URBAN ETHNOMUSICOLOGY: A BRIEF HISTORY OF AN IDEA

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Abstract: ***The nature of urban ethnomusicology and its relations with its parent discipline have been nebulous almost from the start. Some four decades ago, when urban ethnomusicology first entered the ethnomusicological scene, the term was taken to signal an expansion of ethnomusicology's research field beyond self-contained societies into the urban area. It has now become clear that that expansion required a re-thinking of prevailing practices and theoretical orientations. To better define the issues at stake, this paper traces the development of urban ethnomusicology not as praxis but as idea. The essentially multidisciplinary nature of urban ethnomusicology is examined in the context of its relations with anthropology and sociology in particular. Problems and benefits derived from urban ethnomusicology's multidisciplinary heritage are identified for the purpose of putting ethnomusicology into the best possible position to meet the challenges posed by a world that is rapidly and inexorably becoming urbanized.***

Keywords: ***urban ethnomusicology; multidisciplinarity; purposive redundance***

What is urban about urban ethnomusicology and what is ethnomusicological about it? I borrow that question from the Swedish anthropologist, Ulf Hannerz, who asked anthropologists the analogous question about a half century ago when urban anthropology was struggling for self-definition (1980: 3). Since then, urban anthropology has gained a measure of autonomy as a subfield of anthropology, with at least one journal of its own and courses on the subject offered in many universities. In contrast, urban ethnomusicology has become a name quite unsure of what it names.

Coming into existence not long after urban anthropology did, urban ethnomusicology had a promising beginning. Courses were offered and at least one program in ethnomusicology took it as its focus. Now, however, people in American academia question its relevance. Many dismiss it as passé—an idea whose time has come and gone.

How did this happen? Do events justify this development? What does it say of ethnomusicology in the context of its development as a discipline and its capacity to respond to contemporary circumstances?

This paper will address those questions by looking into the "genealogy" of urban ethnomusicology to see what contingencies gave it birth and what "genetic material" it might have drawn from its disciplinary lineage. The intent is to find clues into the nature of urban ethnomusicology, into its potential or actual capabilities, inherited or acquired, as it made its way in the academic world. By juxtaposing those capabilities against the challenges that ethnomusicology faces now and in the foreseeable future, we might find the grounds for either redeeming urban ethnomusicology from undue obsolescence or speeding it along that path.

To lay the groundwork for the rest of this paper, I would like to emphasize that what I am about to examine is urban ethnomusicology not as praxis but as *idea*. According to Webster's Seventh Collegiate Dictionary an idea is "a transcendent entity that is a real pattern of which existing things are imperfect representations." Note the three elements: the transcendent entity, the reality of a pattern drawn from existing things, and the imperfection of those things as representations of that pattern. The idea admits the imperfection. But rather than conform to the reality of the imperfection or to the imperfection of the reality, the idea chooses to transcend that imperfection; hence, the transcendent entity.

I could have chosen to focus on the existing things that have answered to the name urban ethnomusicology. Instead, I have chosen to take urban ethnomusicology as idea. It is a choice dictated by the lack of what Thomas Kuhn called "normal practice," by the lack of coherent systems of thought[1] (using Liah Greenfeld's criteria 1992: 493 fn) that could coalesce into a real pattern definable as urban ethnomusicology. The idea of urban ethnomusicology—the idea that recognizes but chooses to transcend the imperfection of its representation—is therefore what the rest of this paper will be referring to.

1 Hannerz 1980 describes urban anthropology in similar language: lacking "a coherent, unifying structure of ideas" (4).

With this clarification, I now turn to the principal disciplinary “bloodlines” that have had a formative effect on urban ethnomusicology.

Conditions surrounding the birth of urban ethnomusicology

We all know the debt that ethnomusicology owes anthropology. No history of urban ethnomusicology as offshoot of ethnomusicology can be complete without an acknowledgment of that debt. Most of what ethnomusicology has adopted or adapted from anthropology and has passed on to urban ethnomusicology is common knowledge, so I will mention only what is salient and pertinent to this discussion.

