Jeff Todd Titon, emeritus professor at Brown University, is among the world’s most highly recognized ethnomusicologists. Titon is known and respected for his practice of community engagement. For this reason, I invited him to provide a contribution to this special issue, “Connecting with Communities.” He proposed to write a short story, a piece of fiction. As this is an atypical format for a contribution to MUSiCultures, I consulted with the journal’s editorial team, suggesting that an interview with Titon might provide some context for his story. Below is a co-edited transcript of our conversation. (Marcia Ostashewski)

Interview

Marcia Ostashewski: How is it you came to ethnomusicology? From what I understand, you were a professor of English first?

Jeff Todd Titon: At the University of Minnesota I took a lot of graduate courses in ethnomusicology and cultural anthropology within my doctoral degree program, in American studies. Although I wrote my dissertation on music, with Alan Kagan as my informal advisor—he’s an ethnomusicologist who joined the music faculty there in 1966—I preferred the exchange of ideas in an American studies or English department, so I got the M.A. in English and applied for jobs in English departments. I accepted one from Tufts University and in 1971 started there as assistant professor of English. It wasn’t long before the Chair of music found out I’d done ethnomusicology as a grad student and written on blues. At that time, most US universities didn’t have ethnomusicologists on their faculties. He asked if I’d offer a survey course in...
music throughout the world. So after some thought and much preparation, I did that on released time from English, where I was teaching American literature, and also folklore, another subject I’d studied in grad school. After a few years, I was teaching half in English and half in music, and soon with an anthropologist colleague we established an M.A. program in ethnomusicology there. Then in 1986 Brown asked me to join them to direct their doctoral program in ethnomusicology, so I finally joined a music department after all.

**MO:** What are some highlights of that time, or experiences that were formative for you when you were studying ethnomusicology in graduate school?

**JTT:** The 1960s was a turbulent time because the United States had engaged in a war in Indochina. I was part of the anti-war movement. And I think that the most formative thing was the disconnect between my studies and the movements that I was involved with: the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the anti-war movement and women’s liberation, as it was called back then. In my studies I was being taught to be a disengaged scholar, and outside of the classroom I was an engaged citizen.

**MO:** So was it really all about the disengaged scholar? Was there nothing that provided a means to think about other ways of doing things?

**JTT:** I probably oversimplified it. I would make a further distinction between the kinds of scholars we were being trained to be—objective and disengaged—and the people who made the art or the history that we were studying, who were engaged. We were encouraged to study the art, not the artists. But of course the writers, the musicians, they themselves were engaged, if not in politics, then in art.

**MO:** But the way you were being taught to be a scholar was about being disengaged and objective?

**JTT:** Yes, standing outside and observing and analyzing, with the goal of increasing knowledge, was what we were being taught to do. We were taught to be participant observers, but the purpose of the participation was to understand the music better rather than to engage in it. At that time, I was an engaged participant in blues. I tried to understand it in order to make it, not the opposite. The opposite is a scholarly stance and I can see the point of it in some situations. But that objective stance prevents commitment to action inside of a community. My goal wasn’t to increase knowledge about the war
in Vietnam; we already knew what we needed to know. My goal was to get us out of there.

**MO:** In the early part of your blog (www.sustainablemusic.blogspot.com), you mention two kinds of ethnomusicologists that were understood to have existed. One was more of an anthropologist who was interested in music more as culture, and the other type was more of a musicologist and after the musical structure. You are suggesting that ethnomusicology was a little more complicated.

**JTT:** Well, that’s how it looked to some people at the time. I’m not sure I was aware of any tension over it as a student because I did both—I studied sound structure and also I studied music in its cultural context, as it was phrased then: not music as culture, but music in its cultural context. Music as culture is something I experienced as a blues musician, but it took a little time and distance before I could think about it in that way. When I began attending conferences of the Society for Ethnomusicology in the early 1970s, I did notice that some ethnomusicologists there were more excited about the cultural study of music while others were more interested in studies of musical structure. One of the good things about the field is that it can accommodate both emphases.

