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Alan Feinstein - Interview with Mark Slobin

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Mark Slobin: I've been having a good time talking to alumni from all over the world, and somebody said, well, you also should talk to Americans that work in those countries, you know, not just people from there. So that puts you on the list, of course. So it's great to talk. So, when were you actually at Wesleyan?

Alan Feinstein: I was an undergraduate at Wesleyan from '66 to '70, and was in the graduate program from '78 to '80.

MS: Oh, so that's over a long stretch...I forgot you were an undergrad. So you saw the program arrive then, you were there.

AF: That's true; those were the Bob Brown years.

MS: Oh good. So you can talk about that, because it's nice to get some firsthand account. There are not many people left, and there's not much down about this arrival. Higgins is gone, Dick Winslow is still alive at 98.

AF: Yes, you know, I asked this student of yours, Maho, I asked her if she knew Dick Winslow and she didn't know the name at all, I thought that was too bad.

MS: You are kidding! We've been through that history, she's supposed to know that! I put that in my book. Did you ever see my book? I wrote a little book on Wesleyan called *Music at Wesleyan: From Glee Club to Gamelan*. It came out in 2010. It's anecdotes and beautiful pictures, and it goes back to the 19th century origins of music at Wesleyan and the transitions with pictures of everybody. It's kind of a fun little thing I just did for the fun of it. So, they are all supposed to know the history of the program.

AF: Well, I was there when, well, I don't know because we need a beginning. Early '60s I suppose. David McAllester. I'm not sure when Bob arrived at Wesleyan.

MS: '62, I think. We usually date the program from '63 when he brought Ranga on, as the first artist. So what was it like? How did you get to Wesleyan in the first place?

AF: Well, I wasn't a music major, I was in the College of Letters, and I went to France in '68. Those were very exciting years, in the spring of '68 I was in Paris. But the gamelan, as an undergraduate, I guess I was a freshman, I remember a concert at the McConaughy dining hall, that no longer exists. The visiting artist at the time was Prawotosaputro, and Hardjo Susilo was there and Ben Suharto and his sister, and I just saw the most extraordinary thing. It was my first exposure to gamelan. That was what caught me at that time, so I joined the group.

MS: Ok, that was in '66 or something, you mean?

AF: Right. I think I joined in '67. And when I came back I studied Indian music with Dagar Sahab. As they say, youth is wasted on the young! I forget the incredible people that I studied with. I was incredibly lucky. People of that caliber teaching idiots like me and my cohorts. But yeah, so that's where I started. I never was a music major as an undergraduate. I finished in the COL.

MS: Yeah. Well, that was quite a place in those days.

AF: It was extraordinary. Bob had these wild curry concerts out in the farm. I went to a few of those and got to know him and that whole circus. And when I graduated, I joined the circus; you know, Bob left as I was graduating and a lot of us went along with him, literally helped him move gamelans to L.A. for the beginning of CalArts. So we were there at the beginning of CalArts, which was quite an exciting time there, too.

MS: Oh sure. And then you decided to come back for graduate work.

AF: That's right, and then something called the American Society for Eastern Arts that allowed a group of us, in 1971, the year following my graduation, to go to Indonesia, and many of those people are still involved in Indonesia or gamelan in some way, so that influenced quite a lot of people. Philip Yampolsky, Jody Diamond, Charlemagne Palestine... a lot of Wesleyan names.

MS: Was it Ed Van Ness?

AF: Ed Van Ness was not in that group, but he later went to Indonesia and he's still in Indonesia. Have you interviewed him?

MS: No.

AF: He is in Jakarta. He conducts an orchestra there.

MS: Amazing!

AF: Yes, It's amazing, and his wife... he later came to marry Sita.

MS: Yes, I remember her, yes. Because those people were there when I came in '71, I saw them and yes, they were wonderful.

