Ethnomusicology Report: How do style, context, and culture all connect?

Music spans across the world, dates back to the beginning of humankind, and plays an influential role in our daily lives as human citizens. As ethnographers, it is our duty to look at how music relates to culture and see how far it spreads. For my interview of a trained, professional musician, I had to look no further than one of my closest friends from growing up, Matt Brown. Throughout a seventeen-minute interview, Matt went from describing his musical beginnings and influences all the way to explaining the music of a foreign culture. The answers and information obtained in my interview proved how important music is to customs, ritual and entertainment, while it is also able to create links and influence between styles that encompass a very broad spectrum of culture.

I have known Matt since we were ten years old after we met at summer camp and found out we lived in neighboring towns. He was always interested in music, especially Broadway musicals. More than ten years later, it is incredible to see a dream turn into reality. During our conversation, I uncovered his education experience and was reminded that he did not begin playing guitar until age thirteen. This has always been surprising because most great players who experience early success start at a very young age. It was interesting that the switch to focus on guitar was so heavily weighted on getting braces, making playing the trumpet very painful. It is easy to see, however, that his previous musical training and knowledge of theory probably helped him ease into playing the guitar. Also, the fact that the trumpet is an instrument that is usually played in a small or
large group might have influenced Matt’s preference of playing in a group as opposed to being a virtuosic soloist.

Last year, Matt played on a tour of a Broadway musical called Flashdance, based off the movie. When the show made its stop in Indianapolis, I was able to see the show and experience it from inside the pit sitting next to Matt. This was an extremely unique and incredible experience. Since I have not seen his current show, Dirty Dancing, it was interesting to hear about his current gig during our interview. Since August, Matt has travelled throughout the United States and Canada playing eight shows per week for anywhere from a week to four weeks in each city. The placement of the band is different in Dirty Dancing than in other shows, as the band is on a platform in the back of the stage. Matt described their position as a “set-piece”. When I asked him about the music in Dirty Dancing, he was excited to tell me how much it varied from 50’s doo-wop to 60’s Marvin Gaye to 80’s rock ballad. The variation of music comes from the show’s placement in the 1960’s, but also its actual writing in the 1980’s. The changes in music create a difference in texture from strong melodic guitar played by an electric guitar to softer acoustic rhythms that are really meant to support the singers. Matt said, “It’s a lot of textural stuff. It’s stuff that’s not really upfront in the arrangements.” To me, the most interesting part of the music Matt has to play for the show is the fact that it drives the story along. Without the music and the drive and texture created by the eight-piece ensemble, the story portrayed in the show could not move on.

In high school, Matt and I played in a band accompanied by a few of our friends. I played the bass and Matt played guitar. We styled off each other (ok, mostly me off of him) and played for a while until athletics became my main priority and serious music
became his. When he went to the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music and I left for Indiana, it was much harder to keep up with his playing skills and techniques. It was fun to hear about the different styles of music Matt learned during his time at the school and the professors he connected with. During our interview, he told me about an American professor who was very dedicated to teaching Brazilian guitar styles and techniques as well as Brazilian music in general. Brazilian music focuses more on finger picking and melodic techniques, which challenged Matt, but also made him a stronger guitarist. He said this professor helped him change his style and influence the way he plays certain chords, especially in the Latin-American arrangements in Dirty Dancing. Matt related his need to branch out into other styles to his career and future opportunities. In the future, an arranger could request a certain sound and for Matt to play an instrument like a sitar or even something like an instrument we learned in class, the barbat. As he stated, “if it’s horizontal and it has strings, I can probably play it.”

It was extremely fascinating to really learn about the guitar and a close friend who has turned music from a passion into a career. This assignment was eye opening and really connected the concepts from class to real life. My interview maintained an extremely informative theme and tone, where I learned about everything from Brazilian music to travel with a Broadway musical. I’m looking forward to seeing the show in action when they come to Indianapolis this coming June.
Interview Transcript

On the afternoon of Monday, March 9, 2015, I interviewed Matt Brown, a guitarist for the touring Broadway musical, Dirty Dancing, via FaceTime and recorded the conversation on my iPhone. He was in a rehearsal studio in Cleveland, OH and I was at home in Bloomington, IN.

