I'm Steve Mencher for the Library of Congress with another one of our Music and the Brain podcasts. Our guest today is Robin Sylvan. He's a researcher on the spiritual and religious dimensions of music and Founder and Director of the Sacred Center in Oakland, California, author of Traces of the Spirit, The Religious Dimension Of Popular Music and Transformation, the Spiritual and Religious and Dimensions of Global Rave Culture. And here's where I'd like to start today, which is talking about you and I'd like you to feel free to bring up your work, your research, your passions into this discussion, but let's use you as a starting point and tell me how old you are for example.

Robin Sylvan: I am 51 years old.

Okay because that sort of places you in the middle of some kind of musical nexus when we start to talk about music.

Robin Sylvan: Okay.

I read that you have maintained a daily Buddhist sitting meditation practice for about 25 years.

Robin Sylvan: Yes, it's kind like part of my daily regimen of settling my mind and getting into a clear and grounded space before I begin the day, so that's been very important to me over the years.

Is this a particular branch of Buddhism?

Robin Sylvan: It's just a simple breathing practice in Tibetan tradition. It's called Shamatha but it's very similar to Zazen or it's just a very simple practice that's following your breath. Of course that sounds simpler than it is because the mind is constantly generating lots of stuff to distract you from that, but that's the essential nature of the practice.

Okay, and then I also read that there's a Jewish aspect to your religious practice as well, that you've had a Shabbat practice for, it says nearly 15 years and interested in Kabala and created and maintained your own daily trance practice for over a decade. Tell me about your, you know, daily practices and weekly practices.

Robin Sylvan: Well as you can tell I have kind of an eclectic mix of a lot of different things that I do. You know I was born and raised in a reformed Jewish household, which I would say was largely secular, meaning that there was no real sense of spirituality there, and so like a lot of others in my generation I looked further afield for entry ways into the world of spirit and Buddhism is one of the ways I found it. I found it through some Native American and Shamanic practices; pretty much anything that was exotic and foreign that wasn't my own culture was something that drew me. So it really wasn't until many years later that I found my way back into Judaism, which I'd had great resistance to, and the entry point really was the Kabalistic traditions, which I wasn't taught anything about growing up, which I found to be some of the richest and most beautiful, mystical traditions alongside, I would compare any in the world. And of course I live in the Bay area where we have a way of doing
things, alternative style and so in the Bay area there's a kind of a Jewish, I guess, movement would the right way to put it. It's called a renewal of Judaism where people are being a little bit more creative and kind of going back and taking pieces of the tradition that might have been lost and starting them again. That was my entry into Judaism, and then the trans part is more, you know, I've always had a strong connection to music growing up, strong experiences. I'm a singer and songwriter and guitarist so I've had strong experience that way, and that's what led me into doing my PhD work in this area, but for me I am very interested in these trance states that one can access through music and dance and my interest grows out of my own experiences with them, and so yes, somewhere along the line I started dancing to music on a daily basis and I didn't set out to create a formal practice but it kind of evolved into that over the years and it's kind of a case where there's a physical exercise component to it but there's also, it's also a place where I can access these ecstatic states on an ongoing basis, which I happen to believe is really good for your mental and psychological health as well.

>> Let's go back to your introductions to music. You said you were a guitar player as a youngster and I was interested to read that the guitar was sort of your entry point when you traveled, for instance, to West Africa into the religious experience there and making your connection between music and religion and the community as well in that case. But start me out with how you were introduced to music and how it sort of caught with you.

>> Robin Sylvan: Well my family has a long history of being very into music. My grandfather who was born and raised in Amsterdam was a classically trained pianist and for him he was extremely fastidious about his approach to it. If you were listening to music being played, you couldn't move, you couldn't make any sounds. He would go to the symphony with the sheet music and take notes on the performances, so it was kind of a double edged sword because he instilled this great love but at the same time it was so rigid and oppressive that you know we were also rebelling against it. My folks were very much lovers of classical music and still go to the symphony and opera as much as they can. So everyone in our family grew up with music, of course, myself and my brothers we branched out and rebelled in the ways that were available to us, so we grew up with rock and roll and I grew up with a lot of fusion jazz and great jazz music. I grew up in the Chicago area so I attended a lot of great concerts that way.

