultural Australia which has eventuated from the transposition of people from Latin America to Australia. This approach would require an examination of government policies towards multiculturalism and immigration, taking into account the effect of the changes and continuities of these programs on the nature of migration. Some research in this vein was conducted during the 1970s by Simon Anderson, a PhD candidate at the Australian National University.⁹ However, the state of these communities today is considerably different to what it was in the 1970s. A more recent publication by demographer Ian Burnley, *The Impact of Immigration on Australia: A Demographic Approach*¹⁰ includes a section on Spanish speaking migrants, but mentions little of the influence that their transplanted cultures have had in urban Australia, other than to simply state that they exist.

Conversely, Latin music could be researched in a non-migrant context, examining the influence of the 'Latin tinge' on elements of Anglo-Australian culture such as ballroom dancing,

⁷ R.C. Williamson, *Latin American Societies in Transition* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1997) 2.

⁸ Peter Parkhill, 'Of Tradition, Tourism, and the World Music Industry,' *Meanjin* 52.3 (1993): 501-2.

⁹ See P.S. Anderson, 'Latin Americans in Australia: A Study in Migrant Satisfaction,' PhD thesis, Australian National University [Canberra], 1979.

¹⁰ I.H. Burnley, *The Impact of Immigration on Australia: A Demographic Approach* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001).

film, television, cafe culture, night clubs, and live music venues.¹¹ This approach has been pursued by researchers of Australian music and media such as John Whiteoak and Rebecca Coyle, and is supported by a wealth of recordings and other primary source historical evidence in the archives of Australian cultural institutions such as the Victorian film centre, state libraries, University archives, and the like. These collections are not, however, organised to demonstrate the Latin influences on Australian popular culture, and much work remains to be done in extracting, collating and cataloguing the 'Latin tinge' that has affected multiple music genres in Australia.

Alternatively, Latin American popular music can be assessed as a case study of cultural contact between 'Western' and 'Non-Western' music, following in the footsteps of ethnomusicologists such as Seeger, Rice, Tilley, Reyes Schramm and others who have all examined the effects of and interrelation between 'the West' and 'the Other' in rural and well as urban environments.¹² This approach provides a rewarding wealth of categorical information, as the analytical frameworks for conducting such comparisons are readily accessible and well tested. The procedural similarities between Seeger's *Why Suya Sing* and Olsen's *Music of the Warao of Venezuela*¹³—both based on fieldwork conducted in Latin America—present a standard model for ethnomusicological methodology. This model can only be applied to Latin American migrant music to a limited extent, however, because it is mostly used to compare diametrically separate music cultures. Latin American popular music is considered to be a hybridized combination of any or all of American, African, Spanish, Western, technological, and political influences.¹⁴ Ultimately, Latin American popular music culture pervades the Australian experience of popular music to such an extent that it should be viewed as a combination of the above approaches. In order to do this, the research must be conducted from an 'inside' as well as an 'outside' perspective without favouring either side.

If migration is chosen as the entrance point for research into Latin American music in Australia, then, as Parkhill's comment suggests, a number of different types of migration must be considered. Firstly, it is conclusively shown that migrants from Latin America contributed (and contribute) largely to the dissemination of Latin American music.¹⁵ Another important contribution is made by the extension of the American popular music industry in Australia. Migrants from other parts of the world, such as southern Europe, have also brought Latin music influences with them, as did the influx of American armed forces based in Australia during the second world War.¹⁶ Since then, the growth of a 'World Music' recording industry

¹¹ The term 'Latin Tinge' was coined by American journalist John Storm Roberts. It denotes the little acknowledged influence of 'Latin' music over almost all Western popular music. See J.S. Roberts, *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹² Anthony Seeger, *Why Suya Sing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Timothy Rice, *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Folk Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Christopher Tilley, 'Performing Culture in the Global Village,' *Critique of Anthropology* 17.1 (1997): 67-89; Adelaida Reyes Schramm, 'Ethnic Music, the Urban Area, and Ethnomusicology,' *Sociologus* 29.1 (1979): 1-23.

¹³ Dale Olsen, *Music of the Warao of Venezuela: Song People of the Rain Forest* (Miami: University Press of Florida, 1996).

¹⁴ Sue Steward, *Salsa: The Musical Heartbeat of Latin America* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

¹⁵ Mike Ryan, 'Latin Americans and Caribbeans,' *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, ed. A. Kaeppeler & J.W. Love, Vol.9 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998) 82-84.