Besides following early anthropology’s lead into so-called primitive societies and, subsequently, into folk and peasant societies, ethnomusicology also embraced aspirations, assumptions, and methods derived from anthropology. Like anthropology, ethnomusicology has aspired to be a science. In its early years, it has shared assumptions pertaining to human evolution. In the area of methodology, ethnomusicology has adopted anthropology’s strong reliance on empirical observation. Sharing common attitudes that derived from colonial Europe, ethnomusicologists and their anthropological role models maintained what they assumed to be a scientific distance between themselves and their subjects of investigation in situations commonly described as first contacts with previously undiscovered peoples (Wikipedia, “Sociology” and “Anthropology”, 4/6/2011).

The ramifications of these fundamental borrowings or appropriations and their impact on urban ethnomusicology were far-reaching and profound. They, too, are well-known. I will thus confine myself to two because their effects on methodology have been both consequential and problematic.

The first ramification came out of an assumption that turned into bias. Cultural homogeneity was a defensible assumption in the context of ideas prevalent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and in the context of societies believed to be simple and insular. It became an expectation which ethnomusicologists held on to even as they moved into urban areas. Urbanized societies which are a radically different social form, severely challenged that expectation with observable reality. But having become ingrained by decades-old practice, the expectation had become resistant to critical review and to the findings of decades-long research on cities from other disciplines, mainly sociology. The effects of what is tantamount to bias on methods in general and on analysis in particular cannot be underestimated.

The second ramification comes from a methodological procedure that delineates the boundaries of the unit of investigation. Habituated and eventually conditioned by long experience studying units with pre-defined boundaries, early urban ethnomusicologists presumed the existence of or sought such well-bounded units in cities. The result was too often the obfuscation of the more obvious and in most instances the more significant fact, namely, that in urban areas, the fluidity or porousness of boundaries is far more characteristic and more revealing of urban dynamics than the insularity that results from boundaries drawn or taken for granted without due consideration of the wider context and the shifting conditions on the ground.

These ramifications—effects of what Thomas Kuhn (1996) called paradigm-induced expectations and, as habit, often operating below the level of consciousness—thus had a far-reaching impact on the fledgling efforts of ethnomusicology to enter the urban field. Those ramifications had, in effect, upended the commonsensical dictum that the tool should fit the task. Embarking on urban research armed with tools intended for a radically different kind of social form led in most instances to shaping the task to fit the tool. The results call to mind the old proverb: "To the man with a big hammer, all problems look like nails." On a more sober note, the philosopher and communications theorist, Marshall McLuhan, delivers an analogous precautionary message: "We shape our tools, and afterwards our tools shape us" (quoted in Carr 2011: 1).

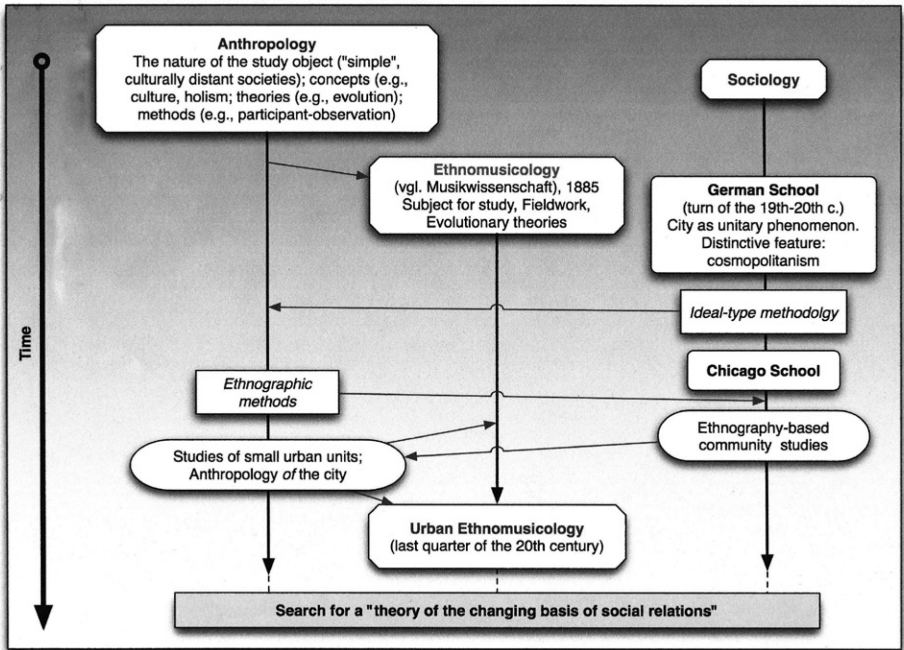
It was inevitable, therefore, that those ramifications would stand in the way of a clear-eyed view of the urban—of the very context from which urban ethnomusicology would draw meaning.

