

*Work in Progress:*

# Islands, Songs, Singers and Singing

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## **THE AIRS PROJECT**

A 7-year, major collaborative research initiative (MCRI) that I am associated with has been successfully funded (Can\$2.5m) by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada (SSHRC), under the overall leadership of Professor Annabel Cohen<sup>i</sup>. AIRS aims to advance interdisciplinary research in singing (hence the acronym: AIRS) through cooperation with students, academics, community representatives and other stakeholders worldwide.

## **SINGING AND INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: AN ISLAND FOCUS**

Within AIRS, I am tasked to lead research that looks broadly at singing and intercultural understanding. I am especially keen to explore the fragility and/or resilience of songs and singing styles within minority cultures, and any accompanying hybridisation . I will be looking especially at islands as the depository of such minority cultures.

We know that islands are key depositories of not just the world's genetic and biotic diversity, but also of its linguistic stock (Crystal 2000). Clark (2004) has elaborated on how a traditional dance – in his case, the Ballad Dance of the Faroe Islanders – can be revived, but also reinvented, in the context of the threats and opportunities presented by rampant cultural globalisation. We know that song can also be examined from such a 'cultural collision' lens.

The Islands of Globalization<sup>ii</sup> program, devised by the East-West Center in Hawaii, explored 'South-South' island interchanges, and used (among other cultural devices) the songs of the Caribbean and the South Pacific to enhance understandings of the origins, nature and consequences of globalisation from the perspective of small island societies. Hayward (2001) explored the evolution of song and singing style on the Whitsunday Islands, off Australia. A special focus on the Islands of Oceania is a research interest of sociologist Jean Mitchell<sup>iii</sup> (Islands of Tanna and Efate in Vanuatu, where singing is central to everyday life) as well as of music scholar David Huron<sup>iv</sup> (Guam and Yap in Micronesia), ethnomusicologist Kati Szego<sup>v</sup> (Hawaii) and cognitive music psychologist Kate Stevens<sup>vi</sup> (University of Western Sydney). It is worth noting that all these scholars are AIRS affiliates.

Following this germ of a research idea, an electronic message was sent out in May 2009 to the extensive AIRS network, as well as to the members of the list-serves for the Society for Ethno-Musicology, the International Small Islands Studies Association (ISISA) and the Small Island Cultures Research Initiative (SICRI). The message invited expressions of interest; and suggestions as to how to take this research strand forward. The latter would involve undertaking complementary research that investigates island songs and singing styles; identifying scholarly literature that explores the relationship between song and island culture; and suggesting scholars from a variety of disciplines and countries who may be interested in joining this research effort, which has the potential to take the form of a global 'island studies' project.

By the first week of June 2009, 48 individual scholars and practitioners had responded positively to the idea: from Guernsey to the Solomon Islands, from Corsica to Canada's West Coast, from Scotland to the Seychelles, and from the Caribbean to the Pacific. These became the founding members of an informal group called the Island Song Research Network (ISRN). They share a keen interest in examining the condition of song, singing and singers in island contexts around the world. The rich information provided by these individuals has greatly helped to refine the research aims and objectives.

### **WHY ISLANDS AND SONG?**

Dr Owe Ronstrom, ethnographer and musician from the island of Gotland, in Sweden, has urged us to explain more clearly what we could expect islands to contribute specifically to this study. Thanks to his timely prodding. Four main justifications can be proposed at this stage:

1. That islands, and islanders, can serve as subjects with a clearer (though still in their own way messy) relationship with local identity and the external Other. The disposition of islands to be unitary jurisdictions, to construct an indigenous sense of 'ethnie' and affiliation, to more readily identify those who are 'from heres' as against 'come heres', helps to somewhat clarify a complex issue.
2. That the distribution of islands around the world can create a truly global smorgasbord of case studies; moreover the fractal nature of islands – for example, typically always having referent land masses both larger and smaller than themselves – can help to acknowledge and disentangle the hierarchical natures of globality and locality, as expressed through song and singing.
3. That there is a significant role of tourism in island economies the world over, and the associated image/brand that such islands craft and cultivate about themselves. Song, and singing, can reproduce, critique, and otherwise connect with and contribute to tourism and any commodification of island culture.
4. That given the concern, if not obsession, of island cultures with the shore, the sea, navigating the great beyond, longing for home ... these concerns provide some fairly specific thematics to serve as comparative transversal benchmarks for the expression of island culture worldwide through song.