AF: Anyway, so, having been through Indonesia, through that, I realized how little I knew about the place, and realized that, eventually, after coming back and living and working in San Francisco—Los Angeles first, then the Bay area—I decided to go to Wesleyan, go back to Wesleyan for the M.A. So I went in '78, yeah. But then I switched over to Michigan, so I left.

MS: Yes, I remember you. Everybody was sorry to see you go. So then, of course, you worked with Sumarsam. by then he had done his M.A.

AF: That's right. Sumarsam became my teacher at Wesleyan. I'm not sure that Harjito had come by then.

MS: I think for his first round, maybe he was there on his first round, and then he left and came back. I'm forgetting the chronology, too.

AF: Yeah, me too. I get confused.

MS: So what was it like being a grad student after being an undergrad?

AF: Oh, it was great and Wesleyan was just as wonderful as a graduate student as it had been as an undergrad. And especially my fellow students, Ed Herbst, and...I don't know, just a wonderful group of people to be working with and studying with there at the time. Tom Ross, Jody Cormack, and...maybe Tom had already left, but...a lot of really interesting, talented people.

MS: So, did you have the feeling the program was a little more subtle than it was under Bob Brown? I mean, the quality or the lifestyle, so to speak, must have been a little different, right?

AF: Yeah, and there was a raging controversy, I suppose, about the Wesleyan model, as opposed to some of the others. I think there was an outside evaluation of the program right around that time, and I know, a number of us were, I don't know...involved in criticizing what the outside evaluators had to say. Because they—it was Bruno Nettl, and I'm trying to remember, somebody who was at Harvard at the time—Bruno will remember! Criticizing, yeah, mainly about Brown's sort of model of people learning musics firsthand, and that it wasn't, I don't know, academic enough, or it wasn't rigorous in the ways other programs in ethnomusicology were. So I don't think it was entirely fair, and I'm probably not giving that a fair...

MS: Well, I thought that review was way back. I thought that review would've been when you were an undergrad. Or, I don't know, maybe I'm mixing up the reviews. There was an early one that said, you know, "Nobody in this program has a Ph.D.," and then they hired me after that, in '71. That was an earlier critique. I don't think by the late '70s, I don't think anybody would've said that as much.

AF: Maybe I am conflating things, but I do remember that being in the air, the controversy still being there. Maybe it was still fallout.

MS: That's interesting. So there were no more kind of curry concerts and circus going on though, when...

AF: Yeah, it wasn't quite as colorful. That was the beginning of the Center for the Arts, and those magnificent buildings, and Jon Higgins was the director, and he was very rigorous, so the program was quite exciting, even without Bob. Maybe because he wasn't there, I don't know. The way things worked with Bob is, you know, he's very charismatic and he draws you in, but then always disappoints in some way. He influenced my life in a very positive way. I think many people have similar stories about being disappointed by Bob in the end.

MS: It seems to be a consensus, I mean, I never felt it personally because he was gone by the time I came, but yeah, that seems to be the consensus opinion. So outside of gamelan, did you study other musics? Well, you did India, you said, in the old days.

AF: I did India as an undergrad. I was very close to Ranga and Viswa, but I didn't study with them as a graduate student. I don't think I had time. I was in the gagaku group that formed when Togi Sensei came from Japan.

MS: Oh, I don't remember we had gagaku.

AF: That was fantastic. That was unbelievable. A great experience. And Tom Ross was there, because he was playing hichiriki. Alex Dea was also there. He's somebody else who's around sometimes. He floats around. He's in Indonesia now. He moves around.

MS: Yeah, he has this way of never quite settling, but he's always engaged with gamelan in some way.

AF: Absolutely, and there's something wonderful about Alex in what he has done for our teachers. He was incredibly, and remains, very devoted to our teachers through their old age and when they're ill and sick, and when they, you know, people sort of forgot about them, they were home in bed or in the hospital, he took care of them. And that's with so many of the people that we knew. Not only once-visiting artists, but older Japanese musicians that we were lucky enough to study with. He gathered—he lived with Pak Cokro and he gathered so much material about him. He's got this book that he's going to, he's threatened to self-publish, because I don't think anyone else would publish it. It deserves to be seen, it's an incredible amount of material. You know, Alex is someone you may talk to also.

