

## Musical Interludes and Teaching Laboratory: Learning and Student Engagement in an Economic Anthropology Classroom

Jeffrey H. Cohen<sup>1</sup> and Andrew P. Mitchel<sup>1</sup>  
<sup>1</sup>*The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA*

### Abstract:

We report on two exercises, musical interludes and the teaching laboratory, we developed for use in Economic Anthropology courses. The Musical Interlude asks students to present a song to the class (typically using a music video) and responding to a series of questions, summarizing the ways it reflects course themes. For the teaching laboratory, students are organized into working groups and collectively analyse and present their selections during the last week of class, addressing specific themes including altruism and selfishness. These assignments embrace the concept of musicking introduced by Christopher Small (1998), as students capture what he describes as music's social value in understanding ourselves and others.

**Keywords:** Economic anthropology; Musicking; Pedagogy; Student Engagement.

### Musical Interludes and Economic Anthropology

Students tend to assume that Economic Anthropology will be a difficult course filled with challenging ideas, extensive readings, and complicated work. To counter that belief and make the class more enticing, we borrowed from The Hives' 2012 single "I Want More" and renamed the course "More: Culture and Economic Life." Embracing the song's lyrics, "A healthy appetite is good for one and all. And I should be at peace with the world baby, but still I want some more. A larger slice of pie, a bigger set of wheels. A million sets of human eyes staring right at me." We redesigned the class to connect with students as we debate altruism versus self-interest and selfishness, investigate patterns of consumption, and explore the socio-cultural foundation of shopping (Miller 1998). While the course investigates core themes in theory and the history of economic anthropology, there is an opportunity for students to apply their experiences as they learned (for a similar approach using Netflix, see Ben Abdesslem and Picault 2023).

A new title and modified content do not guarantee enrolments or improve student engagement. To foster active learning and critical thinking, we reimagined the classroom. Moving beyond a combination of lectures and readings, quizzes, and essays, we defined a series of activities based around music and musicking (Small 1999) that require active participation and gives students the opportunity to demonstrate their mastery using their experiences, likes and dislikes. Listening to Janis Joplin sing "Mercedes Benz", the Hives play "I Want More", and Beatles perform "Can't buy me Love", themes that are central to economic anthropology, including the value of altruism and/or self-interest in daily life as well as production, consumption and exchange were present.

The Musical Interlude assignment is a weekly part of the class that asks students to find examples of music and highlight song lyrics in relation to the topics covered in class. Ideally, the selections the students make connect with weekly themes, but the guidelines for the selections are broadly defined and allow students leeway in their choices. In fact, where there might be questions about a selection, students are encouraged to defend their choices and explain how the piece connects to course materials, and in that way, further stimulate discussion and insight.

Students can select pieces that are contemporary or classic. There are no rules around the language used, though students are encouraged to translate lyrics into English for the classroom and to avoid extreme examples and

explicit language that might be interpreted as crossing into the categories of hate speech and challenge the university’s code of conduct. Finally, while most pieces will fit into a clear musical category like pop, classic rock, rap or country, students are encouraged to explore and bring the music they like to the classroom. It was easy to motivate students, and most were excited to share their music (see table 1 for a playlist compiled during the Fall 2022 semester). Within a few weeks the students demonstrated that there are more songs about economic life than anyone might imagine (Tinari and Khandke 2000).

Table 1: Musical Interludes playlist, 2022.

<i>Title</i>	<i>Artist</i>	<i>Year</i>
C.R.E.A.M. (Cash Rules Everything Around Me)	Wu-Tang Clan	1994
Lawyers, Guns, and Money	Warren Zevon	1978
Next of Kin	Lucy Dacus	2018
Iraq2Chile	Lowkey, Mai Khalil	2020
7 Rings	Ariana Grande	2019
Money	Pink Floyd	1973
She Works Hard for Her Money	Donna Summers	1983
Money Trees	Kendrick Lamar, featuring Jay Rock	2012
I Don’t Want Your Money	Ed Sheeran, H.E.R.	2019
Old Money	Mark Whalen and Nico Bokos	2019
Money	Michael Jackson	1995
Stranger in the North	Nomee featuring Wang Leehom	2016
Foreclosure of a Death	Megadeth	1992
Peruvian Coke	Immortal Technique	2003
Animal Spirits	Vulfpeck	2016
Money for Nothing	Dire Straits	1984

