

Sound Expertise – Episode 10

TRANSCRIPT prepared by Andrew Dell'Antonio

SPEAKERS

Timothy Taylor, Will Robin

Timothy Taylor 00:00

I think too many of us in the music fields talk about how Oh, music is a commodity or, you know, whatever, or this musician has sold out. And you know, I have to say the vast majority of musicians that I know, they're dying to turn their music into a commodity. You know, most musicians are not recognized by capitalism, and they are trying to be and how does that happen? Okay, capitalism needs agents. You know, it needs people who can figure out — Ah, you know, I know how I can make money out of this thing.

00:28

[music]

Will Robin 00:48

So on sound expertise lately, we've been talking about the tensions that exist between different kinds of music history. One of those tensions is between a music history that is populated by texts, musical works, whether they be symphonies or pop songs, and a history populated by people: those who create, perform and listen to that music. This tension is particularly acute when it comes to thinking about the role of music in society, and how we map musical developments alongside major historical and cultural moments. Does an individual piece of music act as a mirror of what is unfolding in society at a national or global scale? For example, does deciphering the microscopic musical details of a Bach concerto reveals something fundamental about the bourgeois values of the 18th century middle class? Or does the flow of a Taylor Swift song tell us something about neoliberal capitalism in the 21st century? For many scholars, the answer is a resounding yes. Deep textual analyses of musical works offer insight into the macro structures of society. But some scholars — and I'll admit I include myself in this camp most of the time — are more hesitant to see music as a mirror of society, because it means overlooking the fact that society itself is comprised of lots of different people who create their own meaning out of the music that they create and consume. To use a bit of sociological jargon. The music as mirror approach means attending to societal structures without attending to the individual agents who are participating in and creating those structures. An alternative approach see society not as this big thing out there, but as comprised of individuals and their relationships to each other and to music and to lots of other stuff. And that means for example, if we wanted to write a critical history of the relationship between music and capitalism, we would not be constructing grand arguments about how evil capitalism conscripted good music into its web of deceit, but instead look at the more subtle ways the cultural processes by which people relate to music as a commodity. That is part of the approach of Timothy Taylor, Professor of Ethnomusicology at UCLA is Herb Alpert School of Music and my guest on the podcast today. I have been a reader of Tim's wide-ranging work for a long time from his pioneering 1997 book *Global Pop* to his more recent work on music, advertising and capitalism. I wanted to get him onto the podcast to talk about music and capitalism from the very particular ethnomusicological, an anthropological viewpoint He has expressed over many years, one that evolved and as you will hear

significantly departed from the musicology training he had in graduate school. Our conversation begins with a discussion of his recent work on the idea of value in musical performance. How do people in different cultural contexts value music, and opens up to a broader discussion of his research and worldview. I think you'll learn a lot from this conversation. I know that I did.

03:28

[music]

Will Robin 03:40

So I want to start with a recent essay that you have in the works on the idea of musical performances as a kind of medium of value, which is very much grounded, you know, after I read it, in anthropological literature on this idea of value. Can you talk a little bit about what this project is and how you kind of came to approach it?

Timothy Taylor 04:01

Well, that article is one of a bunch of things I've written in the last few years about value. One of what you heard, you know, when we were at that conference in Switzerland, and it was Steve Feld who got me into this. He recommended a book called *Empire of Things* that was edited by Fred Myers, who is an anthropologist at NYU. And really helped me understand and theorize the way in which music or anything can be thought of as representing or being a token of value. Because we're so used to, at least in the music fields, are so used to talking about -- music is a commodity or music wasn't a commodity, and then, you know, big bad music industry came to town and then, you know, the happy musicians who who played and sang music for themselves suddenly found their music to be a commodity. And the anthropological literature about commodification, well about value more generally, is much more subtle because a lot of anthropologists don't study societies that have money. But that doesn't mean that conceptions of value don't exist. I mean, people do have ideas about, you know, what is valuable and what isn't valuable. And people have ideas about how resources are apportioned, and all kinds of things you know about exchange, obligations to reciprocate and, you know, on and on and on. So there's conceptions of value all over the place. It's just that we are so accustomed to thinking of value only in terms of money, or music only in terms of whether or not it's a commodity, that I think it blinds us to thinking about the ways that value can work differently. And we all know this to some extent. I mean, I remember in the old days of film, you know, if you took a roll of film into a drugstore and they screwed it up, and they would say, well, we'll give you a free roll of film. It's like, Well, no, you know, my pictures are more valuable than ... my pictures that you lost are more valuable than this roll of film. So I mean, we all understand how this works. You know, I mean, that value can work in ways that aren't economic. It's just that we don't often talk about them, or we talk about them in in these kind of rarified ways about, you know, the priceless masterpieces of composers. Um, but okay, but is there a more sort of historically precise, ethnographically useful way to approach those conceptions without just falling into, you know, platitudes about great composers and masterpieces.