Urban ethnomusicology: its disciplinary lineage

While anthropology and sociology are not the only disciplines implicated in the development of urban ethnomusicology, they are the principal ones. This paper will therefore focus on these two disciplines.

Theoretically, there is a considerable overlap between them. Both belong to the social sciences, the former referred to as the science of society, the latter as the science of man. But the focus of much research in each of the two disciplines could hardly be more different. That branch of sociology led by Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber responded to the intellectual challenges posed by industrialization and urbanization. In contrast, that branch of anthropology which came to be known as cultural anthropology responded to the challenge

posed by previously unknown societies that colonialism made accessible. It was on this basis that Ulf Hannerz called anthropology anti-urban by definition (1980: 1). And it was on the basis of anthropology's and sociology's divergent foci that these disciplines, at least until the first quarter of the 20th century, were taken to be mutually exclusive. (Note that in the schema, "Disciplinary Flow of Influences...," there is no arrow representing a flow of influence between the two disciplines until half-way down the diagram.)



But as will soon become evident, forces internal and external to each of the disciplines would conspire to replace that mutual exclusivity, first, with tentative receptivity on the part of each, and subsequently with a mutually enriching exchange of ideas. The results of this cross-fertilization became part of the lineage that took form as urban ethnomusicology.

While modern sociology and its studies of urbanism and cities go back to the 19th century under the leadership of figures such as Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim, those efforts did not coalesce into a school of thought until the turn of the century with the emergence of the German School of Urban Research. Based

in Heidelberg and Berlin, the German School was represented by sociologists such as Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Toennies and Oswald Spengler. What Richard Sennett, called "the first modern effort in urban studies,"(1969: 5), Max Weber's book, *Die Stadt* (1906), came out of the German School.

For Weber, the principal defining feature of the city was cosmopolitanism, a consequence of different life styles, different sorts of individuals coexisting and permitting "the greatest degree of individuality and uniqueness" (Sennett 1969: 6). It is a formulation that foreshadows heterogeneity, a feature that was to become embedded in subsequent descriptions or definitions of the city. The contrast between this defining feature and homogeneity, which anthropologists and, later, ethnomusicologists attributed to the societies they studied, illustrates the mutual exclusivity of anthropology and sociology at the time.

Scholars of the German School differed in their individual emphases; some focused on the social and the psychological aspects of urbanism, others on the bureaucracy, still others on the over-all social structure. But what bound them together as a school of thought was a conception of the city as a unitary phenomenon illumined by its relations to units beyond it, units such as the national transportation systems that served the city, and the state, which connects the city to the world.

In many ways, the German School laid the groundwork for the Chicago School which became at least as influential as the German School in urban studies. The towering figure from the Chicago School, Robert Ezra Park, had done graduate work in Germany at the University of Heidelberg where he had attended Georg Simmel's lectures. Ten years after Weber's book, *Die Stadt,* Park produced the first major work that came out of the Chicago School: the landmark essay titled "The City: Some Suggestions for the Study of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment" (1916).

While the members of the German School were predominantly if not exclusively sociologists, the Chicago School attracted scholars from a variety of disciplines. Park was a practicing journalist when he decided to go to Harvard to study philosophy and thence to Germany for graduate work in Heidelberg. Back in the U.S., before he came to the University of Chicago, he worked on race relations, and was an assistant to the eminent African American educator and political leader, Booker T. Washington. This background predisposed him to a strong advocacy of anthropology's ethnographic method. Using a systematic empirical approach to urban studies (as opposed to the "armchair" approach of the German School scholars), the scholars of the Chicago School called attention

to the value of "qualitative data" (in contradistinction to the quantitative data of sociological survey research, for example).

Another member of the Chicago School, Robert Redfield, well known as an anthropologist, followed the efforts of the German School to define the city and urbanism through the ideal-type method. This consisted of identifying oppositions and then creating ideal types to represent the polar ends of that opposition. Weber had compared ideal-type cities from different historical periods. Ferdinand Toennies contrasted the *Gemeinschaft* of rural folk with the *Gesellschaft* of urban dwellers. *Gemeinschaft* bound people through ties of kinship, community, and common goals. *Gesellschaft* was characterized by the impersonality, individualism and self-interest that marked urban social relations.