**MO:** You were being taught to go out and learn the music and come back and tell the story of the kind of music culture it would be. But you chose a music that was very close to home—you didn’t go to Java, or to Africa, or to India. You choose the music of the blues.

**JTT:** Although I didn’t go far from home to study blues, I wouldn’t say I was being taught to learn the music and come back and tell its story. Storytelling was for biographers and authors of popular books. We were taught to be scholars, “sciencing about music,” in Alan Merriam’s phrase. But I was always encouraged to follow my heart, and the music that most interested me in school was blues. Singing blues I thought was beyond my capabilities, but I wanted to become a better guitar player, so in college I tried to learn how to play like Libba Cotten, Mississippi John Hurt and John Fahey, whose early recordings were very important to me. Eventually I got to meet Fahey, and I met some of the others and got to play with them, like Son House and Fred McDowell. That was in graduate school. I was getting better at blues guitar and eventually I joined a blues band there in Minneapolis. It was an integrated band, with a black leader, Lazy Bill Lucas, who’d grown up in Arkansas and had a career as a
blues singer and pianist in Chicago before moving to the Twin Cities.

I interviewed Bill and his friends, got the interviews published in blues fan magazines, and it helped their careers. It was a way of giving back. And later when it came time to choose a dissertation subject it dawned on me that I knew something about how to do ethnomusicology, I knew something about blues and wanted to learn more, that I was playing in a blues band, and I might be able to research and write something about blues and make an original contribution to knowledge.

**MO:** So your interest in teaching in American Studies was about interdisciplinarity?

**JTT:** I always felt intellectually stimulated when exposed to a variety of viewpoints in response to any particular question, or problem. It’s one of the reasons I’m attracted, I think, to ecomusicology now. I think musicologists and ethnomusicologists have something to contribute. I think eco-critics have something to contribute. I think acousticians have something to contribute. I think acoustic ecologists have something to contribute. Soundscape ecologists too. And we can learn from all of them.

Just after I got tenure at Tufts, my colleague Jesper Rosenmeier, who was a professor of early American literature, asked me, How would you like to co-found an American Studies program with me? And I said I would like nothing better. So we did that at Tufts in the late 1970s. We devised an interdisciplinary introductory course called “History and Ecology in America.” This was team-taught by professors from all the liberal arts divisions: we had
a cultural anthropologist, a physicist, a professor of early American literature and myself. Later we were joined by a molecular biologist. As far as we knew, it was the only American studies program that regularly integrated scientists and humanists among the faculty.

I’d had something of a science education as an undergraduate. Although I was an American studies major, I went deeply into some sciences. At one time I thought I might go to medical school. I studied experimental morphology with an eminent professor then past retirement age, Oscar Schotté. Early in his life he’d studied embryology with Ernst Haeckel. Haeckel in his time was as important as Darwin. Around the time of the American Civil War, Haeckel had developed a new branch of science and coined the term for it: “ecology.” It was a very fortunate part of my studies, I came to realize, and gave me some confidence to work across the disciplines, the sciences and humanities.

**MO:** There seems to have been a lot of room for you as an English teacher. I am thinking about programmatic prescriptions, or departmental boundaries. History and Ecology in America sounds like a wonderful course to be able to teach—and what an opportunity you had to initiate the program!

**JTT:** The boundaries of English literature have been less rigidly policed than some other disciplines in the US. After all, the literature that people in English
departments are concerned with tends not to have boundaries and, I am not sure how true this is in Canada, but in the United States, many English professors have an interest in expressive culture, generally. Whether it’s stories, folklore, music. You might be surprised how many English professors write about music, how many have been music critics over the years.

MO: So, it sounds to me like you were publishing mostly fairly typical ethnomusicology kinds of work, and of course you brought your own new ideas and contributions to the field. To be writing fiction—such as the piece you have contributed to our special issue, “Connecting with Communities”—is another thing entirely, perhaps? On the one hand, I will say that when I was writing my dissertation I very much thought about fiction as a way to express and share some of the things I wanted to. I am wondering, how is it you came to share this story with us, responding to a call for papers for a community-engaged ethnomusicology. And how would you describe what you wrote?