Will Robin 06:39

Right. So it's kind of like taking the fact that those platitudes exist, that someone declares this music to be priceless, and saying, Okay, what does that actually amount to? as a idea of value that's not just -- okay, this value is \$50,000 or whatever. It's trying to find some way of extrapolating outward from that?

Timothy Taylor 06:58

Yeah, and, you know, I would say just trying to be more historical and ethnographic, you know, who has these ideas and why do they have them and how do we get it perpetuated? You know, through, you know, music appreciation classes and music appreciation textbooks, you know? So, I mean, these ideas are perpetuated all the time. We're constantly polishing the monuments of great composers, whom I revere as much as the next person, you know. But I think we need to understand that these musicians aren't self-evidently great that there's a whole apparatus that continuously, you know, keeps their greatness, you know, afloat and reminds us of that. And this can change. I mean, I'm old enough to remember when, you know, Gustav Mahler was kind of revived, you know, in the 70s, mostly by Leonard Bernstein. Not that people hadn't tried before, but um, you know, composers' statures, you know, To go up and down over the years, and that's because of the apparatus that exists to establish or take away value is always in motion.

Will Robin 08:11

So in this essay in particular, you also are kind of, I guess, developing a framework to analyze what are like, what is the relationship between musical performance and value? So can you talk a little bit about some of the parameters that are important to understanding what a musical performances is in this context, and what its value can amount to in some degree?

Timothy Taylor 08:33

Well partly, it's simply to point out that what musicians do isn't just perform, because it's often the case, you know, I mean, all musicians understand this, and people just think that musicians show up and play and I'm, like, well, no, no, it's years of practicing and years of trying to make a little more money to buy that instrument that's a little bit better. And you often might need a costume - I mean, there's all these things. Which I argue, you know, sort of builds up value, which is only realized in the moment of performance. But value gets built up, you know, for years and years and years. And, you know, which is something that I think often non-musicians don't really understand. Especially since musicians can be there ready to play when necessary. I mean, I remember after 9/11, you know, pretty soon after 9/11, there was a concert. And you know, and you could do that, you know, you couldn't, you know, you couldn't write a novel or you couldn't write a play or something within days of 9/11, but you could have musicians come and play. So it looks like, you know, it's done without effort and without any of the actual work that goes into building up value, which is, as I argue, you know, sort of socially communicated in moments that are recognized to be performances.

Will Robin 09:52

So value kind of accrues in you know, the many years of a performer trading the actual monetary value or non-monetary value of their instruments of I don't know their tuxedos, of the organizational apparatus that rehearses them and keeps them together. And then value is realized on stage in the moment of performance in the kind of interaction between musicians and audience. That's kind of what you're arguing.

Timothy Taylor 10:18

Yeah, and there's a kind of an exchange that takes place. I mean, there's some inconsistency in the anthropological literature because some people think that value or exchange of value can only happen when a tangible thing is exchanged. But I don't think that's the case. I mean, you know, anthropologists study rituals, so they know that things that are intangible can be tokens of value and value can be exchanged. Or knowledge can be exchanged without any token. I mean, you can go to a professional

meeting and hear a paper and learn something without reading, you know, reading the physical paper or buying the book. So that's probably what I wanted to try to argue?

Will Robin 11:01

Well, so what are what are some of the kind of anthropological ... anthropologists you're building on here? And how do you see understanding musical performance to change what the existing kind of literature might be in this area?