¹⁶ Tony Gould, 'Jazz,' *The Oxford Companion to Australian Music*, ed. W. Bebbington (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997) 303-307.

and the omnipotence of international Latin super stars such as Jennifer Lopez and Ricky Martin have also contributed to the continuing migration of Latin music to Australia.

These different approaches to the study of Latin music in Australia divide into two basic categories depending on the materials or informants that the researcher may chose to access. On the one hand, sufficient data exists in the historical record (in printed or recorded media) for the migration of Latin music to Australia to be regarded as a phenomenon that has occurred independently of demographic change. On the other hand, the presence of Latin American migrants in Australia, as well as other associated musicians, provides the researcher with a human record of Latin music migration. These two approaches appear mutually exclusive, unless the view is taken that they converge on the point of the research, and by extension, the researcher. This being the case, the role and responsibilities of the researcher in reconstructing a history of musical migration are a further important contribution to consider.

In my own experience, as a non-Latino Spanish-speaking participant musician in Latin bands, the access that I was afforded to Latin American migrant musicians was mitigated by my role as a researcher. Approaching the community in this way, I was not completely an 'insider,' yet, by virtue of my performance experiences in Australia and Latin America, neither completely an 'outsider.' The nature of the research necessitated a liminal position as my analytical stance was '...on the threshold between one world and another.'¹⁷ The necessarily liminal stance of this fieldwork is, according to ethnomusicologist Gregory Barz, '...a prescribed state for ethnomusicologists, an anticipated, supported, and funded *rite de passage*.'¹⁸ That these worlds, in the case of Latin American popular music in Australia, occupy the same physical territory is irrelevant, as Kisiuk explains:

The location of the field...does not depend on geography, but on the self-constructed identity of the ethnographer in a given social landscape...[which in turn] depends not on a particular location or apparent resemblance to other investigators and interlopers, but on the quality and depth of research relationships and ultimately on the way we each intend to re-present our experiences.¹⁹

In other worlds, the role and activity of the researcher can influence the research outcomes independently and apart from the other sociocultural factors surrounding Latin performances in the post-migratory context. Fieldwork creates an interlocking dynamic, as research representations also depend on what kind of information the subject group is willing to volunteer. The Latin American migrant musicians I interviewed were aware that my interest in them was partially encouraged by my own academic purposes, and I was, in turn, aware that their answers to my questions were guided by how they wanted themselves to be portrayed personally, professionally, and historically.

As a researcher, I was required to establish and maintain an investigative link between two separate spheres of Australian culture, assuming a liminal position in and between the

¹⁷ Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965) 22.

¹⁸ G.F. Barz, 'Chasing Shadows in the Field: An Epilogue,' *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. G.F. Barz & T.J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 206.

¹⁹ Michelle Kisiuk, '(Un)doing Fieldwork: Sharing Songs, Sharing Lives,' *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. G.F. Barz & T.J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 32.

two. By taking advantage of the many intersections between these two cultural spheres, it was possible to create a working academic model of this music, existing simultaneously in the parallel contexts of 'migrant' and 'mainstream.' As the 'field' of my research is the urban Australian environment, these intersections occur frequently on various social levels, from workplaces, to nightclubs, or even family environments. A model that I found particularly useful for contextualising these intersections was a framework proposed by cultural theorist Arjun Appaduri:

The new...cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models. Nor is it susceptible to simple models of push and pull (in terms of migration theory)...I propose that an elementary framework for exploring such disjunctures is to look at the relationship between five dimensions of global cultural flow which can be termed ethnoscares, mediascares, technoscares, finanscares and ideoscares. The suffix -scape allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes, shapes which characterize international capital as deeply as they do international clothing styles.²⁰

This final statement is equally applicable to international 'Latin' music style. Appaduri's framework can be neatly applied to my multi-dimensional study of Latin American popular music in Australia. The nature of this music's performances is indeed complex, overlapping and disjunctive. As it is performed in both migrant and non-migrant contexts, it also eludes a centre-periphery model of definition. Neither is it explicable by 'push' and 'pull' models, as it has arrived in Australia as a result of political persecution as well as in tours of artistic excess, and as a direct result of world war as well as a commodity of peacetime commerce. Appaduri's '-scapes' allow for a holistic view of Latin American popular music, in all of its Australian manifestations.