MS: Yeah, I don't know if I have his e-mail either. I should probably just get on Facebook and find these people.

AF: Alex is not on Facebook, but I'll send you his e-mail.

MS: Ok, great! I can see this project is going to extend a little longer than I thought.

AF: How is the Archives, by the way?

MS: It's flourishing, I mean, we keep getting new stuff and it's really a major place. The problem is the limitation on staff and funding to digitize stuff to preserve them and, you know. Alec McLane is wonderful, the librarian. He plays the erhu he goes to China all the time, he's in the gamelan all the time. You don't expect this from a music librarian. He's very engaged and yeah, it's a serious place.

AF: That's terrific. I donated some recordings way back when. I hope they are in good hands. I assume they are.

MS: Yeah, it's in good shape. It's just getting enough money to process all of it and get it out there. Because, you know, it's a small institution without special funding for that. So, let's see. You were there twice and there was a kind of an interesting shift in atmosphere, but a continuity in a certain kind of ethos or spirit about the world music project.

AF: That's right, and performance was still quite central. The other teacher who was there was Pak Kanto. He was there during my time.

MS: Yeah, he was very good, wasn't he? So, you are in touch with—you are sort of the spider in the web in a way. I mean, you are in touch with everybody at the heart of all this in some way.

AF: I moved around in Asia over the years, so it's good to come back to Indonesia. Though today there was, I don't know if you heard about this ...

MS: Yes, there was a bombing...

AF: One wonders, some days, if we made the right decision to come back. Yeah, it is good to be back, yeah, I'm in touch with a lot of people from those Wesleyan years and from the many other years I spent wandering around.

MS: That's...you really experienced...so, what would you say about the overall impact of Wesleyan as a place in Indonesia or in South East Asia in general, I mean, what is the profile, in a sense, over these many decades?

AF: I think, you know, I don't know if I can add it up completely. Certainly it's affected the lives of so many people who have been through the world music program specifically, but also Wesleyan generally. I've met a lot of people who have come from Wesleyan. I met the president a couple of years ago at an alumni event in Bangkok. Mike Roth, just a delightful guy, and from my era.

MS: Yeah, that's right, he was there when you were there.

AF: So we shared a lot of stories about...he was in CSS. It affected a lot of people and people went out to do lots of really interesting things. Andy Sutton, for instance, he's another one. He improved the program. He's now in Hawaii, he's a Dean at the...Anyway, South East Asia. I mostly know the world music people who are connected to India or Indonesia, but I think there are quite a few also, you know...

MS: Yeah, there's Sooi-beng Tan in Malaysia.

AF: And Malaysia. They're very important, I mean, in their context, and influential.

MS: What do you think the impact is though? Is it sort of philosophical? Or is it just kind of cosmopolitanism that they've got there? Or, you know, if you could distill it.

AF: That's a good question, I mean, maybe it's the very thing that Wesleyan was criticized for. We were given this opportunity to interact with remarkable people representing different musical cultures in an important way. Maybe not everyone, and maybe not for all. Not everyone is equipped with the same. But I do think it's still a very strong part of the Wesleyan that I knew, and I think it continues. Yet, there's a very strong academic, theoretical, historical part to the program as well. My only beef with that sort of argument that had surfaced way back when.

MS: Yeah, and the opportunity for local people to develop their own approaches, like Sumarsam's surprising M.A. thesis, you know, could probably...it only happens in Wesleyan.

AF: That's right. Now, people like Garfias took a very different approach, but they also came up...like Bob came up out of UCLA and Mantle Hood's school, but he felt no one should stay longer than a semester or a year, and that it's wrong for the artist to settle and develop, put down roots. I don't know if he still holds to that, but it's true that he was much more in favor of people getting to know variety of traditions and not focusing too much on one or two, which was maybe inevitable in the Wesleyan music model.