Timothy Taylor 11:13

Well, I'm not interested in anything ontological about, you know, is something a musical performance or not? I mean, to me, you know, I don't really care about that philosophical question. For me, it's always an historical and/or ethnographic question. You know, do the people participating believe it to be a performance. And, you know, conditions around that can change. I mean, I play every week, well, before the pandemic, I played every weekend in an Irish bar, where we play in what's known as a session like a jam session, but we just call it a session, which is what Irish musicians call it, you know, sitting in the corner of a bar and playing; and for us, it's not a performance. It's not a gig. A gig is you know, there's an audience and maybe you have a microphone and people pay attention. And so that's, you know, that kind of thing is not socially recognized as a performance, I would say, although some people in the bar might. I mean, some patrons of the bar might think that it's, it's a performance, but that's not how we think of it. So for me, you know, that kind of thing always matters, you know, who among, or how did the participants construct what they do as a performance? I mean, in the classical music world, you can go to an open rehearsal, which can look for all intents and purposes like a performance, except people aren't wearing, you know, their nice clothes or whatever. And maybe the conductor will stop them a little bit. But, you know, and, or a dress rehearsal is, you know, it's not seen as a performance, but... because it's socially not seen as a performance, but in other respects, it is. That's what interests me, you know, the social constructions, and the people I was drawing on to answer your question. Not just Fred Myers. This book that I mentioned before, called *Empire of Things*, but Fred wrote a really interesting book called *Painting Culture*. He started working with us Australian Aborigines in the 70s. And including painters who did you know those beautiful dot paintings that we associate with those people and he, and now Fred must be in his 60s. So he's witnessed the transformation of those paintings from, you know, folk art to gallery art, you know, they sort of traverse this different sort of social category, this social framing. And to me that that kind of thing is like extremely interesting. Like, how does this happen? What is the apparatus that's required to make this happen? So he talks about how all these paintings needed to have a kind of, like story behind them, which is not like provenance in the art world, but I think in a way that's kind of a throwback to them as folk art more than anything else. But it's a really interesting and slow transformation that Fred witnessed writes about in this really interesting book, I also drew on Jane Fagans who is an anthropologist at Cornell, who talks about value and talks about exchange, exchange of value. And she brings in the issue about whether or not value can be exchanged, when there's no physical exchange, which she says can happen, but is a little bit inconsistent about that, I think. But still, that was ... it's an older article, but it's a really useful piece. I found it... though I should mention David Graeber's book on value, which came out in 2005. And to me, that book really resonated because, well, one of the things that he does is he looks at what was known as the values project, which is from the 1950s and it was conducted mainly by an anthropologist at Harvard named Clyde Cluckhohn who was a famous Harvard anthropologist in that era. And he was one of Clifford Geertz's teachers. so Graeber notes that Geertz doesn't really ... didn't really follow in Cluckhohn 's footsteps by you know, taking up the values project. But I argue -- and something I something else I read about value that in fact he does, because Geertz's

emphasis on ethnography being what is meaningful to the people we study is another way of talking about value.

Will Robin 15:24

I see - interesting.

Timothy Taylor 15:26

And for me, I don't want to just turn the clock back and go to this sort of Cluckhohnean worldview. But to me value has been a more precise way of getting at meaning. Maybe it's only ... it only seems more precise, because you know, it's just a different take on meaning or maybe it is analytically more precise. I don't know. But for me, it's it has been a more precise way and I've always been a Goertzian, I don't know why one wouldn't want to study what is meaningful to the people that that we are studying, which to me is an idea that's, that's still very compelling. And so value has just been another way to sort of realize that Goertzian impulse. And it's proved to be a really, enormously productive body of literature; I've written about, I don't know, what, seven or eight chapters and articles where I talk about value. I keep thinking I'm done with it, and then it pops up.

Will Robin 16:28

Yeah, I mean, you have this interesting case study in that article too. And I know you've written about this elsewhere of Isicathamiya, and I mean, that relates to what you were saying about folk art becoming something that's in galleries -- in this case, we have this kind of competitive South African tradition that's made most famous by Ladysmith Black Mambazo, but also becomes part of the kind of global world music / Paul Simon Graceland world. So can you talk a little bit about that history and how that might say something about these kind of different regimes of value, which is the phrase you use.