>> Was it in sort of an academic setting where the light went off and you started to make the connections between the music and the religious and spiritual experience or did it or was it the other way around that you were having these connections and say well, gosh if they're going to let me study this let me study it. How did that work?

>> Robin Sylvan: The sequence for me has always been experience first and then conceptualize about it to try to understand it second, so these experiences came first. I would say that a very influential article that set me on this path was by an essayist for the L.A. Weekly. I don't know if he's still writing for them, named Michel Ventura, and it was an
article called Hear That Long Snake Moan, and in this he sort of traces the roots of rock and roll back through R and B and blues, jazz, back through New Orleans and Congo Square and then basically back to Haiti and from there all the way back to West Africa. So the basic thrust of this is that these West African possession traditions, which I'll speak a little bit more about tonight, but essentially you have this religious complex where you have these drum ensembles, people dance to these songs, to these complex polyrhythms for long periods of time, go into these trance states and then while in these trance states they become possessed, which is to say that their personality checks out and the personality of the spirit or the deity, among the Yoruba this is called the Arusha, comes in and takes over their body, so I was just fascinated by this and basically what he was saying is we find traces of that still in rock and roll and some of the popular music that we hear today. So this was the kind of the ah ha experience for me where he began to identify the sense of experiences that I myself and many of the people who I knew had had and began to kind of show its lineage and show the mechanics of how that worked. Now I didn't go to graduate school to study for my PhD until I was in my 30's, so I had actually had my entire 20's to have this body of experiences, whether it was through drumming and chanting, whether it was through I was actually in a band, a rock and roll band for a few years. So I when I went to graduate school and got involved in religious studies as an academic discipline, I honestly, I didn't go in saying I was going to study this, it just occurred to me like this is what I already do. I'm already a student of music and religious experiences, now I'm going to try to go into it in a more formal way. Strangely no one had really been doing work of this kind. For people like myself and people that have had these experiences I think it's a fairly obvious thing. Music is something that induces these very powerful experiences, life changing experiences and they're clearly religious and spiritual in nature but strangely within the academic discipline of religious studies or any other discipline for that matter, no one was really examining this, so it was great in the sense that there was a niche there for me to do my thing but it was challenging in the sense that there were no other scholars doing this work, there were no methodology, there was no body of literature. Even my PhD committee couldn't really help me all that much, they could kind of suggest certain resources, so yes it's been an interesting process there to, you know, go into the academic side of things and really see it's kind of a [inaudible] there.

>> Now was there some push back from these same academic advisors when you said well, and I'm going to study the Grateful Dead and I'm going to study, you know, rock music and rap music and heavy metal music?

>> Robin Sylvan: Well I really thought there would be but you know the program I was in, which is University of California Santa Barbara is known for its eclecticism. There's not any one school of thought that predominates as in other university programs, so I could kind of slip between the cracks but I will give props to my mentor and PhD Chair, Charles Long, who was a great African American scholar who was at the University of Chicago for many years. One of the things that he passed onto me was this idea that when you're discussing popular religion as distinct from what we identify as, you know, quote formal religions like
Judaism, Christianity and so forth, it's the mode of transmission that's as important as the content and what he means by that is the mode of music being played, is it amplified, is it in a concert setting, all these kinds of things. He wanted me to be grounded in the African American traditions of music and I was more than happy to do that but once that was, you know, he was satisfied that I had done that he was really very supportive in me going into these other spheres.

>> That's fabulous. Now does it matter when you're studying these things, you started to talk about this just now, as how the music is experienced whether it's your grandfather saying, you know, you can't wriggle in the seat and you've got to listen and be silent to the end and then applaud politely, or if you're on a rave floor where you're spending the whole night jumping up and down, bumping into your friends and all of that. What's the difference in how music is experienced and how you think about music in those different settings?

