

Greg Chako ethnography assignment for *Intro to Ethno*

FOCUS: The Role of Music as Ritual on the St. John Fisher Tennis Team

I live with a female tennis coach. I am a male jazz musician. She follows a very strict daily schedule. I'm an improviser without a schedule. Her daily routine includes morning jogging, and I've noticed she always has headphones on, listening to something. What's she listening to? I'd guess it's not my music. Is it even music at all? She is the coach of the men's and women's tennis teams at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, NY, a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III private liberal arts college. St. John Fisher is a member of the Empire Eight Athletic Conference, a very competitive conference that includes Alfred University, Elmira, Nazareth, Hartwick, Ithaca, Steven's Technology and Utica College.

When I joined an *Introduction to Ethnomusicology* course and was assigned an ethnography to write, my thoughts for a subject went immediately to my house mate and her headphone habit. When I told her about the class assignment and my curiosity about her headphones, she told me that years ago a sports psychologist visited her tennis team, suggesting they all listen to music to best prepare for playing tennis. Since then my friend, Coach Linda Gohagen, instructs her team members to make a CD of music to listen to as routine preparation for playing. Coach's written instructions given to each player includes explanations of the music's purpose: *Relaxation Music* is "...to relax and focus on breathing...". This helps players avoid focusing their thoughts on mistakes made during play, what Coach calls "negative self-talk" which tends to result in repetition of mistakes; *Focus Music* to help them "...concentrate better and make an attitude adjustment if necessary..."; *Peak Performance Music* for players to use while visualizing "...playing well and highlights of their best played matches..."; and *Today's Play Music* "...to get into the rhythm of playing the match and executing the game strategy...". Coach lets the players make their own musical choices, but requires them to show up to all practice sessions and matches wearing their headphones listening to the music they've compiled.

I planned to accompany Coach Gohagen to multiple team practice sessions and a match or two, meeting with the players and getting to know as much as I could about them and how music might play a part in their tennis activities.

The use of music in sports is popular. The world's number one tennis player today, Novak Djokovic, discovered at age 6 in his homeland of Serbia and taken under the wing of Serbia's most famous player/coach, Jelena Gencic, was instructed to listen to classical music daily. When asked why by a *60 Minutes* reporter (<http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7403196n>), the coach said it was to make him "...a better human being...". Just days after winning a stunning 5:30 hour match win at the Australian Open this year, Novak says the music "...calms me down... and I still listen to it...". Sports psychologist Dr. Elizabeth Kelley, Program Director for Physical Education at Monroe Community College, says (personal contact 4/16/12) the forefather of music use in sports may well be Dr. Georgi Lozanov, a world-renowned psychiatrist and educator who many consider the originator of accelerated learning. Believing the key to effective teaching was not necessarily related to I.Q. or intelligence, he inserted music directly into curriculum to simultaneously activate both right and left sides of the brain, engaging the emotions and merging conscious and unconscious stimuli. As he put it, "...the arts are the greatest form of suggestion in existence..."(http://www.optimalearning.com/readings_delehanty.htm;&
<http://www.scribd.com/doc/38642922/The-Lozanov-Method>). His methods became an important part of the institutionalized educational system of Soviet Bloc countries, and were later popularized in America by the New York Times best seller, *Super Learning 2000*, by Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder. *Super Learning 2000* describes in detail how music is used successfully in connection with imagery, cognitive science, and various forms of training and education, saying "...that slow Baroque is synchronizing your brain and body..." inducing "...a powerful form of alert relaxation - an ideal state for optimal accomplishment...". While the uses of music in sports may be acknowledged by some best selling authors, athletes, coaches and sports psychologists, it may not be known by many musicians, and perhaps, ethnomusicologists have yet to write ethnographies on tennis teams. It's my hope

that this paper may begin to fill any potential gaps of awareness, spurring us on to continually seek and study ways in which music effects us.