Timothy Taylor 17:00

I've been interested in South African music for a long time. Even though I've never been there, I hope to get there someday. But Isicathamiya music was sort of ... it was known before Paul Simon came along. I mean Ladysmith Black Mambazo had toured Europe and you know, they released recordings on, you know, folk music labels, but it was Paul Simon's Graceland album that really catapulted them into international fame. And they were the most famous of these Isicathamiya groups, which are these men's choral groups that involve also you know, dance. And there's a really interesting documentary series from the 70s, called beats of the heart, where ... and one of them is about music in South Africa and they show what these competitions are like and before the you know, they became globally known thanks to Paul Simon, there were competitions in the townships in Johannesburg, and a judge for the competition would be basically just sort of swept off the street. And it was always some white person and usually somebody who was recently released from prison, or somebody who was down on their luck because they were the only people likely to be out and about in the middle of the night because these competitions would go, you know, all night long. And so the argument I make about that is, it's just ... it's a way of ensuring you know, impartiality in the extreme by getting a White person who surely wouldn't know any of the musicians. But to me it was, it's a way of trying to understand just how important it was for the musicians and Black South Africans in cities in general, to try to create a space for themselves where their own value in this case of excellence, you know, excellence in performance could be recognized. And it was for that reason that this, you know, extreme impartiality of the judge really mattered. I mean, judges were even, they had to ... sit in front of the audience so they couldn't see the audience and be swayed by the audience. I mean, everything was done to make sure that judges were as impartial as possible. And, you know, when I, when I was writing _Global Pop_, my first

book, which came out in the 90s, a lot of us are talking about resistance. That was a big question in the 90s, about theorizing resistance. And so *_Global Pop_* is partly about that, but I don't know if I would characterize these musicians as being resistant now. I think I would... I mean, one of the problems of the resistance literature is that in a way, it denies oppressed people, kind of subjectivity apart from being oppressed and resistant. You know, people aren't doing that all the time, and what are they doing when they're, you know, cooking or having fun and, you know, not being resistant? And I think, you know, that was one of the problems with that, with that conversation we were all having back in the 90s. And I think the value literature helps get around that problem.

Will Robin 20:24

Yeah, I mean, you also make, that's really interesting. And you kind of talk about the way that the values can shift, right, in a genre like this when you move from having it valued as part of competition versus valued as part of a concert circuit in Europe versus valued as part of, you know, a kind of world music market where now there's actual, like, clear, right, tangible economic value.

Timothy Taylor 20:47

Yeah, and that's the thing about value is that you know, it can be converted, I mean, a non-economic value can be converted into an economic value. And this was one of the things that that's really useful about another book, trying to go back to your earlier question, Anna Tsing's work on the matsutake mushroom. It's a great book and you know, it's a great body of work. And you know, the way that she talks about what she calls translation, you know, something that is produced outside of an economic arena gets translated into capitalist value, which I think is a really useful way to talk about it because ... or, talk about this issue because, again, you know, just ... I think too much ... too many of us in the music fields talk about how Oh, music is a commodity or, you know, whatever, or this musician has sold out. And, you know, I have to say the vast majority of musicians that I know, they're dying to turn their music into a commodity. You know, most musicians are not recognized by capitalism. And they are trying to be --and how does that happen? You know, capitalism needs agents. You know, it needs people who can figure out, ah, you know, I know how I can make money out of this thing. Sometimes it seems to be easier than other times, you know, if a musician is working in an established genre of music, but that doesn't guarantee that they're gonna make any money from it. So I really think we need to look at things like our processes like commodification, not just as things that happen because there's a music industry, but we need to look at agents, you know, who make it happen. People who figure out how to turn something that wasn't a commodity into a commodity, and how that gets done, you know, how it gets "translated," you know. And who are the people behind these translations? Which I think we often forget about. Or we often you know, we'll hold up somebody, you know, like Colonel Tom Parker, in the Elvis case or somebody as like, you know, somebody as sort of an entrepreneurial genius, but that's different than sort of sitting down and analyzing, okay, what actually did they do, you know, to effect this translation?

Will Robin 23:10

Well, this seems to relate, you know, to your -- two books ago, your book on music and advertising where, you know, it's not advertising bad, music good, or, you know, like all these musicians being corrupted by the industry, but it's actually about the human people who make the decisions, to put music in commercials and how that's changed over time.