Unfortunately, taking this approach led to the marginalisation of the personal contributions that the musicians themselves made to my research. Their individual stories made way for general experiences, supporting theories and explanations of the complexity of the social consequences of migration. This eventuality is also predicted by Appaduri: 'individual actors are the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part by their own sense of what these landscapes offer.'²¹

The concerns raised by Appaduri have been topics of discussion for many researchers in the field of ethnography. The study of a cultural construct, as stated by Clifford Geertz, is 'faced with...a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which [the researcher] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.'²² While the performance practices of Australian Latin American ensembles are fairly uniform, the reception of these performances depends upon each individual audience. For example, an audience of Chilean refugees is more likely to be receptive to political messages in songs performed by a Latin band than an audience of Anglo-Australians would be. The multiplicity of function in

²⁰ Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,' *Public Culture* 2.2 (1990): 6.

²¹ Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference': 7.

²² Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* 10.

Latin American popular music in Australia demonstrates that the analysis of cross-cultural perceptions in music requires a cross-disciplinary approach, an assertion supported by urban ethnomusicologist Adelaida Reyes Schramm: 'Confronted repeatedly by the complexities of the urban situation, we are pressed to reassess the resources with which to meet new problems.'²³

The 'innovative' interdisciplinary methodology of urban ethnomusicology²⁴ provides the analytical framework for an examination of this music's multiple significance. As stated previously, Latin American popular music in Australia has been influenced by a long history of migration which has shaped popular music worldwide. It has arrived in Australia by two routes: firstly, as part of a global musical migration devoid of cultural context, and secondly, brought by Latin American migrants who have imbued it with a particular sense of cultural identity. Both of these urban Australian musical manifestations share a cultural history, despite their significant cultural differences.

This seeming contradiction in terms can be resolved with a phenomenological approach to analysis. As Geertz explains, '...the definition of art in any society is never wholly intra-aesthetic...the giving to art objects a cultural significance is always a local matter.'²⁵ In ethnomusicology, a phenomenological approach is regarded as essential by writers such as Tim Rice, who notes: 'In phenomenological hermeneutics, the world, far from being doubted by the subjective ego, is restored to its ontological and temporal priority over the ego or subject.'²⁶ In other words, analytical priority is given to a subject or process in its own abstraction. When applied to an analysis of Latin American popular music in Australia, this approach establishes a dialogue between the local, external, and historical influences that have all contributed to the circumstances in which it exists. This approach provides the meeting point from which research can be conducted.

A recent urban ethnomusicological study from the USA by Kip Lornell and Anne Rasmussen also provided a useful methodological framework for the analysis of Latin American popular music in Australia in all of its cultural manifestations. *Musics of Multicultural America*²⁷ is a collection of individual case studies which are united in their approach to the cultural analysis of music. Their list of common themes and issues that unify the varied contributions to *Musics of Multicultural America* is a useful ethnographic framework for the analysis of Latin American popular music in Australia. This list includes the consideration of intersections between music, community and identity, the role of cultural institutions such as churches or festivals, and the actions of individual musicians in music making activities. It also considers questions of musical preservation, transmission, performance and purpose, both within and outside the musical sub-culture. Most importantly, they acknowledge the role of the researcher, regarding the 'effect of fieldwork experience in shaping our (writer and audience) view of the music.'²⁸

²³ Adelaida Reyes Schramm, 'Explorations in Urban Ethnomusicology: Hard Lessons From the Spectacularly Ordinary,' *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 14 (1982): 1.

²⁴ Schramm, 'Explorations in Urban Ethnomusicology' 12.

²⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) 97.

²⁶ Timothy Rice, 'Toward a Mediation of Field Methods and Field Experience in Ethnomusicology,' *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. G.F. Barz & T.J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 114.

²⁷ Kip Lornell & A. K. Rasmussen, eds, *Musics of Multicultural America* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997).

²⁸ Lornell & Rasmussen, *Musics of Multicultural America* 6.

My examination of Latin American popular music in Australia presented many research problems, yet the above mentioned methodologies were useful for establishing a theoretical framework with which to approach the topic. They all regard their subject areas as representations of human experience, rather than processing the particulars of each cultural context as a dry analysis of categorised data. They all acknowledge the role of the researcher in the outcomes of the research. If the researcher assumes a liminal position, he or she is able to establish a dialogue between various contexts, facilitating communication.

Antiquated ethnomusicological fieldwork methodologies suffered from a lack of communication, and as a consequence often failed to provide representative accounts of the music cultures they portrayed. Similarly, the recent criticisms of 'world music' group Deep Forrest stem from the failure of this group to establish communication with the people whose music they plundered. These kinds of problems are averted by assuming a liminal standpoint—one that acknowledges the common social, cultural, and political conditions which affect both the research and the researcher.