Arts & Humanities

Roadhouse Raga

The musical worlds of Aaron Fox.

Fall 2003

The walls of Columbia's Center for Ethnomusicology, housed in an upper room of Dodge Hall, are lined with shelving and file cabinets, but these, presumably, are entirely full, for every available horizontal surface is piled with cardboard boxes, plastic tape cases, stacks of papers, and handmade musical instruments, small, medium, and large. Aaron Fox, associate professor of ethnomusicology and the new director of the center, gestures toward row upon row of dusty reel-to-reel recordings with an air of tired satisfaction. "We're two-thirds of the way there," he says, referring to the center's ongoing efforts to digitize the thousands of recordings and videotapes in the collection. It was Professor of Music Dieter Christensen, director of the center from 1971 until he passed the mantle to Fox last June, who began the digitization. When complete, the project will enable Columbia to be the aural equivalent of a lending library and to maintain and develop relationships with music and sound collections around the world. Fox is clearly delighted about the extensive reach of the project, but he is also eager to give assistance to local communities and looks forward to helping various museums and not-for-profit groups in the City set up their own sound archives.

With an impressive list of publications to his name, Fox is happily ensconced in the ivory tower, while keeping one foot on less lofty ground. A Harvard baby (his parents both went to graduate school there; his father taught there) who as a classical cellist became a composition-and-theory major, Fox realized during his sophomore year in Cambridge that he was at heart a popular music kind of a guy, with a song in his heart and a band on the side. His parents were leftists, and his father helped organize coal miners' unions in Appalachia; there were family friends who were folk and pop musicians, and American vernacular music came with that territory. In keeping with his family's commitment to social justice, his interests, he realized after a couple of years at Harvard, were not necessarily about music, but rather

about “American class ideology and blue-collar culture.”

He dropped out of Harvard to write songs and sing with a band, but to support himself he also worked with a crew of furniture movers, trucking around New England and listening to his coworkers’ favorite music on the radio all day—country and western. By the time he returned to Harvard for his junior and senior years, he was determined to declare his “new citizenship” by embracing this music as a field of serious intellectual endeavor. “I figured it would annoy my musicology mentors on the faculty,” he says mildly.

He chose the University of Texas for graduate school in social anthropology, lived the famous Austin bumper sticker’s claim to have “danced country at the Broken Spoke” (he played and sang there, actually), and wrote his dissertation, titled “Out the Country,” on “speech, song, and feeling in American rural, working-class culture.” For many years, Fox’s nights were spent playing music with both local and regional country bands, and with uncounted small groups of friends. Although he carried a tape recorder with him at all times and was attuned to every opportunity for research and interviews, he was known as “a picker, a singer, and . . . a songwriter” in the rural bars and homes around central Texas, where he spent his time. “And that makes for some problems applying a rhetorical filter called ‘ethnography,’” he writes in *Real Country: Music, Language, Emotion, and Sociability in Texas Working-Class Culture*, to be published this winter by Duke University Press. In the end, “fieldwork, music-making, friendship, conflict, and writing have grown together into a dense thicket of stories in which knowledge, memory, emotion, and practice have become inseparable.”

While at Texas, Fox also discovered the second thread of his ethnomusicology career, through Stephen Slawek, a sitarist. Slawek encouraged Fox to study tabla (Indian drums). “I’m a musically voracious person,” Fox says, “so world music was natural for me.” He “fell in love with the sound” of South Asian music, in part because Indian music is formally based on singing, and “there’s a tremendously complex link between vocal practice and instrumental practice,” he says. And for him, “the central issue has always been the human voice.” This was one reason country music, with what he refers to as “its elaborated voice consciousness,” appealed to him so strongly.

At Columbia, Fox teaches a course in South Asian music that is a sanctioned alternative to the Core Curriculum standard, “Masterpieces of Western Music,” or

“Music Hum” in brief. “It could almost be called ‘Music in the Islamic World,’” he says. Many who sign up are American-born students of Asian heritage, either Hindu or Muslim, “urbane and sophisticated, and looking to connect to their family traditions,” he says. And then there is another group to whom his teaching and research interests speak—students who are a somewhat invisible presence on the college campus in terms, at least, of their own identity—students from blue-collar or small-town midwestern or southern backgrounds. They take his course in country music, which he teaches at the 2000 level, just above an introductory course, in an intentional bid to make it as open as possible. “These students often have as complicated a relationship with country music as the immigrant students have to Asian music,” he says. “In that class what I emphasize is country music as working-class culture.”

The course also emphasizes the extent to which country and western has rapidly become a world music, Fox says, especially in areas of the world that have hosted an American military presence, including Okinawa, the Philippines, Thailand, northern Europe, and the English-speaking Caribbean. Artists like Don Williams, who can’t sell out a club in the United States, regularly fill soccer stadiums for concerts in southern Africa. In Ireland, country and western music has been the most popular music for 20 or 30 years, Fox says, and some elements of country music, such as the pedal steel guitar, have even been adapted for contemporary South Asian movie music. Ethnomusicologists who study Japanese *enka*, Indonesian *kroncong*, Brazilian *sertaneja*, or Thai *pleng lukthung*, recognize the kinship of American country and western music to these varied traditions, and they write about it. Although these musics may not relate in terms of sound, Fox says, all nonetheless share ideological and cultural characteristics—“the triangulation of rusticity, working-class experience, and nationalism.”

Part of the agenda of scholars of vernacular music, Fox acknowledges, is to advance the claim that it deserves elevation in the academy. “That is the challenge popular music has thrown up in the last 20 years,” he says. After those two decades, in which popular music studies has become a more established field,it is unlikely that an undergraduate could annoy any mentors today with Fox’s erstwhile ease. Having written more than 20 articles with titles like “The Jukebox of History,” “Honky-Tonk Dis-course,” and “Talk, Trash, and Technology in a Texas ‘Redneck’ Culture,” Fox himself has brought country and western, if not into the canon, then right up close to it. Ain’t it funny, how time slips away?



Guide to school abbreviations