JTT: I think there are many ways of getting at some of the ideas about sound, and music, and communities. Fiction is one of them. When I was first invited to contribute to this issue of the journal, my initial reaction was no, I’d already written so much about this topic, why repeat myself? But then I saw it as a chance to say something else, in a different way. I’d started writing fiction in high school. I seldom tried to get my stories published or anything like that. But a few of them have been published recently; one only last year, by a small publisher in Vermont.¹

I think I first became aware of similarities in fiction and ethnography, or at least ethnographic narrative, when I began teaching at Tufts. It was a freshman course in composition. Although we had to teach students to write better, the subjects the students wrote about were up to us. I developed and taught one called “Inventing Anthropology.” We read popular anthropology as fiction, and fiction as ethnography. Then we tried our hand at writing some of it. As part of that course we also read science fiction as if it were ethnographic narrative. The students were quite interested in science fiction. We read Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Her parents were important anthropologists early in the 20th century, incidentally, Alfred and Theodora Kroeber. In anthropology we read Colin Turnbull’s *The Forest People*, which is a popular narrative ethnography about the Mbuti, in central Africa.

MO: And then there are all those popular detective anthropology novels, some of which I have read in anthropology courses. [See http://www.crimefictionlover.com/2013/02/forensic-mysteries-five-of-the-best/ for further reading.]
JTT: Yes, yes. My colleague Barbara Tedlock said to me when I was teaching this course, “Well, you know, a lot of anthropologists are closet fiction writers.” I said “Well, I knew that a lot of English professors were, but I didn’t know that about anthropologists,” and she said “Oh, yes” and she mentioned Return to Laughter and a number of other works. She was saying that there was a tradition of this writing, and I said to myself there must be something about the imagination of the fiction writer and the imagination of the cultural anthropologist that conjures up worlds and enables them to move between these two worlds, fact and fiction. And I began wondering what that was for the anthropologist, particularly the one who goes to a culture which is unfamiliar. It may be just as imaginative as fiction, in the sense that this strange world engages the anthropologist’s imagination as the fictional world that a fiction writer creates—trying to figure it out, in other words.

In that freshman course we also read examples of the New Journalism, writers like Hunter Thompson and John McPhee. Narrative was a form that was becoming more available, more respectable, for scholars. Journalists had been taught to be objective but now some journalism was turning into personal narrative. And of course it was there in anthropology, not just in fiction written by anthropologists under pseudonyms but in popular books like The Forest People. Turnbull wrote his popular ethnography but he also worked at the Museum of Natural History and he contributed his lengthy scientific description, his field notes, his observations and conclusions to their research archives, just as Margaret Mead did. I remember teaching a seminar in the English department at that time, on narrative. Narrative in history, literature, ethnography and so on. It was in the air then. Coming back. It had been thought unscholarly, unscientific, but with the growing critique of science and objectivity in that era it was coming back into favor, in the humanities at least. I was also talking about narrative in spoken and sung stories rendered as poetry, with my friends and colleagues Dennis and Barbara Tedlock. Dennis was at the center of the ethnopoetics movement then.

One of the early essays I published in a scholarly journal made the point that life histories should be read as fictions in the sense that they were “makings” or constructions rather than found, factual historical objects. It was at about that time I read my first piece of fiction for an ethnomusicology conference. About fifteen years later I read another one, this time at a folklore conference.

MO: When was that?

JTT: The first one was in 1979. It was the New England regional ethnomusicology conference, the chapter meeting, which was at Brown
University that year. I was still teaching at Tufts. And I read a piece of fiction, a murder mystery that took place at a folk festival. But I didn’t introduce it as fiction. The story was narrated by a hard-boiled detective assigned to keep order at the festival, and who eventually solved the crime. I began by saying something like “I am sure all of you will remember the publicity that attended the spectacular murder of the patriarch of country music, Pops Miller.” Of course no one remembered it. In the room were ethnomusicologists who knew little or nothing about American country music. They were studying world music; their musical worlds were in Ghana, Indonesia, India. For all they knew, someone named Pops Miller actually had been murdered at a folk festival and they must have been overseas at the time. Of course eventually it dawned on them that it was not true. At first because of the setting, papers read at a conference, they naturally believed what I was saying, but sooner or later they realized that the “I” of the story wasn’t me at all and that I’d made it all up. Then I guess it became entertaining.