Redfield's ideal types were of the polar opposites, folk and urban. Using the results of his fieldwork in Mexican villages he abstracted the ideal folk type in an effort to show that "views of the modern city were based on assumptions about the lives of non-urban...or 'folk' societies" (Sennett 1969: 17).

The ideal type method eventually proved unwieldy. But tracing its use longitudinally from the German School to the Chicago School, and latitudinally, within the Chicago School, exemplifies both the continuity which has marked urban studies within sociology, and the cross disciplinarity of urban studies as it gained a foothold in the United States.

Here we see the interaction of sociology and anthropology through their individual practitioners. Sharing an interest in the urban, scholars had ideas and methods flowing across disciplinary lines. (See the lower half of Figure 1.)

Cross-fertilization continued to bear fruit as exemplified notably by sociology's ethnography-based community studies which took neighborhoods, gangs, ghettoes, and small units within cities as subjects of investigation.

The outreach in the opposite direction—anthropology seeking out concepts and methods from sociology—came about in the second half of the 20th century. With massive population movements mostly into cities, with accelerating urbanization, and the virtual disappearance of the self-contained, insular societies that had claimed so much of anthropology's attention until the middle of the 20th century, the urban began to attract fresh and intense interest. This was the climate in which urban anthropology, urban sociology, and urban ethnomusicology subsequently emerged.

Plagued or blessed—depending on one's point of view—by ideas outside their respective disciplines, all three struggled with self-definition and faced questions of relevance. Ulf Hannerz formulated the issue for urban anthropology with the

question I appropriated for the beginning of this paper: what is urban about urban anthropology and what is anthropological about it? (see also 1980: 2–3). Peter Saunders, professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Essex explored the issue in his book, *Social Theory and the Urban Question* (1981), which grew out of his suspicion "that there was no such thing as urban sociology" (p. 7).

To my knowledge, there has been no substantive discussion of the issue in urban ethnomusicology. Almost from the start, urban ethnomusicology was seen mostly as a declaration of independence from the rural, the simple, the folk, the peasant societies that had dominated ethnomusicological discourse until well into the second half of the 20th century. Having finally been granted the freedom to go into previously restricted territory by its parent discipline, ethnomusicology, urban ethnomusicology, many have contended, lost its presumed raison d'être. What had been labeled urban ethnomusicology, so went the argument, had become part of the ethnomusicological mainstream. And since an ethnomusicology *of* urban areas has not found a definitive voice that can articulate its distinction from ethnomusicology *in* urban areas, no counterargument has been heard.

Re-thinking urban ethnomusicology

Is urban ethnomusicology's virtual disappearance, at least from the American scene, then the result of a natural process of evolution in which an organism or one of its parts, having lost its function, becomes vestigial or just fades away? To address this issue, a quick look at urban sociology can be instructive.

Peter Saunders's suspicion that there was no such thing as urban sociology (quoted above) seemed to rest on grounds similar to that upon which much of American ethnomusicology takes urban ethnomusicology to be a duplication of functions already served by the parent discipline. Paralleling ethnomusicology's reasoning, the question that obtains for urban sociology may be formulated as follows: since sociology has traditionally been involved in studies of urbanism and urbanization, what would be the point of urban sociology? Saunders's response, however, went in a direction opposite that taken by American ethnomusicology. Instead of simply dismissing urban sociology as a non-entity, he set about identifying, first, the grounds for his skepticism and, from these, the grounds on which urban sociology's existence might be justified after all. It is an alternative course that urban ethnomusicology might do well to consider.

"[E]ach of the different approaches to urban sociology," Saunders wrote, "has foundered on the attempt to fuse a theory of social processes with an analysis

of spatial forms" (1981: 7). Such attempts fell short, he argued, because it is precisely the distinction between a theory of social processes and the analysis of spatial forms that makes possible the dialectic tension between them. This dialectic tension, in turn, pervades all things urban, is essential to urban social cohesion and, thus, holds the key to understanding the distinctiveness of the urban.