Timothy Taylor 23:29

Yeah, and as an ethnographer, you know, who am I to criticize a musician for making a living? And I shouldn't say just as an ethnographer, but, you know, as somebody who's got tenure, you know, I'm not in a position to say no, you should turn down those gigs. I mean, after the book came out, I got approached by an ad agency for Big Pharma, asking [unintelligible], and I said, No, I'm not going to work for Big Pharma. You know, this is the only approach I got. So it was curious, you know, interesting that I was approached at all. But uh, but you know, I had the luxury of saying no, and a lot of musicians, you know, I've interviewed tons of musicians who would rather be writing music for films or Netflix or network TV. But if they get an advertising job, they'll take it because, you know, they got a family or, you know, they have student loans or whatever.

Will Robin 23:30

Yeah, I mean, I'm curious -- this is something I think about a lot with my own work. And some of my colleagues' work, where it's this kind of, it's this balance between kind of like critique, like big C critique, and then actually like, what happens when you actually talk to the people involved in these musical situations and becomes a lot harder to kind of theorize whatever your big attack on capitalism or neoliberalism is, and so I'm like, do you see critique as part of your way of thinking about these issues in terms of musicians' relationship to capital and capitalism, or is that kind of just not a useful framework for what you're trying to do.

Timothy Taylor 25:04

Yeah, it's hard. It was a hard thing to learn, you know, because when I was in grad school, I was very angry, and I remember... [both laugh]

Will Robin 25:10

We're all angry in grad school. Yeah.

Timothy Taylor 25:11

I mean, Graceland came out in my first year of grad school. And at first I, you know, I loved the album. And then I started, you know, reading about it and, and I wrote this angry stuff about Paul Simon. And -- but, you know, I slowly realized that that's not my... that's not the function of a scholar. I mean, if I was going to be a critic, you know, I got asked once to write something for Village Voice about Ry Cooder and I was pretty critical. But that was, you know, for the Village Voice. It wasn't like in my academic work. So I've learned in my academic work, how to be sort of critical of, you know, sort of structures and you know, like capitalism -- or, you know, the patriarchy -- but not necessarily being ... not necessarily singling out individuals to be critical of. You know, I'll still write about people that I think, you know, are worthy of disapprobation. But I won't say that, I'll just... I'll present whatever it is, and trust that the reader will figure out that this is a bad example. But that was a hard thing to learn. You know, I have to say, I don't think I'm naturally angry. But...

Will Robin 26:33

I guess why did you... Why did you choose to go in that direction, then, of feeling that you want to understand the kind of human experiences behind these larger structures? Like what impelled you towards that way of thinking?

Timothy Taylor 26:48

Yeah, well, I started my academic career as a musicologist. But I worked on very contemporary music. I was, you know, I really wanted to try to understand my own time, which ... and that era, in the late 80s,

early 90s... I mean, as a musicologist, you really couldn't do that. I mean, one of my professors even told me that, you know, there wasn't enough history to study, you know, Philip Glass or whoever, you know, which I thought was ridiculous. And because, you know, because Cultural Studies was taking off, people were studying contemporary cultural production all over the place. But in... at least when I was in music school, music theorists could study post World War II music, because they would study how it was put together, but musicologists couldn't study post World War II music. And at some point, I realized that the ethnomusicologists in my own department were studying contemporary music and just kind of a different music than I studied. And they were just super interesting. And I would like to give them a shout out Deborah Wong, René Lysloff in particular, and they would give me stuff to read and I started, you know, I took a class with Judith Becker, who ended up on my committee, my dissertation committee, and I just got more and more interested in ethnomusicology and ethnography. And yeah, because I could talk to my musicians that I studied too. You know, I interviewed Pauline Oliveros for my dissertation. Kevin Volans I interviewed... I knew him well because I spent a year at Queen's University in Belfast when ... the only person I couldn't interview was Cornelius Cardew who was dead. But everybody else for my ... I mean of the of the so called "art music" composers, all the rest of them I interviewed. And I just became more and more interested in what ethnomusicologists were doing. And that period, at least at the University of Michigan, all the musicologists could talk about was music and society -- like that -- music and music in society. And then Susan McClary's and Richard Leppart's Music and Society book came out in 1997. That was my first year in grad school. And there's this brief moment when musicologists are really looking at ethnomusicology for ideas about what to do, how to study music and society, how to be part of the cultural studies boom. But it was a brief moment, it didn't really go anywhere, which is kind of interesting. I don't know why. Virtually all the musicologists when I was in grad school took Judith Becker's proseminar on ethnomusicology. But I couldn't name you very many people or maybe none beyond myself who actually...