MV: Hi Matt!
MB: Hi, how’s it going, Max?
MV: It’s goin’. So, this is Matt Brown. He is a professional musician. Alright, what instruments do you play and what instrument do you mainly focus on?
MB: At work, I play guitars. I play guitars in the plural sense because I don’t just play, you know, electric or acoustic. I play all types of guitars. If it’s horizontal and it has strings, chances are I play it. I’ve played bass guitar on gigs; I’ve played banjo, mandolin, classical style guitar, acoustic guitar, you know steel-string acoustic guitar, the most typical kind of acoustic guitar you’ll see. Electric guitar. But, mostly when I’m at home practicing on my own time it’s going to be electric guitar. For either jazz, blues, rock, pop…that’s really the area I focus on most as a musician. Yeah, you know, jazz, blues, rock and pop, I would say.

MV: Great. Alright so going off of that, talking about what you do at work, what’s the gig you’re currently working on? How does your music incorporate into the overall performance?
MB: Right now I’m on tour with a musical called “Dirty Dancing” and basically they just took the movie and put it on stage into a Broadway show. The show was never actually on Broadway in New York. It played on the West End in London, which is the Broadway of, you know, London. And so, I’m in an eight-piece band. We play in the back of the stage. We play eight shows a week all across the country. We’re in each city for about a week at a time, although this city, I’m in Cleveland now, we’re here for three weeks. And yeah, we’re basically backing up singers who are telling a story on stage, so if you’ve ever been to a Broadway show or a Broadway musical, it’s all about them, it’s about the actors and singers. It’s about them conveying a story and a plot and we’re in the background. We’re almost like a set-piece in this show. Most times in a musical, the orchestra is under the stage and not visible at all in a pit, but we’re visible from time to time. There’s a curtain that goes up and down and we’re like a set-piece.

MV: Ok cool, and are you playing a lot of rhythms or a lot of melodies, or is it a mix of both?

MB: It’s a lot of…It’s a combination of 60’s music, like there’s a lot of Marvin Gaye. So there’s a lot of 60’s music and there’s a lot of 80’s music because the story takes place in the 60’s but the original movie was made in the 80’s, so it’s kind of like hardcore 60’s and then hardcore 80’s, so we play “I’ve had the time of my life”, which is obviously very 80’s. We play a song called “Yes”. It’s another very 80’s song. And again, the 60’s stuff, we play “This magic moment”, we play “Stubborn kind of fellow” by Marvin Gaye. And then there’s actually a lot of Latin too. So like salsa and that kind of stuff because it actually incorporates a lot into the story. There are a lot of dance lessons that take place on stage.
MV: What’s the difference in texture between the Latin music and the Marvin Gaye stuff and the 80’s stuff?

MB: Well the Marvin Gaye stuff and the 60’s stuff, we play “In the still of the night”, which is actually more of a 50’s doo-wop song. There’s actually a lot of doo-wop. That stuff is usually on electric guitar and its pretty rhythm style. It’s a lot of bar chords and strumming as opposed to individual note picking and melodies. There’s less of that in this show. It’s a lot of strumming. It’s a lot of textural stuff. It’s stuff that’s not really upfront in the arrangements. It’s more rhythmic oriented and strumming chords, that kind of thing. Especially on the acoustic guitar…When I’m playing acoustic guitar, you know six-string regular acoustic guitar, in this show, I’m basically always strumming big open chords. It’s pretty straightforward.

MV: Awesome, this is great. More about you. What’s your musical education experience?

MB: Hey, we got to pause this for a second.

Brief break while he meets with a colleague.

MV: So, tell us about your musical education experience.

MB: Well, I guess you could say my official education, musical education experience, started when I was seven or eight years old in my hometown, growing up in New York on Long Island. I had just started playing trumpet at school, in the school band, so my mom got me private lessons with a professional teacher in town at the local music store. And I took lessons with him for many school years. I think from fourth grade until,
literally senior year. I took some kind of lessons with him, at least every year. But, for fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh grade, I did four years with just him. And then I started playing guitar when I was in eighth grade and I was also taking piano lessons. So I was taking three different lessons a week with the teachers at the music shop on trumpet, piano and guitar. I kind of, I think what happened was, in eighth grade, my parents insisted I get braces because I had an impacted cusped. That’s when I started focusing on guitar. I would kind of get home from school and I would play a lot of guitar in my room and that sort of became my main instrument. I should say that the significance of the braces is that it really would hurt my teeth and my chops to play trumpet.

MV: Thank you for that. Going on, you work with a group in the gig. Do you prefer solo or group play?

MB: Honestly I prefer group play. I do write songs, and I do have some of my own music, but really as a musician, I feel I thrive the most playing in a group feeding off of others people’s energy and ability and time feel, stuff like that. Again, I’m not the type of player who is a virtuoso soloist. I’m not going to be the type of guitar player who it’s like here’s a guitar and here’s a room of a bunch of listeners. Entertain them for hours on end. That’s not really the type of player I am. I’m sure I could think of something. Almost invariably, my gigs are with a band and some singing combined. That’s what I like to play the best.