For Saunders, an intrinsically urban problem requires "not a theory of the city [as subject of study] but a theory of the changing basis of social relations" (ibid.: 12) that is at the heart of urban life. The tension is "between a concern with social processes operating with[in] a spatial context, and a concern with the spatial units themselves" (p. 256). This is a formulation that, to my mind, adds specificity and clarity to the distinction that the anthropologist, John Gulick[2], made between research *in* the city as opposed to an anthropology *of* the city which urban ethnomusicology had adopted. But more important, Saunders's formulation underscores the importance of the cohesive tension that underlies and in fact characterizes urban dynamics. For as the highly respected historian of cities, Lewis Mumford, so strongly puts it:

"It is in the city… that man's most purposive activities are formulated and worked out, through conflicting and cooperating personalities, events, groups, into more significant culminations. Without the social drama that comes into existence through the focusing and intensification of group activity, there is not a single function performed in the city that could not be performed—and has not in fact been performed—in the open country." (1970: 490).

At this point in the narrative, it would have been reasonable to expect sociology's and anthropology's mutual exclusivity to have yielded to disciplinary cross-fertilization. Points of convergence had emerged among which the most obvious was in the disciplines' view of what urban studies does *not* stand for. It does not stand for what Saunders called "a theory of social processes" fused into an "analysis of spatial forms," and not for what Gulick called an anthropology in the city, a view which ethnomusicology has not actively disputed.

Perhaps less evident but nonetheless emphatically underscored by Saunders's and Mumford's words quoted earlier, an undoubtedly substantive point of convergence is the concern for relations. Underscored by a whole line of thinkers from Galileo to Charles Sanders Peirce to Alfred North Whitehead, a concern with relations has become all the more imperative in light of the dynamism and

2 See also Eames and Goode 1977: 30–35 and Leeds 1968: 31.

complexity of the urban social organism. That concern involves a fundamental confrontation with a methodological mindset that is all too often brought to bear upon anthropological studies and, through these, upon urban ethnomusicological studies.

The strong tendency to focus on the parts (e.g., on ethnic or minority groups, on urban neighborhoods, or urban genres such as hip-hop), or to take the part and assume that it is the whole calls for a countervailing force. Nourished by a long history of dealing with insular wholes, this tendency has long stood in the way of confronting fully the complex methodological problem of relations between constituent parts and wholes in the context of the urban. The problem needs particular attention because the city is an emergent organism.

Such organisms belong to that category of complex systems that, in the words of the sociologist Liah Greenfeld, "cannot be explained by any of the properties [of its constituent elements]; [rather] it is the relationship between the elements...which gives rise to it, and which in many ways conditions the behavior of the elements [in the system]" (1992: 494). The parts, therefore, are not predictive of the whole, and the whole is not the mere sum of its parts. In many cases, one could say that the parts are in search of the whole to which they owe their status as parts. Mumford put it this way, "Each group, each community, each vocation, each habitat...by their interaction within the close medium of the city... provides endless permutations and combinations in all its members." (1970: 456)

As an emergent organism, the city's cohesion depends not in what has been called "the replication of uniformity" (Hannerz 1980: 282). The cosmopolitanism and heterogeneity that are now taken to be part of the city's birthright call for and respond instead to what the anthropologist Anthony Wallace calls "the organization of diversity" (Hannerz 1992: 12). It is a call echoed in linguistics by Uriel Weinreich, William Labov and Marvin I. Herzog in their concept of "orderly heterogeneity" (1968); by the "orderly disorder" espoused by physicists working on complexity (Gleick 1987: 266); and by the urban historian, Lewis Mumford, in his concept of "contrapuntal order"—an order that accommodates "more significant kinds of conflict, more complex and intellectually stimulating kinds of disharmony" (1970: 485).

Whether the primary focus be on culture (as it is in anthropology) or on social life (as it is in sociology) or on musical life (as it is in ethnomusicology), what this means is that urban life, musical or more broadly social, in its parts or what the investigator takes to be its whole, is best thought of as an open system. While the object of investigation may be a small unit, its identity as urban is to be

sought nonetheless not only in its internal relations but in its relations with units beyond it. In studies of urban life or urbanism, the search for cohesion is ongoing; it is "never carried once and for all to completion" (Hannerz 1992: 164). The mosaic, therefore is not the proper metaphor for the city's cultural diversity and heterogeneity. The kaleidoscope, Hannerz suggests, better reflects urban social life where "the multitude of parts again and again take on new configurations" (1980: 15).

