

Verso una musicologia transculturale

Scritti in onore di Francesco Giannattasio

a cura di

Giorgio Adamo e Giovanni Giuriati

con la collaborazione di
Vanna Viola Crupi

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In copertina: Francesco Giannattasio a Harar (Etiopia), 1998; foto di Simone Tarsitani.

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Dear Francesco,...

STEVEN FELD

Dear Francesco,

It is truly a great pleasure to join friends and colleagues to participate in this volume to celebrate your distinct presence in, and contributions to, transcultural musicology. On this occasion, I hope you might appreciate something brief and informal from me; not another academic essay, but a letter that partakes of two other non-academic genres, the diary, and a reflective commentary.

As a starting point, let me begin with our meeting for the first time, in Venice, at the end of January 2001, when you generously invited me to participate in the yearly seminar of the Istituto Interculturale di Studi Musicali Comparati at the Fondazione “Giorgio Cini”. For that occasion, the topic was “Ethnomusicology and ‘World Music’”, and over two and a half days the program, as you will recall, began with your provocative introduction “Musiche, métissage, missaggio e messaggio”. It was a perfect opening to a topic that, certainly at the time, was dominated by prejudice and attitude, and too little serious or rigorous academic attention.

Reviewing the terrain of questions and positions, I recall your skill at projecting perspectives equally doubtful and hopeful, equally distant and engaged, equally uniting the critical problems facing musicians and scholars, not to mention heritage policy bureaucrats. My many notes remind me now, as then, that you spoke forcefully criticizing colonial and neocolonial attitudes in the global music industry, making clear the need to balance attacks on harmful exotica and support for progressive intercultural. I particularly liked the way you located so much of the matter exactly where it belonged – in the marketplace.

As someone who had been writing about these issues since Paul Simon's 1986 *Graceland* recording, I particularly liked your stance on how scholars were complicit both in the promotion and policing of musical traditions. And I was struck by my deep agreement with your nuanced presentation of the mixtures of pleasure and guilt, and of confusion and awe, then surrounding the global merchandising of hybrid, experimental, and indigenous musical repertoires.

In addition to yourself, well-known Italian colleagues were also on the program: Maurizio Agamennone speaking about intercultural confrontation and "migrant" musicians onstage, and Giovanni Giuriati addressing old and new productions of exoticism in the case of Cambodian music. Sociological and anthropological perspectives were presented by Denis Constant-Martin from Sciences-Po, Paris, and by me, at the time teaching at New York University. Additionally, Guy Huot, from UNESCO's International Music Council, brought an institutional perspective different to typical scholarly preoccupations.

But what made the seminar unquestionably unique, and of course of greater interest to the press and general public than the typical academic audience, was the presence of Ali Farka Touré. The guitarist from Northern Mali had of course garnered international acclaim for his "desert blues" stylings on CDs like *The Source*, *The River*, *Niafunké*, and the Grammy award-winner *Talking Timbuktu*. But on our program he was simply listed as another speaker, for a presentation titled "Le point de vue d'un musicien".

In fact, I actually encountered him before meeting you at San Giorgio!!

Diary: Wednesday, January 24, 2001

The arrival scene at Marco Polo airport struck me as perfect for the opening of the Venice Carnevale, although my date book tells me that it is actually the opening of the Chinese New Year! Greeting me on behalf of the Istituto Interculturale di Studi Musicali Comparati as I disembarked was the gently Italian-flavored English of the Institute's secretary, Sabrina Marenco, a petite young woman with pixie-cut white-blond-hair, stylishly dressed in hot pink and black. Before I could even think about being under-dressed for the occasion, she led me to a presence of towering elegance just a few gates away. Tall, beautifully dressed in a full tuxedo, patent leather formal slip-on shoes, a heavy overcoat, and multi-colored scarf was Ali Farka Touré, the great guitarist from Mali. As he stands I realize how striking and pronounced is the difference in height and skin color to Sabrina when they are both right in front of me, she barely reaching to his shoulder height in heels.

Ali greets me graciously in what I recognize to be a very formal French. I respond briefly, apologizing for my modest ability with the language, simply telling him that the pleasure of meeting is all mine, and that I have listened to his music with real joy for a long time. He thanks me with more formality as he continues to shake my hand, saying that these are such kind words. Ali has just arrived from long travel, considerably more hours than me even if less distance. As we begin to walk, following Sabrina's enthusiastic march toward the baggage area, he tells me his route: eight hundred and fifty kilometers via Land Rover from Niafunké to Bamako, then by plane to Paris, and then on to Venice. I tell him that I have come from New York via Milan.

Our common purpose here is a conference on “world music”, or rather music and globalization, but neither of us is aware of exactly what we are in for. It is my first academic conference in Italy. Having retired from performing, Ali is here without a guitar. He tells me that he feels a deep sense of honor to be invited to an academic conference not as a musician but as a lecturer. «But of course I have some music», he says, taking a somewhat dusty un-cased audio cassette from his coat pocket to show me. It is at that moment that I realize how large are his palms, how long and strong his fingers, how the cassette looks so small in his hand. I explain that I am not a performer of world music but a professor who studies the topic. «I am sure to learn from you, professor» he responds with respectful grace. «But you are the true professor among us», I say, very aware of how stiff the words feel to me when rendered literally in my rudimentary French. He smiles and thanks me warmly again, shaking my hand, this time enclosed in both of his.

