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Mladen Milicevic - Interview with Mark Slobin

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Mark Slobin: Great to see you, right!

Mladen Milicevic: Good to see you!

MS: It's been a long time.

MM: You look great!

MS: Yeah, well here I am in New York, you know. I've moved down to my little place here. I'm retiring in June.

MM: Oh, ok.

MS: So.

MM: So enjoy your retirement!

MS: So yeah, just sort of asking people how they got to Wesleyan and why, and what the experience was like being there, in your period. What year did you come?

MM: 86.

MS: 86, ok.

MM: 30 years ago, can you believe that?

MS: Only 30? I mean, big deal, right. [both laugh]

MM: It was very exciting, and, I mean, things have changed, you know, tremendously, everywhere. But I still keep in touch with, you know, several people due to Facebook.

MS: Who are you in touch with?

MM: Well, ok, I'm in very close connection with Doug Kahn.

MS: Ok, uh huh, yeah.

MM: He's right now in Australia at New South Wales.

MS: Right.

MM: And, uh, but he's been here, all over the place. He married an Australian woman.

MS: Oh, I see.

MM: So he figured out that it is better for them to retire down there because social services are much better down there. And so they moved couple years ago, and he got really nice situation. So they're there. But we, you know, email back and forth, and I think he's writing something. Some book about Alvin, or something. Because he asked me like these very specific questions, like, "Do you remember in Aspen in 1987 at that concert, we were sitting and it was Earle Brown," and like, which piece we were listening to? I mean, it's just like very specific things that are. Chris Schiff is up Maine, working in the library.

MS: Oh, yeah, I think I heard that, yeah.

MM: Yeah, I saw, actually, lots of people at Alvin's 80th birthday concert.

MS: Yeah, that was a wonderful event.

MM: Yeah. But I'm kind of, on Facebook I'm in touch with Paul Austerlitz.

MS: Ok, yeah.

MM: Even Michael Nixon, who's in South Africa, he had some students contact me asking, you know, questions. Jay Pillay, remember, Dan Wolf in Germany.

MS: Yeah, I talked to Dan. I talked to Michael Nixon, in this round.

MM: Yeah, right, of course, Ljerka.

MS: Ljerka, I saw. I went down there and visited her in, uh.

MM: In Nashville.

MS: In Nashville. That was really nice. We had a nice visit.

MM: I meet Sumarsam at some conference, but must be like 10 years ago or something.

MS: Oh, ok!

MM: In Hawaii. So he was there. I guess that's pretty much it.

MS: That's a pretty good list. I mean, that's. That was an interesting period. How did you get to Wesleyan in the first place?

MM: Well, I mean, it was, of course it was Ljerka was instrumental in terms of, you know, telling me why this is great. And then I met you in Sarajevo. So that was kind of—I applied several places. I don't remember which places, and I think I got accepted three, but of course Wesleyan, knowing you, knowing Ljerka, world music program, you know, I play all these folk instruments from Bosnia. So that was appealing. And then Alvin, being very experimental, and Cage, being associated with Wesleyan. It was just like, nothing could beat it.

And you know, that's, you know the main reason I came. And of course, I mean, I was given a stipend. It was just great. Imagine, I got there and probably within couple weeks, within couple weeks I had, Phil Glass had a concert. And I was at the concert and after that there was party at Alvin's, like a reception. Phil was there. I mean, to me, that was just (unintelligible). I mean, put in that perspective. But also there's one thing that I'll never forget. It was the first Thanksgiving, when you invited all international students to your place because, you know, we didn't know what Thanksgiving is, and we didn't have a place to go.

MS: Right.

MM: So it was, you know, remember Wu Wenguang?

MS: Yes.

MM: You know, I think there was Kwan, you know the Cambodian [Sam-ang Sam]. Mauly Purba, the percussionist from Malaysia. Jay Pillay. Who else? There were a whole bunch of people from around the world. We all came to your place. It was first Thanksgiving, real nice, you know. That was like the first impressions.

MS: They're pretty nice.

MM: It was great. And then I got this thing, I got accepted to Aspen, you know, and then Alvin managed to give me summer stipend for that. So Wesleyan supported me. I didn't know how much. When I saw the amount of money they give, I was just like, I couldn't believe it! I mean, I got the stipend, but basically Wesleyan paid for everything.

MS: Really! Oh that's great.

MM: It was some kind, I don't know what kind of deal he pulled. And it was like, I don't know, twenty-five hundred dollars back then.

MS: Wow, that's a lot of money.