This, then, in a highly abridged form, is the historic legacy, and the intellectual ferment that urban ethnomusicology has inherited from its forebears. That the ethnomusicological focuses on musical activity and musical life takes nothing away from the richness of its legacy from anthropology and sociology. That legacy verifies not only urban ethnomusicology's identity as *urban* but solidifies its claim to be *ethnomusicological*, for it is only by making the contributions of anthropology and sociology inherent to its nature that urban ethnomusicology can honor its commitment to sociocultural context. What is ethnomusicological about urban ethnomusicology resides *as much* in its choice of a musical subject and the way this is treated *as* in its ties to those disciplines that will enable it to honor its commitments *to itself,* to its nature as urban as well as ethnomusicological.

Urban ethnomusicology in the 21st century

It is with these considerations in mind that we can now turn to the question of whether ethnomusicology is well served by treating the urban as an indistinguishable part of the mix that is the ethnomusicological mainstream. Does affixing "urban" as a marker create a redundance we can do without?

If the argument for removing the marker, urban, rests on redundance, then the question revolves around the functions of redundance. There is needless redundance, a repetition of what is already obvious. But there is also purposive redundance, ubiquitous because it is indispensable to enculturation and in such areas as formal rhetoric, pedagogy, or advertising. Deliberately embraced for strategic reasons, purposive redundance serves the purposes of emphasis and for keeping the term itself or what it represents in the forefront of people's attention. It is a reasoned response to the human tendency to forget, to be distracted, particularly in a complex world where so much vies for our attention. If "urban" is a redundance that reminds us that we are in territory still waiting to be fully explored, then urban ethnomusicology, it can be argued, is a case of purposive redundance.

But if the question has to do not with "urban" as a marker or modifier of the general category, ethnomusicology, but with its potential utility as a conceptual and methodological toolkit designed expressly to address the challenges of today's world, then the discussion must turn to what those challenges might be. Even a summary of such challenges would require far more space. Some data should therefore suffice inasmuch as cities and urban areas are highly visible, open to observation and, in an almost global sense, part of our experience of daily life.

A little more than a year ago, the Chief Executive of IBM writing on "The Future of the City" noted that the world had crossed a threshold. For the first time, more than half the human race is living in cities. By 2050, the figure will rise to 70 percent. ...This means [that] the most important locus for 21st-century innovation—technological, economic, and societal—will be our cities." (Palmisano 2010).

The historian, Kenneth Jackson, had made a similar point earlier (Wills 1999: 25). And Geoffrey West, the British-born physicist who is credited with giving Jane Jacobs's classic work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* a scientific basis, reiterates the demographic trends. For him, "urban population growth is the great theme of modern life." The city, therefore, is "an intellectual problem with immense practical applications" (Lehrer 2010: 48).

Since practical applications are likely to be felt more immediately on the local level than the global level we could zoom closer to where we stand.

For some time now, and especially in the last few months, concerns over "multiculturalism," national identity, and assimilation vs. integration as policy to address cultural diversity have gained greater prominence. As migration, especially forced migration, accelerates and grows in magnitude, prime ministers, chancellors, and presidents have voiced those concerns as have ordinary citizens. Complex social relations fuel those concerns.

What has all this to do with ethnomusicology?

They all have to do with human agency, with the increasingly diverse and heterogeneous makers and consumers of music, in an environment that, of necessity, conditions or impinges upon their behavior. They all have to do with social processes operating in a spatial context the density of which and the cultural differences within which can encourage fragmentation, even violence, or can promote the innovation and creativity that is mandatory if urbanism as a way of life is to be sustained. They all have to do with music and musical life as expressive culture, as an expression of collective sentiments, and, as scientists increasingly have been suggesting, as a human adaptive mechanism.

These are issues ethnomusicologists have been examining through the lens of musical behavior. Whether we have been doing them to the fullest potential of our interdisciplinary nature is a matter for debate. But what is fairly certain is that the musical lives of a culturally diverse population living in close proximity, within the confines of an urban environment where insularity is not an option, can be an important window into the kinds of relations that make the city a laboratory for studying what Saunders called "the changing basis of social relations." Conversely, the changing basis of social relations revealed by studies of urbanism cannot but have an impact on the musical life that emerges as a result.

Perhaps Iain Chambers suggests the magnitude—and the magnificence—of the challenge: "This transformation in our understanding of movement, marginality and modern life," he wrote, "is inextricably tied to the metropolitanisation of the globe, where the model of the city becomes...the model of the contemporary world" (1994: 27).

Is generic ethnomusicology up to meeting the challenge that this implies? Upon the response to this question may rest the justification for urban ethnomusicology's existence.

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