Since Coach and I share friendship and living space, her tennis team's dynamics and activities are a popular topic of discussion. This provided me with much information above and beyond what I gleaned from my more limited time with the individual players. At all times while researching material for this paper, I tried to be an observer of, and participator with the team, to the greatest extent possible without actually playing the game myself or interfering with their training.

On Saturday, February 25th, 2012, I attended a practice session and met the team. It was the day before the men's first competitive match. I waited outside Coach's office to see the players as they came in. Were they going to be listening to their music as required? I saw one out of four listening to music with headphones as the team assembled and waited. After everyone arrived, Coach gathered them together, made some brief announcements, and directed their attention to me. After I introduced myself, explaining very briefly why I was there and what I would be doing (observing), we boarded the bus at St. John Fisher College to travel to Mendon Raquet Club in Mendon, where the practice would take place. Before the bus drove off, I noted that coach stood in the front of the bus and addressed everyone, telling them to "...put their game face on, their head sets on, and listen to their music during the drive..." I did not notice the majority of players following her instructions. They were talking amongst themselves or eating instead.

After practice, the bus arrived back at the college and the players dispersed. Coach and I road home together and talked about the practice session and what I observed. I told her I had noticed an apparent lack of concentration by the team while they were practicing, including casual banter between the players on the court, and players who lost patience and composure while playing, visibly showing their anger and frustration by banging their racquets on the ground or storming off the court muttering obscenities. Coach confirmed to me she noticed the very same things.

She reminded me that while the players are on court, whether it be for practice or a match, they should not engage in unnecessary chatter. That is one of the reasons she wants them listening to music when they're not actually playing, to *focus* on why they're there and to eliminate undesired gossip and socializing. Visible and/or audible displays of violent emotion are considered inappropriate and could result in the offending player being benched. At the session I witnessed, one player was actually taken out of the starting line-up for the next match, as a disciplinary measure based on his poor behavior on the court. This action put the team's chance of winning the next day's match more at risk, since the disciplined player's absence meant another, less qualified player would be moved up the ranks to take his place. However, the Coach reasoned that examples like this must be made to illustrate to the whole team that while on the court, rules must be abided or they won't be allowed to play. Coach has confided in me that enabling her kids to mature as individuals is more important than any match score, and I have witnessed over time how her style of coaching attempts to instill in her students advantageous personal qualities that are meant to be utilized by the kids in their lives both on and off the tennis court, now and in the future. Perhaps one of the most important of these qualities is the ability to focus: living in the present moment.

The team lost the next day, and from what Coach told me, did not play well. In the time that elapsed before I attended my second team practice session on April 1st, Coach informed me that the problems witnessed during their February practice had escalated, dragging down team morale and seemingly prolonging a losing streak. She felt it necessary to address the whole team in a special meeting. At the meeting, she reminding them what her expectations were, then asked them what they thought should be done when a team member failed to follow the rules such as not listening to their music. They replied that "...the offending player should be benched...". From that March day onwards, Coach observed improvements in her players' on-court behavior, including seeing more headphones on their heads at the appropriate times.

Around the time of the special team meeting in March, after I had made the team's acquaintance and enlisted Coach's support for my efforts, I emailed the players the following questionnaire:

"Coach requires you to make a CD of music to listen to during all matches and practices.

- 1) Did you make a CD and use it as she instructed? Why or why not?*
- 2) What music did you choose and why?*
- 3) How does listening to music effect your tennis playing/performance?"*