The reason I had done that was kind of mischievous. I had worked for the Smithsonian Folk Festival in 1976, the first time I’d done anything like that. It was really a wonderful event, but there were aspects that troubled me. I decided to express my ambivalence in fiction. And what better way to point them out than from the perspective of a detective who didn’t hold the same ideas about authenticity that folklorists did. He lived in a world where authenticity had to do with people going under assumed names, with forgery and the like. Of course, my story itself was an example of forgery, you might say. Well, during the festival this detective was hearing performances by older people past their primes and he wondered what all the fuss was about. Eventually in solving the crime, he got to learn about some of the problems and conflicts from the festival workers and the performers themselves.

MO: Fiction might sometimes be the only way we could write about such things.

JTT: Yes. And of course it was also great fun. I never published it, never tried. Reading it was all the publication I intended. It allowed me to express things that I was deeply ambivalent about in a way that would show them without resolving them, partly because I hadn’t resolved them either. I just wanted to put them out there and have the audience experience them for themselves as people do when hearing a story. Then maybe we could talk about it. I believed that festivals were a good thing, I felt celebrating traditional expressive culture and community arts was a very important thing and I was glad that we were doing it. But some aspects of the show made me a little uncomfortable. I
was reacting to the staged part of it, the frame, the way the performers and workers were being treated at times.

A blues performer I was presenting, Big Joe Williams, was scheduled to perform on the front porch of a small church building. Of course it wasn’t a real church but it was built to look like a country church, and it did. Joe thought it was sacrilegious to sing blues in a church. Many blues singers in his generation felt that way. So he refused to sing there and then the stage manager blamed me for not persuading him that it wasn’t a real church. I hadn’t even tried because I thought Big Joe should be the one to decide if it was real. Joe was scheduled to perform there the next day also, so I went to a high official in the festival and explained the problem and suggested moving Joe to a different stage. But the official wouldn’t adjust the schedule. They thought it shouldn’t matter because it wasn’t a real church. So it was things like that. I went back and again I told Joe I agreed with him, but also that I’d failed to get the festival to change where he was supposed to play. He thought about it and the next day he decided to perform there after all. But I stayed upset about it. I guess he did, too. And the more I thought about that incident, the more troubling it became, troubling and interesting too.

MO: I remember reading Bernard Lortat-Jacob’s book, *Sardinian Chronicles*, in graduate school. It was compelling in a similar way to what you describe. I read it in a grad seminar. It was one of a number of ethnographies the class read together, to become familiar with different methodologies. I remember that, when we discussed the book, there were mixed feelings in the group. People felt that it was an engaging way to learn about the music and culture, but it was hard to know what was factual and what was not. This is partly why I wanted to discuss your short story with you in this interview, and to provide a bit of context for those who will read it in the context of this issue.

So, you have talked about the narrative in that first story you presented, and how, at the time, you couldn’t think of a better way to present that information. Now, with “Flight Call” for this issue, it was a deliberate choice for you to use narrative. I am wondering what motivated that choice and what you feel was gained in this.

JTT: I am not sure if I am your best witness about that. Authors are not always the best explainers of their intentions because they are not always aware of them, not fully anyway. I think that when I have wanted to write about experiences of people, those I’ve worked with and become friends with, I tend to write about them narratively, presenting it as non-fiction. I did this in *Powerhouse for God*, in the beginning and end of the book; and I’ve done it
elsewhere. But writing a story and presenting it as fiction is a different kind of thing from writing narrative ethnography.