Economic Anthropology is an advanced course, built around lecture, readings, and discussions that pushes students to master and effectively demonstrate core themes in the field. Readings include classic statements in the field and in the case of Economic Anthropology, articles from the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Newer resources in a range of styles that include books, book excerpts and articles, popular pieces, digital news, and more track between classic themes and contemporary issues. Traditional concerns over altruism and self-interest; production, consumption, and exchange; gender, formalism, and political economy, share space with the discussion of poverty, neoliberalism, globalization, inequality, and wellbeing (see table 2 for a sample of weekly class topics). Musicking and the diverse songs that students present in association with the topics schedule bring the class to life and drive far ranging discussions. Critically, students are reminded they are not to ask, “is this good music?” but to emphasize the connections of their selection to economic anthropology and critical thinking.

Song selections by students can be surprising, as they chose from their personal favourites as well as those of their parents and grandparents. Picking from songs of the past to gain insights into the present, one student picked Pink Floyd’s “Money” to explore changing ideas of consumption in the UK and US. The student focused on changing signs of value and shifting attitudes toward displays of wealth that separate the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The expensive cars, private jets, and rare jewels that pepper the original tune released in 1973 are replaced by new signs of wealth, including the latest technology. That technology sits alongside investments in the person (learning and travel) as well as morally driven choices that are based in the ideal of sustainability, the quest for authenticity and the value of local production. Another student chose Donna Summer’s hit “She Works Hard for the Money,” using the lyrics to focus on how gender norms have shifted in the 40 years since its 1983 release. The student used the song to reference the increasing presence of women in workplace and the rising number of women in boardrooms and at skill jobs ranging from the law to education and medicine.

The familiarity the students brought to musicking and rethinking the value of their selections to understanding economic life allowed them the opportunity to think well outside the box, and their examples highlighted just how timely and critical a song and its lyrics can be. For example, one student picked Namewee and Leehom Wang's 2016 composition "Stranger in the North". The student translated the Chinese lyrics of the song, "some people work for their dreams, for three meals a day, to support their families," and reflected on poverty, dependency and precarity, connecting to themes that included neoliberalism, globalization and poverty that were central to the class. These examples capture the way that students used the musical interludes to organize their thoughts and make sense of diverse topics and demonstrate that they had begun to master core concepts in economic anthropology. Just as importantly, the interludes and their discussions gave students the opportunity to claim ownership as learners and critical thinkers. These efforts underwrote student success going forward.

Table 2: Sample Schedule for Economic Anthropology

Week 1	Economic anthropology.
Week 2	Poverty and inequality (via analysis in economic anthropology).
Week 3	Poverty and Living on Almost Nothing in Contemporary America.
Week 4	Economic Anthropology's Past and the Formalists-Substantivists Debate.
Week 5	Political Economy and Rethinking Economic Anthropology.
Week 6	Development (via analyses past and present).
Week 7	Beyond economic man (gender and economic life).
Week 8	Sociality and economic life (cooperation and reciprocity).
Week 9	Neoliberalism.
Week 10	Globalism.
Week 11	Economic Systems (the role of formal models in economic anthropology).
Week 12	Shopping (modern patterns of consumption).
Week 13	Markets and Exchange (the social meaning of the marketplace).
Week 14	Gi Giving and Commensality.
Week 15	Economic Inequality, Health Inequalities and Applied Anthropology.

To facilitate the students and guide their critiques, the musical interlude is built around a series of questions and concerns that are embedded into a template (see figure 1). Students are encouraged to share a music video of their selection and present it at the start of the class. The videos are critical to the start of class. The videos bring the room to attention and build rapid engagement as students are often quite quick to share their thoughts. After introducing a tune, the student gives a brief presentation and lead class discussion.

Students are randomly assigned a presentation date and they turned in their completed worksheet/template for credit. The template (figure 1) includes their information as well as the video link if available and information on the group, composer, and release date.

The core of the assignment asks students to respond to five questions:

1. What is the connection of your selection to economic life and course themes?
2. Does your selection emphasize a positive, negative, or critical connection to themes in economic anthropology, or does it do something else?
3. How does the piece you selected connect to ideas of altruism and selfishness (love and money) and motivations to behave according to cultural norms?
4. Thinking of the date of the piece's composition, how does it connect (or does it?) to economic events/issues that occurred at the time?
5. Put on your critic hat and think about today and our world. How does the song you've selected connect to economic issues in the present?

