Beyond the Musicology of Disaster: A Sri Lankan Music History for the Post-War Period

Dr Jim Sykes
Research Associate, Music Department, King’s College London

Abstract
Since 2004, I have been doing fieldwork with Sri Lankan drummers from a wide array of performance and communal backgrounds: Sinhala Buddhist (berava) ritual drummers, Tamil Hindu musical theatre (kooththu) artists, Sufis, light music (sarala gi) pop musicians, rockers and heavy metal drummers, former child soldiers, tsunami orphans and peace activists. What this research reveals is a general tendency on the island to invest in drumming as a kind of gift, whether it be to deities, individuals and/or communities, for purposes of healing and/or protection. In this talk, I discuss the possibility of reshaping Sri Lanka’s cultural history so that it ceases to simply mirror the divisions inherent in the country’s communal conflicts and comes also to represent the generosity and interactions inherent in the musical offering. Sri Lanka’s music history, I will show, is characterized not just by the musics of distinct ethnic and religious communities, but also by a history of relatively harmonious communal interactions and exchanges that were present even during the war. Given the lack of reconciliation amongst the island’s communities since the official end of civil war in May 2009, I suggest a peaceful and sustainable future will require publicizing this dual notion of the island’s cultural history – at once communal and interactive - a perspective that, it is important to say, is something quite different from ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘hybridity’.

Event Details
Wednesday, 6 March 2013
3.00pm to 4.30pm
Malay Studies Seminar Room
AS7 #04-13
Kent Ridge Campus
National University of Singapore

About the Speaker
Jim Sykes completed his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 2011. After finishing a postdoctoral research fellowship at King’s College London this June, he will begin a post as Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses on the intersections between music, personhood, religion and modernity across the eastern Indian Ocean region, with an emphasis on Sri Lanka; he is currently beginning a project on Tamil Hindu musicality in Singapore and Malaysia. His research has been funded by, amongst others, the Fulbright-Hays DDRA, the Mellon Foundation, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.