MV: Have you ever gotten into any international music?

MB: We were talking about my music education before and yeah, I, when I was out of high school, I went to a school called the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in New York. It was a jazz conservatory and I was actually studying a lot of Brazilian
music at the time with a guitar player. Really that was his main thing, his main passion. Although he was American, he was very, very passionate about Brazilian music and he taught several courses with ensembles about different styles of Brazilian music. That’s really the most international music I’ve delved into, the Brazilian stuff.

MV: How did that influence the way you play?

MB: It actually, you know, before then I had really played almost everything with a pick, but this class he insisted I play some stuff, like chords, with my fingers. You know, I’m right-handed, so with my right hand fingers. It wasn’t really classical style. It kind of influenced the way I play chords, solo guitar, with my right hand finger picking technique. I was more inclined after taking those Brazilian courses to play with my fingers and a pick as opposed to just a pick all the time.

MV: Can you describe what Brazilian guitar is like?

MB: It’s a lot of four-note voicing on the top of the guitar. I mean on the highest sounding four strings. It’s a lot of finger-style. It’s a lot of very virtuosic, fast, single-note lines. The rhythm section is almost always groove-oriented. There are a lot of different types of grooves associated with Brazilian music the drummer and bass player lock into and the guitar sits on top, playing chords. There’s a samba. There’s a machichi. There are all types of Brazilian grooves.

MV: What is a machichi?

MB: A machichi kind of sounds like (audible beats, repetitive). Is that right Myles? (to friend in room, bass player on Dirty Dancing) And then there’s a style of Brazilian music; its own little style called choro. Choro is almost like the intricacies of Bach melodies, like
melodies that kind of weave in and out of chord changes that are really interesting and really pleasant to listen to.

MV: Have you ever played any exotic guitars? What are the craziest, not necessarily limited to guitars, but string instruments in general or crazy instruments? Like have you ever played a sitar or any middle-eastern instruments?

MB: Actually, yeah. When I was fourteen or fifteen, my mom went to India for a few weeks and she brought back a sitar from India and it’s sitting in my parents’ house now. I did mess around with that for a little bit, but I have to say I was just doing it by ear. I never studied it with anybody or knew the proper way to play it, but I have one. I have to say it hasn’t been out of the case in many years. In my line of work doing the theater, Broadway shows kind of stuff, I could totally foresee some arranger in New York calling me to play a show and saying “there’s this scene that takes place in India and we want to create that mood. Could you play a few notes on the sitar to sort of draw that texture?”

Then what I would do would be take it out of the case and play a few notes and see if I could come up with some thing on my own. If that doesn’t work out, I’d find a teacher who’s familiar with Indian stuff. Other exotic instruments, I play mandolin. It’s not my main thing. I can do basic stuff. It’s nothing crazy. On this show I’m doing now, they called me and wanted to bring a Pete Seger style banjo, a five-string sort-of bluegrass type banjo, which I had never played and never owned one. So that I sort of tuned it to the tuning of a banjo, open G tuning, and I kind of just learned the parts they gave me in music notation and that was that. Other exotic instruments? Not so much. I try to sculpt my sounds, in terms of recording and stuff, I use an electric guitar and use a lot of
processing with either analog pedals or software that emulates the sound of pedals and amps.

MV: Who are your influences when you’re talking about sculpting your sound?

MB: That’s a good question. Definitely for blues and solo stuff, Stevie Ray Vaughan, John Mayer, Eric, Jimi Hendrix, they’ve influence my fuzz tone, if you will. Fender amp with an overdrive and a Stratocaster or a telecaster, that’s the sort of Fender sound those guys are really big influences on. Definitely in terms of sounds, at least. Honestly, other sorts of sounds, though, I really don’t feel like I’m drawing too much from specific influences as much as just a combination of all the music I’ve heard, and it’s a sound that will pop into my head, and I’ll hear it in my head and then I’ll try and get whatever I’m working with, whether it be software, hardware or analog, I’ll try and do my best to get that to sound exactly how it sounds in my head. This is a huge skill that’s kind of necessary for guitarists in this day and age.

MV: Cool. Well, we know you’re a busy man, so I will let you get back to preparations for the show. Thanks so much for letting us in on the life of the guitar. Really appreciate it, bud. I’ll talk to you.