This story for this journal, it’s a way of exploring some ideas that are coming to me concerning the way sound is experienced in the world. Over the past four years I’ve returned to reading Thoreau and his journals. Thoreau is the only writer in the 19th century in the United States that I am aware of, at least, a writer of the very first rank, who pays prolonged and direct attention to sound. He notices the sounds in the natural world and he writes down what he hears and how they make him feel and what he thinks they mean. For him, human music was just one small kind of sounding in the world. I myself have become increasingly interested in sounds, and what sounds are, and how they impact all kinds of living beings, not just humans. So as I’ve tried to explore this through sound ecology.

Not in the same way my friend Steve Feld went about it. I didn’t go to Papua New Guinea and find a culture with an acoustic-based way of knowing the world. His work is wonderful, and the Kaluli world he writes about is very exciting for anyone interested in sound and culture and ways of being and knowing. Of course, in my research I did follow my fascination with the sounds of sacred language, particularly chanted preaching, what African Americans call whooping. But I didn’t find anything quite like what Steve calls an acoustemology in it. The special sounds in the preaching are understood as a signal of a spiritual anointing; but the special sound was a sign, a medium and not the meaning. So I’ve been asking questions about sound within a more Western frame, and lately a scientific one, soundscape ecology. And also by expanding the frame from music to sound, you expand from human to animal. As Steve was taught to do, by the Kaluli. So I have been reading in the science of animal communication, where sound plays an important role. I’m not going in through some other group’s belief system, like the Kaluli’s, which must remain a metaphor to me as a cultural outsider, even though I do recognize the advantage of different frames to jolt us into new understandings, so we can approach problems like sustainability in more effective ways and from multiple perspectives, not just Western science. Studying animal communication led me to the question of animal culture and animal consciousness—are non-human animals conscious? Do animals have self awareness? Is consciousness more or less than that? You know that your dog can feel emotions: pain, pleasure, possibly some other emotions you have observed. All of this with its relationship to sound is interesting to me. So I started pursuing it in a multi-disciplinary way, and fiction is one of those.

What does sound do in animal communication? What I’ve learned is that it puts us into community. And that’s the relevance to the theme of this journal
issue. Sound travels through a medium that vibrates, it could be air, it could be water, but it sets the water or air into motion. It vibrates. The vibrations are picked up by a living creature, in the creature’s body. We are vibrating, constantly, our whole bodies really, although in humans the sounds that go to the brain come through our ears, mainly. Not all creatures have ears, but they still vibrate to sounds and motion. Worms, for instance. My hypothesis, what I’ve been working with and speaking about at conferences now for a few years, is that what sound does is signal presence, the presence of oneself to another being, and also the reverse—the presence of another being to oneself. And that is the basis of the beginning of community. Erving Goffman coined the term co-presence, to mean when people are present to one another. I would extend that to all creatures, through sound. We already have some awareness of this, even though we find it hard to take literally ideas embodied in phrases like “good vibrations” or “vibes.” But I think we sense it there, and that those phrases are on to something. What that is, is community, or at least the possibility of it, including imagined communities. Maybe like the one Big Joe imagined in the church building they said wasn’t real.

So, that’s what I tried to put into this story, although it wasn’t idea-driven in that way; it just came out that way. I had the start of this story in mind for a long time, years, characters and some things happening to them, long before an opportunity presented itself for this journal. I’d even written out a draft of it, years ago, but stopped in the middle of it. I had a situation and some characters but didn’t know where it was going. But out of the desire to write something in response to your invitation—I don’t suppose you expected fiction, of course—I came back to this story and found out what it was saying, and then how to bring it along further to a close.