Will Robin 29:25

... have jumped ship.

Timothy Taylor 29:27

... really, yeah, jumped ship, and I married an anthropologist, so. So I've really gone, you know, into the world of social science. Whereas the "new musicology" became more sort of, like a literary criticism, literary theory, which was an obvious move, you know, if you're looking for a way to understand a text, you can look at other people who understand texts. I want to try to understand people. Because to me, I mean, music was and remains incredibly powerful and moving. And at some point, I finally figured out, it wasn't in the music. It was in people. And that's what I study. But uh, I kind of regret the musicological shift. I mean, when I was trained, it was a historical field. It was, it would all work in archives. I remember my advisor, one of my professors said, in front of a whole class, he said, your ... whole class of musicologists, he said, You're all going to produce an edition someday. You may laugh, but you're going to, and I didn't, you know, but that was the idea, and I can't, and I think there has been a move away from studying music in history, which I think... I mean, we never studied music in history as historians study history. But still musicologists really knew the history of their periods and I'm not sure that that's as longer the case as it used to be, and I, you know, to me that's too bad.

Will Robin 31:04

Do you -- I mean, how did you then make this transition from Volens, Oliveros, Cardew, postmodernism to World Music, global pop, and your book ... like what was the shift? Where -- not just thinking about

approaches from ethnomusicology, but deciding that, you know, the standard stuff from musicology was not going to be your main focus.

Timothy Taylor 31:28

Well, I don't want to be too incendiary. But a lot of what I was learning in musicology just wasn't very interesting. You know, like I said music is meaningful and powerful. And then to read stuff about how you know, did Bach write piece in 1751, or, well, he would have been dead [both laugh], you know, did he write this piece in 1741 or 1742. It's like, Well, I'm glad somebody is figuring that out -- but that tells you nothing about why this music is so meaningful and so powerful and I felt I was getting a better methodology or a better toolbox to try to do that from ethnomusicology. But it was it was slow. I mean, I think, especially in America where we're so individualist, it's really hard to stop thinking that this composer made the piece the way it is. And you know, that's the end of the story. You know, and to try to start thinking, Okay, how does what's going on in society and culture and history register in this piece? That was a lot... that was hard to get to that question and get away from the individual-centric and composer-worship sort of project because, you know, I did worship composers I came, you know, I'm an MM in clarinet. I was a serious classical musician. And, you know, these composers were people that I venerated. And it was really hard to get off that. But partly, as I said, because I think, you know, for maybe, especially Americans, it's, you know, it's just the default position, you know? This individual made this thing happen, and there's no -- you know, society or culture or anything out there, which is a complex theoretical question, you know about structure and agency, but I just didn't feel like I was getting the tools I wanted from musicology. Or the humanities. I mean, my best friend from college was an English major, and then got a PhD in English, and he would give me, you know, the hot stuff from literary theory. And at a certain point, I just stopped being interested in music as text, and became much more interested in music as something that people do.

Will Robin 33:34

And, I mean, as part of that, I guess the interest in kind of using capitalism goes back to the 90s books. But how did you, kind of begin to head in that direction through the advertising book, and then your 2015 book, Music and Capitalism?

Timothy Taylor 33:50

Yeah, you're right. I mean, my interest in capitalism goes way back, but I didn't... It didn't really become sort of thematized until much later in my work. Maybe partly because, you know, the way I was trained. I mean, I read... I mean, virtually all the social theory I read in grad school, I did on my own, except what I got from Judith Becker. And so there was a long period of just trying to re-educate myself, or give myself the education that I didn't get in grad school. And that took a while, you know, trying to figure out okay, like, What does Marx ... what do we mean when we say capitalism? or What does Marx say capitalism is, or if we call music as a commodity, what do we really ... what do we mean when we say that? I mean that took a long time. I don't think I really felt properly educated until I was, I don't know 50. Or maybe late 40s. But it took a while and I'm not ashamed to admit it. I spent a summer one summer and probably, I don't know, 13-14 years ago, I worked through one of my wife's syllabi. She's used to teach this sort of Marx / Weber / Durkheim You know, social theory class for anthropology. So I worked through that, I read everything in the syllabus, we met once a week, to discuss it, and that really made a huge difference because, you know, I can read Marx on my own or whatever on my own. But then it's like, I know this thing over here, but I don't know how Marx relates to Weber, or Durkheim and, and you really need somebody to put that all together for you, you know, even if you already got a PhD, you know, if, you know, it's like learning a new musical repertoire, you know, you need somebody to