MM: It was like lots of money! And I was just, it tells you how naive I was. So I got in the car and then I'm driving across the country. It took ten days to get there, just discovering America. But I didn't know the prices of anything. So like for example I thought that there would be like unbelievably expensive for me to sleep in a hotel. So I couldn't have a concept of, you know, like, Motel 6 or something. So I slept in a sleeping bag in the car! [both laugh] You know, just because I had no idea that I could actually afford it! [both laugh] It wasn't out of my reach. But I was so, you know, uninformed and unequipped to be in America. So it's like an adventure. But it was cool. But I got here, and Aspen played an important role. And I think that would have never happened. Alvin did, I think Alvin even showed me this. You know how they have pamphlets.

So he showed, he said, “Oh, how about this?” And then I looked at it and said, “Yeah, but how am I gonna go?” and he said, “Just apply.” So I applied, they accepted me, and then Alvin pushed and I had eight year run with Aspen.

MS: Eight years!

MM: Yeah. Because they gave me, after first year, they gave me scholarship immediately.

MS: Amazing.

MM: And so I was assistant to Michael Czajkowski.

MS: Really!

MM: Who was running electronic music studio. So every summer I would go, and Aspen Music Festival, from then on, covered all the expenses. You know, me getting there, room and board and everything, and you know, small stipend. So first I was assistant, then I was even, I got one or two years of faculty.

That was towards the end. But through Aspen, I’ve seen awful lot of stuff that was different than Wesleyan. So I got to see all these, you know, Pulitzer-Prize winning composers, Jacob Druckman, Bernard Rands, you know that type of people. But Earle Brown was there, there was like international composers. Lots of people, you know, came to that. And of course they all gave talks.

So it was just great to be exposed to all these things out there. And then, one year I met Chris Schiff and Doug Kahn, they came. We had, you know, good time, Kronos string quartet played. But none of that would have happened if Alvin didn’t just, push, he pushed it from the inception. And it was great. So I think it completely shaped my life in some way, if you want. If he didn’t do that, you know, who knows?

So there are all these serendipitous moments that you never know, like, you know you run into somebody, and just, your life takes different direction.

MS: Yeah, yeah, well. It’s true, we do try to support the students. It’s so great when it pays off.

MM: Well, yeah, it was just, you know, great. And you know what, they have, they are not doing this anymore, it’s Jeanine Basinger, did she retire or something?

MS: No, she’s turning 80 and she still isn’t retired.

MM: Yeah, but see, she used to come here to LA, I think for a good ten years.

MS: Right.

MM: And, it was a kind of like fundraiser, but she would get in touch with all the Wesleyan students that are in the film industry.

MS: Which is pretty impressive.

MM: And everybody would come and, you know, talk, “Oh, Jeanine!” and such. It was a sizeable crowd of Wesleyan grads. And then they have all these—you know, I met the president, he came here. So there are like all these alumni events that I come to. It’s just interesting to connect with Wesleyan people. And, do you know—I don’t know if you play with electronic gadgets that much, but Wesleyan has one of the best things that they developed which is Wesleyan alumni around the world, there’s an app, if you put it on iPhone or iPod, you just click on your location and it shows you where people live.

MS: Oh, no kidding.

MM: So in Istanbul, I click on it and it shows me Wesleyan grads, their names and addresses and phone numbers. Like, wherever you go, just—get that. Unbelievable what they did. And it’s really good to, you know, to connect with alums, you know, and I run into all kinds of alums here. And you know, some bonding of people who graduated, you know, long long time ago. And that was really something because I took intro to film course. I’m not sure if you’re aware of that, but I took, two semesters, I took classes in the film department, as electives. I made experimental films.

MS: Oh yeah, I remember seeing that work. But yeah.

MM: Yeah. So I did that. That was my connection with Jeanine. And with that side of Wesleyan. Yeah, so that’s the, that’s kind of my, still, connection. And I read, they send me this alumni newsletter and things like that. So I read that, and you know. So, it’s nice to follow what’s going on.

MS: It’s still there. Did you do, well did you do world music stuff when you were a student, too?

MM: Well, I mean I was composition with Alvin, but I participated in all kinds of world music, you know. I played all those instruments of mine, and, you know, I mean it was like very close connection. I did not have time, like, to take classes—I didn’t take a class in gamelan. But I was just dealing with it in an indirect way. You know. So.

MS: Because it counts. Yeah. Did you, you were there for the Cage Festival?

MM: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

MS: That’s right.

MM: That was the big thing. You know what? I’m the only one who has those tapes.

MS: You do? Really?

MM: Videotapes!

MS: What are you doing with them? [laughs]

MM: Well, but see I have to digitize them and share—I gave some of the stuff to, uh, to Chris Schiff, but I, I have to digitize them. But this is what happened. You know, remember Real Art Ways?

MS: Yeah.

MM: Ok. So they did the videos. Just covered the whole thing. And I made, back then I made copies of that, just for myself. And then they lost the tapes!

MS: Oh, no kidding.