>> Robin Sylvan: Well it's a great question because it relates to this current study that I'm involved in, and I'll be talking about that more at the lecture, but for the last four years, three of them formally funded, I've been involved in a study through the Templeton Advanced Research Program in collaboration with a brain scientist colleague of mine, Peter Genada [assumed spelling] at UC Davis Center for Mind and Brain, and basically it's the first systematic study of music and religious experience. Now the way I'm going to work back to your question here is you know we have to have, in order to do scientific experiments, which is nothing I've ever done before, I have no background in science whatsoever, you have to have a testable hypothesis and you have to have an experimental design so that you can sort of prove this. So some of the, and of course this is my colleagues area of expertise, but some of the things that he wanted to look for were or that spilled over into what I was trying to do with these interviews was people's level of participation in the music, and this is something that was already part of my work in the two books that I had done. In other words, it's one thing if you're passively listening to the music sitting rigidly in your seat, that's one type of experience, but what we were hypothesizing as a secondary hypothesis in this study is that the greater your level of participation, the more likely you are to have a powerful experience and the more likely that experience is to be amplified and intensified. So what do I mean by participation? I mean you gave a great example of it. I mean a rudimentary way of participation might be simply tapping your hand or your foot in rhythm to it. A more, you know, higher up on the scale would be getting up and actually dancing to it, singing along with it and of course if you're playing an instrument that's the ultimate way of participating because you are actually in the act of creating the music. So absolutely the experiential states are quite different. In other words, I would make the case that the more strongly you participate the more powerful your experience is likely to be. Now there's a whole other set of variables in there as well, which really have to do with how intensely you're moving your body and I'm going to talk about this is the lecture. There are two polar sides to a spectrum. One we could say is arousal where your systems are kind of ramped up and you're breathing heavily and your heart rate is going and so on and so forth. There's the other side of it which is the quiescence side which is much more like a
meditative side of things. So those are two variables that you can, you know, locate yourself on in terms of experiences as well, so those are different ways of talking about the experiential states which are, you know, really quite different in a lot of cases.

>> It seems to me that this research is going to make quite a splash when you guys are ready to let folks know about it, so while I have you talking about it can you give me a preview, let me in on some of the things you're going to be telling about?

>> Robin Sylvan: Well I mean that is a key theme right there. I was involved in doing this kind of research, you know, long before I was aware of any brain science side of things whatsoever and one of the challenges I think in being a religious study scholar who focuses on religious experience is either you've had those experiences and you know they're real or you haven't had those experiences and you're kind of on the outside looking in, there's kind of a glass barrier between you and it, and it's very easy to be skeptical about that. So I've encountered more than my share of skeptical people in my lifetime who think that well that's just simply a figment of your imagination or whatever it is they might say. So in 2004 I was forwarded an email from a friend who basically was an article about research being done by some brain scientists at McGill University in Montreal [inaudible], I'll give them their due, and it was about the researching the phenomenon of musically induced chills. That's that state that you get into where you're so profoundly moved by a piece of music that you get chills going up and down your spine, and they just found all this cool stuff that really verified the work that I'd been doing from a religious studies perspective, but it gave that more hard scientific verification and they could show with the brain scans which show you where the blood flows that the blood flows to these certain clusters, that it integrates different parts of the brain, you know, these are clusters that are similar to ones that light up when you have sex or you eat chocolate or things of this nature. They found that the brain prunes these neural circuits to maximize these experiences. So there was just a whole bunch of-- which basically means that when you have subsequent times listening to that music that you'll go back to that state much more quickly and much more effectively. So basically what they found was they were able to start verifying things that I already knew was the case from my own experiences and people's firsthand accounts, now all of a sudden we have this kind of brain science to verify. I started, you know, kind of devouring the literature in this area and I was excited to find out that there was this huge growing body of work being done in this area, which I'm sure you're aware of since you guys are doing this lecture series, and this is kind of what led me to--I mean essentially what happened was through my non-profit organization, the Sacred Center, I was decided to put on a concert on music and spirituality and I thought God, wouldn't it be great to have a brain scientist to come and explain some of this stuff. And so this search for an appropriate brain scientist led me to Peter Genada at the University of California Center for Mind and Brain, which was ironic because at the time I actually was doing adjunct teaching at the University of California at Davis and I had no idea they had one of the major centers in the country doing this kind of research. So he and I met in person, we had a great connection, I don't think he'll appreciate me
telling you this but we found out we were both former dead heads so that was a bond right there. He came to the conference and I just kept thinking my God this guy has keys to state of the art multi-million dollar brain imaging equipment and as I said, you know, this area is kind of a blank slate so I really felt like God I just kept thinking about all the things that we could do with that equipment. And, you know, I didn't know if he would be willing to work with me or anything like that, and I thought this might come down the pike maybe a few years from now or something like that. So a few weeks later I get a postcard in the mail, it's from something called the Metanexus Institute. I had no idea who they were, how I got on their mailing list, I've never received anything from them in the mail since that time either so I don't know, but basically they were soliciting proposals for four one million dollar grants in science and spirituality and the light just went off over my head and I thought maybe this is the opportunity. So I contacted Peter and proposed that we put a proposal together for a study on music and religious experience and to my surprise he agreed to do this, and, you know, I'm going to sort of fast forward past, you know, nine months of really hard work putting this proposal together and a lot of challenges, but we basically out of 132 applicants we received funding for this grant and so you know that was incredibly exciting, and then right behind that it was terrifying because then we actually had to do all the things that we said we're going to do.