point out the landmarks, and then you can really start to learn the subtleties, and then when you read something, you can understand how they're implicitly building on or implicitly critiquing something else. But because it's implicit, you don't know and unless you know the conversation that they're in. Well that took a long time. So it wasn't really until the advertising book that well, I guess leading up to it, I wrote this article about music as a commodity before that, but uh, you know, in the process of writing that book, you know, I really felt like my education was, I wouldn't say complete, but, you know, sufficient to the task. And now it's kind of funny because now I occasionally teach the kind of Marx Weber Durkheim class for our students. But, you know, it took... it did take a while, and I'm still learning, you know, I still rely on, you know, David Harvey's lectures on Marx or whatever to fill in gaps in my knowledge, I'm not ashamed to admit that. Economic, you know... in making this claim that the economic is everywhere, that means that it should be put in higher relief in people's work. It's not just about, oh, this music is not a commodity, so you don't have to talk about it in economic terms, or we don't have to talk about how musicians make a living. I mean, the book I'm working on now, the big ethnographic project I'm working on now is about film and TV music workers here in town [Los Angeles]. It's interesting because, you know, there's all this literature out now about the creative industries and the cultural industries. So I thought I'd be talking about creativity. But what these guys want to talk about is how they, you know, struggle to make a living. I mean, that's what comes up. And a lot of them say, No, I'm not ... what I do is not creative. You know, music editors aren't creative, or, you know, scoring mixers, we're not creative. I, you know, I make the composers', you know, audio files sound better. And the composers will, if you ask composers about creativity, they'll talk about it. But what they're really concerned about is, you know, the disappearance of royalties under Netflix, trying to get the next gig, trying to hang on to the gig they've got. It's all economic matters, and it's, you know, no matter how much I want to try to theorize and problematize creativity that's, you know, which I will do to some extent, but...

Will Robin 37:53

Do you see that kind of underlying impulse or, I don't know, philosophy, as indicative of a kind of internalizing of, I don't know, neoliberal logics where creative workers are thinking this way, is it internalizing of the kind of precarious state of being an artist? Both, or?

Timothy Taylor 38:13

Yeah, there is a literature that talks about precariousness and willingness to take risks as being a kind of feature of the neoliberal moment. And people willing to do a job that they love because they love it, even if it risks, you know, financial difficulties. I don't know if I buy it. I mean, it's always been precarious for people in the arts. It's more precarious now than it was. I mean, for lots of reasons, that... I mean, like, for example, it used to be if you got hired to do a series for a TV show, you know, you probably had a gig for a season and now you might ... your show might get canceled after 13 episodes, or if it's a Netflix or Amazon Prime series, it might be only 10 episodes. And so these guys -- all of them, not just composers. I say guys, because they're almost all men, though there are more and more women. But you know, they have to scramble to find the next job more often than they used to. Because the current job might not last as long and you know, it's just gotten harder and harder and harder.

Will Robin 39:24

Well, I think those are all my questions. Thank you so much. This was super fascinating.

Timothy Taylor 39:28

Yeah, my pleasure. It's good to see you.

39:30

[Music]

Will Robin 39:37

A big thank you to Timothy Taylor, for that fascinating discussion. I encourage you to check out his many books, and especially the 2016 book, *Music and Capitalism, a History of the Present*. Links to Tim's writing and more are over at our website, soundexpertise.org. We are almost done with Season One of Sound Expertise. It's been quite the journey. Our final episode will air next week, and then we'll take a hiatus for a bit. As we wrap up our first season I encourage you to share particular episodes that you've liked on social media. And let us know what you think of the podcast. You can tweet at me [@seatedovation](https://twitter.com/seatedovation). My email is also on our website. And as always, please follow the work of our amazing producer D Edward Davis over on Soundcloud at [warmsilence](https://www.soundcloud.com/warmsilence). For our final episode of the season next week, I'm very excited to be speaking with the ethnomusicologist Siev Le, my friend and colleague at the University of Maryland. See you then!

40:26

[music]