While the first question, what is the connection of your selection to economic life and course themes, is general, it motivates students to consider how their selection engages with course readings and lectures. Leaving the question open encourages responses that often go beyond the class's goals and allows students to conduct their

own deep dives into economic anthropology. The assignment also offers international and non-traditional students an opportunity to share songs from places that may be unfamiliar to more traditional students and bring an additional dynamism and sense of discover to the discussions of anthropology, economic anthropology, and human life.

Question two encourages students to evaluate what we are reading in class and how it relates to life. Motivating students to engage with thematic materials and develop a critical understanding of the cultural basis of economic life as well as the complex bond that links economy and culture. Asking students to think critically and evaluate their selection, including how their interpretation connects to the goals of the composer, is an opportunity to show how they (the student) learn and demonstrate their mastery of class materials.

Building upon their analysis of the cultural dynamics of economic life, students debate altruism and selfishness in question three. In addition to formulating an answer to the classic question, can money buy love? The student explores how the relationship of love and money has shifted in the last 40 years, how the role of consumption has changed and how economic behaviour, including gendered behaviours that have shifted in recent years, are captured. Building upon that analysis, the students can extend their discussion to new questions around discrimination, colonialism, inequality, and intolerance.

Much of the music that students share speaks to the connection between love and money, and that tension is one of the most important foci for discussion and for moving into debates over the meaning of altruism and self-interested behaviour (Wilk 1993). The assignment is not meant to settle the debate over love and money, altruism, and self-interest, but it does create an opportunity to explore how popular culture become a site through which we understand human nature.

Figure 1: Template for Musical Interludes

<b>Musical Interlude</b>		
Name:		
Song Title:	Band/Singer:	Composition date:
Video address: (insert link to the piece if it is available)		
1. What is the connection of your selection to economic life and some of the themes we've talked about in class?		
2. Can you analyze how your selection relates to the themes of our class in a positive, negative and/or critical way?		
3. Thinking about selfishness and altruism in an economic sense and captured by the differences between love and money as motivations, what is the connection between your song selection and cultural norms?		
4. When was your selected piece composed? How does the piece connect (or does it?) to that moment in time?		
5. Thinking about today, do you believe that your song selection has something to tell us in the present, and if so, what might it be?		

Music does not exist in a vacuum, and students reflect on when their selection was released in question four. Popularity is not a central concern, rather, we are interested in how a selection penetrated the moment of its release, reflecting, critiquing, and revising ideas. The fifth question encourages students to look beyond a song's impact when it was released, to consider its contemporary role. This is an important opportunity to talk about economic change and how new concerns, including shifting patterns of inequality and discrimination can repurpose a historically important piece, create a new life for an older song or even make a piece that was not a hit popular in the moment.

The musical interlude is a successful activity to bring into the classroom. By musicking students contribute to our discussions and illustrate one way to foster critical thinking, engagement, and active learning in the classroom (see the discussion in Small 1999). Students are eager to share the songs and lyrics as they bring dated debates over theory to life. They are also excited to bring new concerns and show their ability to understand complex theoretical models. This is perhaps the most important outcome of the exercise: the musical interlude is a way in which students carve space for themselves in the field and as engaged, thoughtful learners. Their analyses are a foundation to build on and it teaches them that they have something important to say (Krueger 2015; Mahoney, Mathews, and Thomas 2022). To paraphrase Small, the relationships that students establish through the musical interlude informs knowing and brings a confidence that extends beyond the moment and supports their development as anthropologists (Small 1998: 205).

### **From Musical Interludes to Teaching Laboratory**

The success of the Musical Interludes as one part of the process through which students master Economic Anthropology encouraged us to develop the teaching laboratory as a way to further engagement. In addition to asking students to select songs and document their connection to theory, we created in-class student working groups and asked them to produce collective responses to thematic questions that summarized class themes. This teamwork is presented during the last week of the semester and offers an opportunity for students to prepare for the final exam as well.

The addition of the teaching laboratory to Economic Anthropology brings closure to the course and does so by building upon the students' earlier contributions. Asking students to collectively summarize their selections from the semester is an opportunity to reconsider each piece, find common ground and, potentially, discover theoretical debates that they need to focus on and spend a little more time mastering materials before the final exam. Going beyond the "one-off" quality of the original activity, this group exercise is also an opportunity to build upon what the students know and further their professional growth as they develop their skills as group learners and discussion leaders. Finally, the assignment allows for the course to end on a note of inclusion as student collectively present their findings.