After getting responses to my questionnaire, I decided it was time to attend another practice session. As Coach and I made our way to one on April 1st, she remarked to me, "...I think you'll see a big difference with the team today...". I did. The first thing I noticed as I waited for the players to show up outside Coach's office at St. John Fisher College, was that as the players filed in, they all had headphones on! On the bus from the college to Mendon Raquet Club, nobody was conversing or eating. They all had their headphones on. At the practice, I noticed them behaving in the way Coach said they should, and on this day, I witnessed no emotional outbursts on court. I had an opportunity to have one-on-one conversations with some of the players at this practice, about their emailed responses to my questionnaire. I had already received 13 responses, one from each of the 12 players on the team, plus one from the assistant coach who used to be a regular player on the team and was now assisting Coach Gohagen. As the bus was preparing to take all of us home after the practice session was over, I noticed most members listening to their music with headphones. On the bus, since I wasn't sure if I'd see them again or not, I took the opportunity to thank them for their help, and commented that the team I saw that day was different than the one I saw during my first visit in February - to this they heartily agreed, saying out loud they had improved a lot and felt more like a team playing together as one. They had acquired team spirit.

The week before this practice session, the team traveled to Hoboken, NJ. for a match against their conference's #1 ranked team. They had never beat this team and a victory in even one of that match's games would be considered an upset. Yet, I discovered at the practice session that one player won unexpectedly, earning a mention in the sports page of the local paper the next day. Talking to me at the practice, that winner said he attributed his victory specifically to listening to music. He said when he first started listening to music for tennis, he chose up-tempo songs, but found that got him "...too riled up..." and he often hit the ball out of bounds. After switching to "...relaxing music...", he noticed better results. The day of his victory, he listened to relaxing music every moment till he had to actually start the match play. He said that "...music we listen to is the start of our focus. Focus is huge in tennis..., and ...music is the first step in focus...".

The idea that listening to music improves focus was a common denominator among the team. Here are some excerpts of comments from the players: "...I use music to enhance my mood, focus and intensity... I feel like I almost need to listen to music before playing, it has become part of my tennis routine..."; "...helps me get into the right mindset..."; "...helps to clear my mind so I can think better on the court..."; "...helps me focus..."; "...gets me calm and collected and not think about other things..."; "...quiets my mind from any emotions found in the previous games..., ...easier to remember my strategy and obtain a mindset..."; "...eases tension and helps me relax and focus on tennis, or it can pump me up and mentally charge me..."; "...the music helped me reach that middle ground point where I would only focus on tennis and nothing else..."; "...having a song stuck in my head is beneficial, it helps keep me from thinking of the outside world..., I'm less distracted..."; "...I am more relaxed and loose..."; "...I have played some of the worst matches when I *haven't* listened to music and gone through my normal routine...".

Of the 13 members who responded, only two said they listened to music before a match *just* because it was a requirement, however, in those responses, one said "...I don't think music helps me focus on the game but rather just *get me calm and collected and not think about other things...*, once I take the headphones out of my

ears *I concentrate on playing* and not a tune...”, and the other said, “...I really don’t think it effects my performance at all, but it just *puts me in a good mood...*, I pick stuff that isn’t too relaxing to *get my energy level up...*”. These two responses seem somewhat contradictory, since both players readily admit music changes the way they feel. Five of the 13 questioned said that how music effects them depends on what kind of music they choose and how they’re feeling at the time, hence these players use a variety of music styles in their tennis routine to accommodate different circumstances. These players said, “...*If I pick the right songs*, I can get myself into the zone and play very well...”; “...It’s *not just about listening to any type* of music, but *rather certain styles* that get me in the right frame of mind...”; “...I look for *songs that match the mood* I’m in that day...”; “...I chose *lots of different types of music*, to calm me down and leave me feeling tranquil, and others that make me happy and put me in a good mood...”; and the fifth player said he had a wide variety of music to listen to, some to “...light a fire under my ass...; to calm me down when I was too amped up...; and music “...neutral to me, it allows me to clear my mind from everything and focus my body and mind on tennis...”.