Our baggage collected, Sabrina leads us to a waiting water taxi, a new experience for Ali and me. Sitting across from each other, surrounded by the overcast grays and fog of January in Venice, the boat motor hypnotic, we each drift in and out of eyes-shut moments of jetlag as the taxi makes its way from the airport dock to the Island of San Giorgio Maggiore, home of our host, the Fondazione “Giorgio Cini”. But I’m startled out of drift at a moment when the boat’s speed and course changes, and Ali, both hands open and reaching out, eyes focused and deep, looks right at me and waxes eloquent as he enthusiastically delivers the perfect Venice “first encounter” soundbite: «faire une ville au dessus de l’eau, *ça c’est la force!*».

The rest of today has disappeared into the usual arrival business, greetings, meeting arriving colleagues, and an orientation to the Cini Foundation’s spectacular monastic villa. I’ve never been to Venice, and am greatly excited to experience the place for the first time. But as I’ve now slept, gotten up to write these few lines before we travel over the water to town for a conference dinner, I can’t stop thinking of Ali’s brief and beautiful comment, of how much more lyrical, deep, and soulful it is than anything I read on the plane in my hyped-up tourist guidebook. Yes, of course: «*ça c’est la force!*» Wow! How directly, how immediately a man from the African desert can apprehend the distinctive power and the magical allure of a city on top of water.

For the first day, the Thursday sessions, the speakers, after your introduction, were Denis Constant-Martin and me. Despite our differences of academic training and world subject areas, there were many uniform dimensions to the perspectives we three presented on how the term “globalization” was being employed as a friendly type of word, a word whose much less friendly dimension in the musical case was the creation of new forms of detachable and exploitable labor for a marketplace addicted to difference for the sake of new merchandise. You put it very succinctly, both describing the scholarly lament of many ethnomusicologists, and the critical issue for future research linking musicology, sociology, and anthropology: «Il rispetto per le altre culture e un’informazione corretta divengono delle preoccupazioni del tutto trascurabili. Ciò che conta per il mercato sono le forme e le apparenze musicali inaccostumate» [«Respect for other cultures and correct information become completely negligible concerns. What matters for the market are musically unconventional forms and appearances»].

I recall that the first day started with that sense of a punch; a critical tone, a suspicion, and critical case studies that also were wrapped in a fertile outpouring of multidisciplinary keywords.

Diary: Friday, January 26, 2001

This afternoon it is Ali's turn to speak, in between the scholarly case studies of Maurizio and Giovanni. While their language, critical depth, and ethical concerns conjoin with many of the outlooks of the first day's presentations, Ali takes a very different path. "I want to tell you where my music comes from", he begins, gently making clear that he will speak about his home, his life there, the work he and his friends do, "the source" or "origin" as he continues to emphasize. He speaks about the desert, about poverty, about farming, about water. And then he starts to get into it deeply and begins describing the arduous process of importing water pumps and irrigation equipment. And I realize that maybe he is going into a zone of metaphor and a variety of French that is way over my head.

Denis Constant-Martin, who has done terrific research on jazz and African music, and spoke on Thursday after Francesco's introduction, is sitting next to me. I figure it is time to ask a native French speaker what is going on. Denis whispers to me that Ali is speaking in a rather ornate and rustic formal West African French, full of allusions. He asks if I understand. I tell him that I only understand in general. He says, "don't worry, it would be extremely difficult to translate!" and smiles at me. He is listening hard; me too, as Ali is calmly, but passionately telling us everything we possibly could want to know about the difficulties of importing water pumps, of preparing them, of repairing them, of getting replacement membranes for them, of seeing to it that they work to irrigate dry lands, making farming possible, to feed the life of his place.

This goes on for fifty minutes and I think it is great. Give the man a chance to speak about where the music comes from and he gives an eloquent lecture about food, famine, dryness, the desert, water, work, community, the source. Fantastic. Of course it is all about place and this is what I love, this beautiful way of saying that the experience of place is the real generative source of all music. And of course it takes me back to his first reaction to Venice and the power of a city on the water. At this moment I just want to hug and thank Francesco for the brilliant idea of having Ali speak. He has so much to say, and as Denis remarks to me, understanding it word by word is perhaps not the point at all – this is simply something to be experienced as a performance, as passionate as an onstage musical one. Only at the very end does Ali produce the cassette full of desert dust from his pocket, pass it to Francesco, and we hear a few minutes of music. We listen and it is Ali jamming with his students and friends at Niafunké. He concludes by reminding us that this is what they do *after* they have done the heavy work, what they do after making water flow, after planting, after farming. «This is where the music comes from», he concludes.

The talk is finished, the audience half dazzled and mystified. Denis tells me that he is not quite sure he understands it all. I certainly only got half of the French. People are clapping. Ali is beaming. Francesco graciously thanks Ali and then opens the floor to questions.

