

## Kay Kaufman Shelemay

Ethnomusicologist

What in the world is an ethnomusicologist, you ask? Well, the field of ethnomusicology involves researching and comparing world musics, and then documenting them in books and tapes. Kay Kaufman Shelemay's exciting profession has taken her all around the world—from remote African villages to the Holy Land to concrete jungles like New York City. We caught up with Kay at Harvard University, where she heads the Ethnomusicology Department.

**Q: What were your earliest musical experiences?**

A: From when I was 2, I listened to recordings and sang everything from folk songs to lullabies. I grew up in Texas, so I learned a lot of local songs as well.

**Q: What is your educational background?**

A: I went to college at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where I received three degrees. I was a voice major at first, and then I got into cross-cultural music studies, which led to a doctorate in ethnomusicology.

**Q: As an ethnomusicologist, what was your first specialty?**

A: I've written a number of books on Ethiopian music; it's one of my very first loves. I spent several years living in Ethiopia, where I worked in the capital and in northern villages. Since I returned to the U.S., I've continued working with Ethiopians who live in North America. There was a revolution in Ethiopia in the 1970s, and hundreds of thousands of people moved

here, to cities like Los Angeles, Boston, and New York.

**Q: Where else has your work taken you?**

A: Israel—I spent some time in Jerusalem. Lately I've been working with a variety of cross-cultural musical traditions in North America. In Brooklyn, I've worked with Jews of Syrian descent. I've

tango dancing to karaoke to a variety of singing styles. Outside of the classroom, I'm less directly involved with performance—I mainly document and preserve music. I'm very active at the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center, which has the largest collection of American folk and ethnic music recordings.

**Q: Do other fields impact your musical research?**

A: I'm interested in the way neuroscience can shed light on musical performance and creativity. I'm also interested in what my field can bring to help scientists, so I've been working in a wonderful new program at Harvard called *Mind, Brain and Behavior*, which brings together faculty from across the university.

**Q: What are the most rewarding aspects of your career?**

A: I enjoy working with people in ways that help them devel-



researched in Mexico, and I've even done fieldwork in Juneau, Alaska.

**Q: What are your responsibilities at Harvard?**

A: Well, I started a program in ethnomusicology, so I've introduced a lot of cross-cultural musical studies. I've written a textbook called *Soundscapes*, I teach a number of classes, and I advise both graduate and undergraduate students.

**Q: Do you still perform?**

A: Only in my classes, where I teach my students everything from

op their intellectual and professional interests. I also like to expand knowledge of the many different musical traditions that are part of our increasingly complex musical landscape in North America.

**Q: Any advice to students?**

A: Think about ways in which music can open windows to other realms of experience. And remember: You can study music to *make* music and to *enjoy* music, but it also carries knowledge and information available nowhere else. 