The story itself, it begins with a person, Matthew, out in the woods trying to record a bird’s song. Matthew is trying to be unobtrusive and to identify the bird by its song. The first thing birders learn is to name the bird they see, naming the thing. But then Matthew makes a sound and the bird flies away. He thinks he scared it. He goes back to his recordings and tries to identify the bird by its song. But he misunderstands what the song is all about. He thinks it’s a song of alarm. It’s only towards the end of the story that he comes to realize that wasn’t what the bird was saying at all. What the bird was saying is, “Let’s keep the flock together.” So this sound really was an invitation to stay in community. But then who was the bird singing to? Other birds nearby, surely. But was it also addressed to him? It would be presumptuous to think so, but Matthew is not beyond presumption, beyond imagined communities. Yet the bird flew away, which certainly is part of the ambiguity of nature, as it is present to human beings like Matthew, at any rate. To me, the story turns out to have
something to do with the ambiguities of sound, presence and co-presence, and what this person learns through sound about the possibilities of community. It gets played out in the other small communities in the story, with his partner and then the other couples, and then the school children at the end who seem to hold the possibility for a wider community.

All of these ideas, for me, are lurking about this story. And there are others. If a reader of that story comes to assent to its life, leaves the story with a smile of recognition, then at some level the reader gets it, even if it isn’t at a level of articulation. And as I said, there are intentions in there that I’m only dimly aware of, while readers may imagine meanings that I would say are far-fetched. But that’s not to say they aren’t there in the reader’s experience of the story. Of course they are. This is a very powerful part of fiction as the story, we say, takes on a life of its own and demands assent on grounds other than ethnographic accuracy or persuasive analysis and interpretation.

MO: Yet no one would suggest to an ethnographer that they would have the answers. As ethnographers, we ask important questions and engage with people.

JTT: Well, that’s what some of us think we’re about, or should be about, yes. It’s not what most other people think we ought to be about. People outside our fields think we do have answers, or at least that we should. What else are we being paid for? they might wonder.

MO: This brings to mind a story from around the time I was finishing up my dissertation research, and I was traveling in Croatia on field research. I met with a Ukrainian dance instructor there, and asked to interview him. I let him know I was completing my doctorate on Ukrainian music and dance in diaspora, and so we agreed to meet. When we met, I asked him about his understanding of different aspects of Ukrainian dance: what certain regional movements look like, how he performs them, teaches them, what the music sounds like, the characteristics of the dance and so forth. The interview seemed to be going fine, and then at one point he started to give me odd glances, like he was starting to get confused. Then he blurted out “Aren’t you the expert, don’t you know the answers to these questions?” But I answered, “I am interested in what your answers are. I know what I think and what my experiences are and what I was taught in Canada, but I’m interested in learning about what you know.”

JTT: We can say things like, “We are here to learn from you, you are our teacher.” But we sometimes get taken for an expert when we’re uncomfortable in that role.
MO: There are also times that education is not so greatly valued. “What can academics know? They don’t live in the real world.”

JTT: I think that is pretty common stereotype in North America. And, I am afraid that many of us have earned it. By pretending we are experts—

MO: And hopefully articles like the ones in this issue and your story will help us and others continue to engage with, and continue to learn from, our teachers outside the academy.

JTT: May I add to one other thing? You said earlier on that I had a choice. You are right. Since the mid-1980s, I’ve been writing and speaking, as a folklorist and as an ethnomusicologist—not as a fiction writer—about the kinds of partnerships with communities that we folklorists and ethnomusicologists have engaged in, usually coming out of long-duration fieldwork, ever since I can remember. But sound and co-presence has a broader context than what an ethnomusicologist might say about it. Reciprocity is a human impulse, and maybe even not just human. There’s a lot of interest nowadays in mutualism in the plant and animal worlds, and also in altruism in the animal kingdom. It’s not all about competition and predatory behavior. I feel that after some years of engagement with communities, and mutual learning and exchange, we have been able to help them realize some of their goals—just as they’ve helped us with some of ours—and helped them to value and sustain their music and their cultures. Ethnomusicology scholars identify me with a theory of fieldwork based on visiting and friendship, something that I’ve formulated here and there over the years, spoken about and written about. You can find it most easily in places like my essay in Shadows in the Field, or the one in The Cultural Study of Music. A different form, fiction, wouldn’t just reframe the old discussion or offer a new way of saying old things. It could open new possibilities. I chose to do something a little different that might invite, as you were saying, a reader to think in a different way, and in a much broader context.

Notes