MS: Yeah, we had a different philosophy. I mean, I remember Sumarsam came to us and said, “Do you think I can do this M.A.?” and we said, “Sure! If you want to develop your thinking, that’s nice!” So that was the attitude. And Viswa, of course, did his dissertation too.

AF: Actually, when you think about it, the American—maybe expanding this slightly—American university programs taking in non-Western students, graduate students, who were masters, people like Viswa, has had a profound effect also. I think that comes out of the ’60s and ’70s, and it’s not just Wesleyan, but Wesleyan took in some remarkable people who did terrific degrees and went back to their, terrific work, and went back to their own countries. So I think the American university system, or ethnomusicology’s internationalization of it, has had a profound effect. It doesn’t really answer your question.

MS: No, that is the question!

AF: I mean, you studied Afghanistan and the changes and awful things that happened in Afghanistan, but were opportunities open for people from there to come and study?

MS: No, never. There was never anybody who had the English or the academic skills from there to come over. It’s really too bad, it would’ve been nice. It would’ve been very nice. We did have a Pakistani lately though. We had the first ever Pakistani grad student. Who really is very bright and did very nice work, but now he’s back and there’s nothing for him to do in Pakistan. There’s no interest at all. But we did cover that country, so we add to the list of places that we try to engage, but not always work. Well that’s sort of the basic outline, the kind of things I’m interested in.

AF: Well, I’m excited to see people like Maho coming out.

MS: Maho, she’s pretty good, right?

AF: Unfortunately she’s having a lot of trouble at the moment, the research climate, let’s put it that way, is not exactly friendly to foreigners, which is strange. One would think that in the post-Suharto... I’m a bit surprised coming back to Indonesia after 10 years in Thailand and Japan, that things haven’t really changed; the military, the apparatus is still very much involved, making decisions they shouldn’t have any say in, like who gets to do research. And then she was told, in the last couple of days: Ok, you can do research, but you can’t make recordings. What’s an ethnomusicologist supposed to do without making recordings? Then they said: Ok, you can make recordings, but you have to sign an intellectual property agreement, promising not to exploit this commercially. Well just sign it... you are not going to sell these things anyway. I hope if she gets to stay in, she’s not harassed too much more. We are trying to help her.

MS: Yes, I know you are. She’s very determined and very dedicated to those people there, and the work she did bringing them to Wesleyan; that was a real Wesleyan moment. She brought all these young women over and it was... gave them a tour, they set up the tour for them, and just opened these people’s minds completely, and she was so good as an ambassador.

AF: Terrific, terrific spirit. And Ed Herbst was a Fulbright who came back to Indonesia last year with all these 78 recordings and other old recordings and video things that he gave back to Indonesia. I thought that’s also a Wesleyan spirit thing, too. It was quite wonderful to do.

MS: Yes, that's an extraordinary project.

AF: I think the Wesleyan influence is certainly there.

MS: Well, it's great to talk, glad to see you are still out there doing all this really good work. It's important.

AF: I might say, that I was talking fondly of you and your class, classes that I took with you. I learned a lot. You were a wonderful teacher. I'm sure you still are, but you deserve a break, I guess.

MS: Yeah, I guess so. There's going to be a nice symposium for my retirement, a lot of old alums are coming back in April, so it will be a nice send-off.

AF: Wish I could be there.

MS: Yeah, thanks, thanks.

AF: I'll try to track down the e-mails for these people, and maybe send them a message saying you are trying to reach them, or you've already tried but haven't succeeded.

MS: I don't know if they all have Skype, which, of course, is the easiest way, because there's this little recorder I attach to this and just push the button and records it. It's very convenient. It's hard to do on the phone.

AF: Right. Most people have Skype!

MS: Great, thanks man, take care.

AF: Thank you for calling, thanks a lot, take care. Bye bye.