A week and a half later, on April 11th, I witnessed part of a conference match at Mendon Raquet Club. Coach Gohagen’s team lost, but by a very close margin, and Coach said they played very well against a stronger opponent. After this close loss the team went on the road for three more matches that would determine whether they qualified for the *Empire Eight*, a post regular season championship tournament. Only the four best teams in the conference qualify to compete in the *Empire Eight*, and none of the seniors on this team have ever qualified to play in it, since the last time Coach Gohagen’s men’s team qualified was four years ago, and none of her current players would have been on the team at that time. The team won 2 of the 3 road matches and played well in all. This was enough to qualify them for the 4th “seed” position of the *Empire Eight Championship Tournament*.

On April 18th, one of Coach Gohagen’s players had an article published in the school paper for a section called, *The Year In Review*. He is graduating this year and the title of his piece was called, *Looking Back at Four Years of Tennis*, in which he

talks about how much he learned and enjoyed from his tennis experience. One of the things he said was that tennis is not solely about winning, but about having fun, building individual strengths and team spirit. Coach Gohagen asks each player to complete a questionnaire as an end-of-the-season review. She shared those responses with me, and more than one player mentioned increasing their confidence and mental toughness through *focus*, and enjoying the benefits of team bonding during the course of the season. All of them were very proud and happy to accomplish qualifying in the *Empire Eight*, having turned around their initial poor performance to winning 5 of their last 6 games at the end of the regular season. It's difficult to say how much difference music made in that turn-around, but the Coach remains convinced it made a big difference in getting them to focus on playing and behaving their best on the court, which in turn, may have helped them bond together as a winning team.

I collected data on the St. John Fisher Tennis team off and on, for approximately three months. This included numerous telling and somewhat intimate conversations with their Coach, traveling with the team to and from, and attending as observer two 3-4 hour practice sessions, witnessing one part of a competitive match, talking to individual team members every chance I could get, and analyzing 13 written responses to a questionnaire I gave all team members. Some common themes emerge. One is that music is used to increase player's focus, and all the players agree music has an important emotional impact on them, almost all saying they are less distracted when using music before playing. Even though two players said they listened to music just because it was a requirement, one said it "...gets me calm and collected and not think about other things..." while the other said it "...puts him in a good mood..." and gets his energy level up, so effectively, music listening seems to be doing what the Coach expects, and a few players attributed their on-court successes *directly* to music and their tennis failures to *not* listening to the right music.

Evidence of a second theme is slightly more nebulous, and concerns how music was involved to make these tennis players better people. During the time I've been

observing this team, the Coach has taken disciplinary measures to improve their behavior on and off the court, and each time she did so, the ritual of music listening was at the heart of her efforts. It's not unreasonable, in my opinion, to draw an analogy between Coach Gohagen, the tennis legend Jelena Gencic, and the institutional education system of the old Soviet Bloc countries that used Dr. Lozenov's ideas. We recall that when Gencic was asked if she instructed the current world number one tennis player to listen to music to improve his game or to make him a better person, she replied, "...to make him a better person...". Coach Gohagen has told me all her efforts to make a winning team, including the ritual of music to sustain focus, encourage living in the present moment, and build mental toughness, has at its root, the goal of helping these kids mature and acquire skill sets that will make them better citizens. Music certainly seems to be a crucial element in this overriding goal. Another aspect of Gohagen's disciplinary actions is that they appeared to have discernable positive results. When I first observed the team, they were not following the rules and losing matches. Later in the season, after Gohagen acted to enforce the ritual of music listening, I witnessed everyone behaving better and they were winning matches. Although it's almost impossible to prove that music listening in and of itself made the difference in the team's turn-around, nor is it my place to try to do so, Coach Gohagen assures me she is fully convinced it made all the difference in the world.

Starting with the research of Dr. Lozanov, and progressing up to and beyond the material presented in the book *Super Learning 2000*, it's apparent that both scientific evidence and popular belief is growing that music can profoundly impact how we learn and grow as individuals. As educators, sports psychologists, and athletes continue to utilize music to improve performance, it's likely there is a wealth of new information waiting to be discovered by ethnomusicologists and ethnographers who focus their research on athletes and sports teams.