## WHAT DOES THIS 'ISLAND SONG' PROJECT ADDRESS?

Dr Daniel Long (Japan/Australia) warned us not to 'reinvent the wheel' - there is already significant material published about island songs, particularly within cultural anthropology and ethnomusicology. What would this project be hoping to achieve that is perhaps new and cutting edge?

And so, by way of reply, within the overall parameters of the AIRS Project, the 'island song' project component would address questions that speak to the connection between islands, song and inter-culturality. More specifically:

1. How, and to what extent, is island song and singing socially constructed 'in place'; an outcome of particular island contexts and concerns: navigating – after James Clifford (1997) – *roots* (locality, identity, lineage, genealogy, self-sufficiency, xenophobia, nationalism) and *routes* (mobility, hybridity, diaspora, cosmopolitanism, trans-nationalism)?
2. How, and to what extent, does island song and singing portray and convey the concerns of island societies – environmental degradation, political corruption, tourist invasions, the fear of the Other, the Disneyfication of island life?
3. How, and to what extent, are island songs and singing important sources of sustainable income, entrepreneurship, and economic activity?
4. How does the evolution and changing popularity, rendition and consumption of island songs reflect, and/or contribute to, the evolution and reconfiguration of island culture, which is typically highly penetrated by exogenous forces? How does such rendition, consumption and appreciation differ between indigenous island communities and those of their respective overseas diasporas?
5. How, and to what extent, do island songs, singing and singers reinforce cultural stereotypes and kitsch portraits of island life (as paradises, exotica, escapes, mysterious spaces) and of islanders as banal and happy natives, willing to please?
6. What are the consequences of island songs and singers that have achieved major national, regional or global impacts - on local identity, singer careers, island economic development?

## LOOKING FORWARD

AIRS is keen to support scholarship and further research in this field. An edited book proposal with the above ideas is already taking shape and will soon be pitched at an international publisher of repute. Sixteen contributors have already committed to write tightly focused book chapters, with first complete chapter drafts being submitted by the end of June 2010. Andrew Weatherill, a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island, has been engaged as research assistant to compile a bibliographic database of scholarly literature pertaining to island song, singers and singing. We will also be looking at select scholarly journals in various (sub-)/trans-disciplinary fields that would be willing to carry an 'island song' special thematic issue.

## **SOMETHING TO SING ABOUT?**

Ideas and critical but constructive suggestions are welcome.

## **REFERENCES**

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PHILIP HAYWARD (2001) *Tide Lines: Music, Tourism and Cultural Transition in the Whitsunday Islands*, Lismore, Australia: Music Archive for The Pacific Press.

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<sup>i</sup> Dr. Cohen's biography can be retrieved on-line at <http://www.upei.ca/%7Emusicog/personnel/personnel.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Retrieved on line at <http://pidp.eastwestcenter.org/mi/>

<sup>iii</sup> Retrieved on line at [www.upei.ca/mais/mitchell\\_page](http://www.upei.ca/mais/mitchell_page)

<sup>iv</sup> Retrieved on line at [www.musiccog.ohio-state.edu/Huron/Huron.html](http://www.musiccog.ohio-state.edu/Huron/Huron.html)

<sup>v</sup> Retrieved on line at [szegok/index.php](http://szegok/index.php)<[www.mun.ca/music/people/facpage](http://www.mun.ca/music/people/facpage)

<sup>vi</sup> Retrieved on line at <http://marcs.uws.edu.au/?q=people/associate-professor-catherine-kate-stevens>