«Can you say something about the experience of making music with Ry Cooder for *Talking Timbuktu*» asks one Italian journalist, eagerly.

«Well, we sent him the music and three weeks later we got together and played the music». NEXT! I totally loved this. Ali was not biting, not going to glorify Ry Cooder, praise him, make him the big star, do the big gratitude number, wasn't having any of that Ladysmith and Paul Simon kind of stuff. He threw off the question with just one sentence. And it was nonchalant, matter of fact, and completely sincere.

Another hand goes up, and the question is similar: «Can you say something about the success and importance of *Talking Timbuktu*, and all the exposure you have gotten from the Grammy award together with Ry Cooder?».

Again, Ali throws out another one sentence response. «I am happy that so many people heard the recording and responded so positively».

Like: Ry Cooder? WHO?! This was really brilliant, with Ali just so graciously resisting all of the grand liberal sugar-coated narratives about collaboration, about world music as meeting place of the West and the Rest, about the great democracy of “no-borders” music. He knows better. He is not going to give a lecture about power, race, and exposure. But he is also not going to give the journalists the pleasure of hearing yet another African speak about how much he owes to the white man. So far this is the very best moment of the whole conference. And maybe the best wrap-up of the real question of “world music”, namely, musical empowerment to and for whom and under what circumstances?

In a packet of xerox articles you sent to me a few months later, there was one summary that still stands out to me as the clearest and best description of what was revealed by this moment of encounter. Speaking to a journalist, you put it like this: «Ali Farka Touré e Ry Cooder non fanno world music, ma musica contemporanea: non ha bisogno di essere protetta dagli etnomusicologi, ma neanche di essere imprigionata nel ghetto di un’etichetta commerciale» [«Ali Farka Touré and Ry Cooder do not make world music, but contemporary music: it does not need to be protected by ethnomusicologists, nor does it need to be imprisoned in the ghetto of a commercial label»].

Diary: Saturday, January 27, 2001

Francesco and I take a walk after lunch with Ali, moving through some of the commercial streets near Piazza San Marco. Ali is well-known for his cowboy hats, and pictured quite often wearing one. Amazingly – for me, a New Mexican – we pass a shop with cowboy hats! And they are good ones!! There is a fine selection of Stetson hats, and they are expensive, particularly in European currency. Ali is happy. He goes into the shop and buys a very large-brimmed formal off-white Stetson, puts it on and continues to walk and talk with us about the beauty of Venice, about the presence of water everywhere. There is a moment of sun in the Piazza San Marco as we stop, with Francesco telling Ali and me about the history of the church in front of us. I simply must take a photo. The image of the two of them relaxing together, at ease in this city of water, representing the whole “world” of “world music”, is my favorite from the conference.

I hope you know how much I equally enjoyed the few days after the conference, in Rome with you and Giovanni, with your colleagues and students, with presentations at Santa Cecilia and La Sapienza, a visit at your home, and several exceptionally relaxed meals and the chance to talk about much more than “world music”. The opportunity to develop my presentations into an essay for the new series number one issue of *EM* that you edited (2003) “World music: globalizzazione, identità musicali, diritti, profitti”¹ was a pleasure,

¹ *EM – Rivista degli Archivi di Etnomusicologia*, Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, nuova serie, 1, *World music: globalizzazione, identità musicali, diritti, profitti*, Roma, Squilibri, 2013. [Nota dei curatori]



as of course was the opportunity to have something of mine translated into Italian, in this case, so professionally, by Laura Leante. But reading your introduction and the essays in that issue I was only disappointed that a transcript of Ali Farka Touré’s Venice speech did not appear. Yes, of course, that was because it was so memorable to me. But it also is because I still think it is important to remember that moment in the discourse of “world music”, and the unique and powerful intervention you staged then at the intersection of critical academic research, and popular discourses on music globalization.

Perhaps this is why I enjoyed so much the chance to participate yet again in another Institute seminar at the Cini in 2014, and its resulting publication, *Ethnomusicology or Transcultural Musicology*?² Questioning the very legitimacy of “ethnomusicology” is, of course, once again, calling for critical proposals about musicality and musical agency to replace tired and outdated ideas that rely on categories and boundaries of difference, like “music of oral tradition”, “ethnic music”, “folk music”, “international music”, and of course, the still present, still annoying market label “world music”. Reprising the perspective on promotion and protection presented in the 2001 meeting, you put it so well in your critical introduction to this volume when you write: «it is the aura of “other” musics that remains in the postmodern collective imagery».

² Francesco Giannattasio and Giovanni Giuriati (eds.), *Perspectives on a 21st century comparative musicology: Ethnomusicology or transcultural musicology?*, Udine, Nota. [Nota dei curatori]

DEAR FRANCESCO

Francesco I thank you deeply for the depth and courage and quality of your thinking; your focus on critical epistemological issues in the constitution of musical research and debate remain fundamentally important to me, with a special feeling of connection between the Venice seminars of 2001 and 2014. For the opportunity to visit so many times and to participate in your seminars, classes, and rich conversations, I remain deeply grateful. With congratulations and thanks, I send you a big hug from across the ocean.

Steve