Like the musical interlude, the teaching laboratory is founded on the idea of musicking and the belief that we should use music and song (as sonic gestures) to articulate our relationships with others and model the connections that define who we are (Small 1998: 205). In the next section, we cover the aims and objectives of this assignment and the laboratory experience.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The musical interludes ask students to explore the value of their selected songs to economic anthropology; the teaching laboratory groups students together and asks them to consider the impacts of their selections collectively. Combining their musical selections, the teaching laboratory has four objectives (see table 3). First, and acknowledging the theoretical tensions that are present in economic anthropology and the classic debate between formalists and substantivists (see Hann 2021), we ask each working group to explore how their song selections balance themes of love and money. Love and money are used as shorthand references to debates in the field that pit altruistic acts against self-interested behaviour. Love includes the romantic entanglements that characterize so much modern music including Queen who ask, "can anybody find me somebody to love?" in their song "Somebody to Love". In this exercise, love is a proxy for altruism and behaviours that highlight community and interpersonal relationships. Money, on the other hand, references avarice and greed, as captured in Kim Moberg's 2018 song of the same name and is used as a proxy for selfish, venal, and egotistical outcomes that preference the individual over the group.

Table 3: Handout for final, working group project

<b>Teaching Laboratory: Musical Meaning-A Working Group Perspective</b>
Your working group should develop a response to each of the following areas (Altruism and Selfishness, Musicking, Anthropological Theory, and Generationality). Write up your responses in 5 to 10 pages (double spaced) and develop a series of PowerPoint slides to share with the class during the last week of class. Please remember to acknowledge the groups, performers, and selections you are referencing and to put your working group number and the efforts of each participant on the report.
Altruism and Selfishness: Define how these altruism and selfishness appear in your selections. How are presented (metaphorically and using images of love and money? or is something else happening). Are the themes maintained across your group's selections? If so, why? If not, how do you explain the underlying meaning?
Musicking: Musicking assumes that listening is an active process through which the listener connects with others, discovers meaning and defines relationships. The relationships that are created offer opportunities for learning that might not seem obvious. For the second section of your group response, explore how your working group's selections embrace and become clear examples of musicking. What kind of relationships are created over the different selections and how do they serve as an example of the way in which musicking transcends knowing?
Anthropological theory: Reflect on your working group's selections and thinking beyond our class in economic anthropology, do the pieces contribute to the critical discussion of theory in anthropology? For example, do your selections carry value for the discussion of kinship's role, you might also think about the ways in which culture is represented and communicated.
Generationality: Return to the selected pieces that your working group has shared in your musical interludes. Thinking about the timeliness of each piece at the moment of its release, consider your selections collectively. How do song themes, release dates, genres, as well as the backgrounds of the bands involved (sex/gender, race, religion, and ethnicity among other things) impact their value? Think about the cultural milieu in which each song is composed, released, and performed. Now think about how that milieu has changed. Why do some songs maintain their status as important and timely, while others are forgotten? And what does that say about music, culture and meaning?

The second goal asks the working groups to reflect on musicking. Musicking argues listening is an active process through which the listener becomes a part of the performance and through performance connects with others, discovers meaning and defines relationships. Importantly, the connections that are created through musicking transcend and exceed the knowledge and experiences of the participants as passive learners and offer opportunities for learning that might not seem obvious (Small 1998). In other words, musicking as an active material process that can be shared, consumed, distributed, and redistributed (see Krueger 2015).

The third goal of the teaching laboratory asks working groups to elaborate on the ways in which their selections emphasize specific topics that are critical to anthropology such as kinship and family; and how they are confirmed, contradicted, and revised using songs that include the 1979 Sister Sledge hit, "We are Family", as well as Lukas Graham's 2015 song "7 Years". The songs are the starting point, and they are meant to support the students as they discover connections and move beyond the core concerns of economic anthropology to discuss anthropological theory more generally. Finally, the fourth goal of the teaching laboratory asks the working groups to return to their selected pieces, and explore the timely value of their selections' themes, release dates, genres, as well as the backgrounds of the bands involved (sex/gender, race, religion, and ethnicity among other things). Critical to this last exercise is the opportunity to capture the cultural milieu into which each song is released, how that milieu might have changed through time, and why some of their selections maintain their status as important and timely, while others are forgotten.