>> Let me finish by having you educate me a little bit because I wish, one of the great lacks in my own musical education is that I've never been to a rave.

>> Robin Sylvan: Okay.

>> And I know you've studied raves extensively so tell me, again that's sort of embarrassing, what, I have an idea what a rave is but set the scene for me and then let's finish on telling me why raves and the trance that happens in raves are another kind of key building block in the kinds of things you're studying and what you've learned.

>> Robin Sylvan: You know what we call the rave scene started in England back in 1987 and 1988. They had a kind of explosion that was an echo of the summer of love from the 60's in the San Francisco area and they had their summer of love, and basically this was kind of a conjunction of a style of electronic dance music called house music coming to their shores and then also the drug Ecstasy coming to their shores that would be MDMA, and there was this conjunction of these two components and basically because it's an amphetamine based drug people found that they were able to have energy to stay up all night. Now if you've heard electronic dance music it's a very up tempo music, it has a very strong hypnotic rhythm that goes and basically it's DJ mixed which means that they move seamlessly from track to track and really you'd be hard pressed to find where one song ends and the next begins, and so the beat is continuous for 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14 hours. Now if you just dance to that without doing drugs you're going to enter into an altered state of consciousness but obviously this drug also has, one of the effects is that it creates kind of this sense of emotional connection and feeling loving of everyone who's around you, and so it was an incredible combination and it created
this whole culture around these events that would go all night long. Now I should say for those of you who are concerned about the drug side of things, one of the interesting things is that you can then access these states simply by dancing to the music later on and this is something that sort of came out in a lot of the interviews, and then interestingly it sort of came to the United States in the early 90's and sort of took hold. Now I was introduced to it, I mean I heard about it for many years, I was introduced to it in 96 and 97 when I moved to the Bay area to conduct research for my dissertation and you know as I'm sure you know the Bay area has always had this tradition of alternative spirituality and so it had a very distinctive Bay area flavor and what I mean by that was the first one that I went to that I would consider to be really an underground rave, not necessarily a big commercial thing where you spend a lot of money and there's 10,000 people there, an underground event actually had an opening ceremony where they sanctified the space and they wanted to make it safe and sacred for everybody there, and they had alters where people would focus their attention, and basically it was set up as a kind of sacred ritual, which was perfect for me because these were things that I was involved in in my own life. And so what that did by creating that context was that it took that very powerful experience and it highlighted the spiritual and sacred elements of it and it brought them to the floor and it said that these are the things that we value the most that we're trying to focus on here. Now I should add the caveat that, you know, not all raves or electronic dance music events by any stretch of the imagination have this as the primary focus. I was fortunate that I was introduced to it through people who I knew in the Bay area and so it's something that I myself became involved in because I loved the music and I found that I could, you know, these were states on the dance floor that I had had glimpses of or tastes of, but there was something about this particular context where you could just get there and stay there and deepen and over long periods of time. And like the kind of 60's psychedelic counterculture, it also had a very peace and love type of vibe, so people were really trying to do things to take this feeling state and this feeling of connection, you know, to move it beyond just the dance floor in these events and create structures where they could have that in their day to day lives. So for example one of the groups that whose events I go to is called the Rhythms Society and they've actually had their events in a church and they have incorporated as a non-profit religious organization and so forth, so you know some of them have really taken the ball and run with it in terms of really being an ongoing spiritual community.

>> So I think we're going to have to leave it there. I want to thank you Robin Sylvan, researcher on spiritual and religious dimensions of music and founder and director of the Sacred Center in Oakland California. I'm Steve Mencher for the Library of Congress and this has been another of our Music and the Brain podcasts. Thanks so much Robin.

>> Robin Sylvan: You're welcome.