### **The Laboratory Experience**

Helping students understand that learning is a continuous process, the teaching laboratory asks them to return to their interludes and together with their classmates expand upon their earlier efforts. Students are assigned to working groups of 4 to 5 individuals to facilitate and encourage teamwork and to capture the value that multiple minds can bring to answering a question. Sharing their selections and armed with four questions to explore, the groups reflect on their listening habits and connect songs to class content and the field.

Using selections from *Economic Anthropology*, fall 2022, in the next section we present a series of student based, musical interludes and focus on their discussion of love and money as proxies for altruism and self-interest. The students who shared the songs discussed below gave us permission to summarize their in-class responses. The responses capture the thoughtful and focused attention they brought to their analyses of “C.R.E.A.M” by the Wu Tang Clan; “Lawyers, Guns and Money” by Warren Zevon; “Next of Kin” by Lucy Dacus; and “Stranger In the North” (漂向北方) by Namewee Ft. Wang Leehom.

The Wu-Tang Clan’s 1994 release “C.R.E.A.M”, focuses, as the student noted “on the role that money... plays in shaping their decisions and lifestyles,” adding “money is power and... shapes [all] decisions that people make.” The piece captures the divisive role money can play, and “reflects contemporary issues of wealth disparities, unequal access to resources, and the differences in daily lifestyles...” The selection downplays altruism, emphasizes self-interest, and captures the tensions that surround changing assumptions about life, love, and success. Can altruism exist without self-interest, does self-interest (symbolized by a person’s economic success) supersede a commitment to family and friends? Perhaps, as in Cole’s example of shifting concepts of intimacy in *Madagascar* (2009) there is room for alternatives, but the message carried by C.R.E.A.M. is not hopeful.

“Lawyers, Guns and Money” by Warren Zevon, finds a different balance between altruism and self-interest, as the singer calls for love (familial support) and money (a quick fix) as he is confronted by a gamble gone wrong while on vacation “I was gambling in Havana, I took a little risk. Send lawyers, guns and money, dad, get me out of this.” One insight by the student who presented Warren Zevon’s piece noted that the song addresses how “people with money can move easily [and] avoid the consequences” of their mistakes. Building on the ways that class, status, and wealth can influence outcomes and mediate crisis, the student noted that power can sometimes “enable” risky behaviours and limit the impacts of negative and dangerous events. While family remains important to survival, the selection “references calling one’s father for help but only in order to ask him for help,” capturing how awkward family interactions can become as wealth and status shift.

The student who selected “Next of Kin” by Lucy Dacus (2018) argued “the artist is particularly unmotivated by money or material wealth... their kinship relationship is symbolized not only by love and concern, but also the singer’s selflessness.” The singer chooses love over money and altruism over selfishness. Noting she’s never been to Monaco, she isn’t sad, rather, she recalls a brief love, “I held you hand in the pocket of my coat” and, in the words of our student, “admits incompleteness and a lack of desire to seek anything more than the current position...” contradicting the assumption that people should chase adventure at any cost. A melancholy piece for sure, yet Dacus is focused on being happy with one’s life regardless of the situation.

“Stranger In the North” (漂向北方) by Namewee featuring Wang Leehom centres on the value and importance of family in economic life and decision-making. The song’s focus is on “migrant workers in China who feel isolated... [and face] struggles, hardships, and sacrifices to help bring better lives to family members in their hometown.” With an emphasis on daily struggles confronting immigrants who have few rights before the state, the song captures the value of family and the importance of friends and altruistic behaviour for survival.

## **Conclusion**

The musical interludes and teaching laboratory are opportunities to engage with central themes in economic anthropology and, through musicking, consider how songs become sites for discussion and understanding. The outcome is engaged students who build upon and apply their knowledge to show their mastery of class themes.

In this article, we have demonstrated how to use music as a way into a more complete and complex discussion of theory (Mahoney, Mathews, and Thomas 2022). Music is something our students know and that they are happy to talk about. It can be a foundation upon which they can discover, debate, and discuss theory and themes in anthropology. The assignments push our students to create space for themselves as economic anthropologists and to become comfortable with theoretical ideas and thematic subjects that can sometimes seem alien and intimidating. Through their analyses our students embrace critical thinking and begin the journey toward becoming anthropologists. They gain confidence and validation, they find their voices, learn to lead discussions, and discover their own strengths. We are hopeful this approach inspires others to make use of music and incorporate these types of cultural forms into their coursework.

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