MM: So like, nobody can get—and I have, all those tapes, you know, Cage, and Alvin, and Christian Wolff, you know, all that stuff, it's on VHS! I have to digitize the whole thing.

MS: Well, yeah, you should get to it, usually—you better get to it! And we can put it in the archives. Because our archive is really quite good, and functions very well. So you could just pass it on to Alec McLane, who runs the archives.

MM: See, but I, there was another one that I made the video, I think that was 1988 or something, or maybe '89. Alvin had his own, in the gallery, he had his own installations.

MS: Right, right, yeah I remember that.

MM: Just Alvin's installations. And I came, I lived in New York at that time, and I came with video, VHS video camera, and shot all that. And made like a little, not documentary in terms of, nobody talks about it, but just like covers what took place. So I brought that up, actually, to Alvin's and gave one to him. it's a DVD. And I gave it to, Ron Kuivila probably has that. And what was this woman that replaced Alvin?

MS: Paula, right.

MM: See, I think I even sent one to her.

MS: Oh yeah, Paula's great, she's just really dynamic.

MM: So I have that, yeah. I'm gonna dig out all these things and just digitize them and then send them.

MS: Yeah, yeah. The Cage Fest would be great, because that was one of the real high points at Wesleyan. One of the best events.

MM: Oh, yeah, yeah, it was great. If I have pictures—actually, see, what I’m gonna do, I’m going to scan all those pictures, because I have pictures of students preparing Rozart Mix.

MS: Oh, nice.

MM: So we were—I mean it took months. So Alvin would make these pizza parties at his place. It would be like a whole bunch of students come, and I was teaching then a class with undergrads, so they would all come and be cutting and splicing, making these loops, and, uh, you know preparations for that. So I have them on photographs, but actually I should probably scan those. And, you know, just share. A whole bunch of photographs from the Wesleyan period. Yeah, yeah, so I should probably do that. But you know how it is, you never get time. [laughs]

MS: I know, you never get time. Well, yeah, that would be a nice thing to do. Well, that’s great to hear about all that. It’s really nice that you have a live connection, and you have an archive too.

MM: Yeah, Wesleyan, it made, it was a perfect thing at the time. Back then, just go there and do what I did, the whole immersion into world music, you know, change—still, I’m involved indirectly. Like for example, right now, this moment, I’m teaching the basic class in acoustics for recording arts students. And you know, they’re gonna record rock, pop, and stuff like that. But I’m using examples of all these, ethnic instruments. [laughs] So when I talk about an instrument that has a bow, it’s not the violin, it’s erhu [both laugh]. I talk about harp, it’s kora [still laughing]. I’m showing them all these ethnic instruments and talk about it, you know.

MS: That’s great.

MM: I do a lot of that through different perspectives. See, I have a class, let me tell you where I’m kind of at right now. My main interest is neuroscience and music.

MS: Ok, oh, that’s very big, right.

MM: So I teach, I developed a class, it’s call “How Music Rocks and Rolls.” Of course, the title has alluring quality in it. It’s offered in the core, and it counts in the category of “understanding human behavior.” So students, instead of taking Psychology 101, take the class. Instead of Sociology 101, they take that class. Unbelievably popular. So everything about how brain processes music and all that, and then we move onto why Taylor Swift has a hit, and why people react certain way, and why. What’s going on in the brain, so the people react to the, you know, pop song structure a certain way, and expectations, and all kinds of stuff. An awful lot of research done there. And these books, you know, you probably know, Daniel Levitin. So that’s kind of where I’m at in a way. Looking into the brain, what’s going on, how do we make sense of, you know, music.

And when I was in South Carolina I started semiology, you know, music in a general sense, how do we make sense of anything. So it’s all geared towards what’s going on in the brain.

So that's kind—you never know in life. You encounter something and you go that way. [laughs] Like if somebody told me at Wesleyan, you know, 30 years ago, that I would, you know, be doing this, come on!

MS: Neuroscience, right! Well, things move on. And it's very hot, such a hot area now.

MM: Every day, like, the other day, couple of days ago, I read, it was just an article I think in New York Times, that they actually found a region in auditory cortex that only responds to music.

MS: Right, I saw that, yeah.

MM: It's like, amazing that the brain can actually differentiate on such a basic level.

MS: Right.

MM: Because the signal comes in, auditory signal, it's just like nerve impulses, and the brain can differentiate and say, "Oh, let's go this route, it's a language." Or it has these—now imagine how basic the structures must be for the brain to decide it's music. Regardless what music. I mean, you play whatever from Papua New Guinea, you've never heard this but the brain would register it and say, "Oh, it doesn't fall into the category of language."

It's just, every year there are new discoveries and new things. They're very exciting, and enjoyable! [laughs]

MS: Well, right! It all goes back to Alvin with his brain waves, right, right.

MM: Absolutely! He's still kicking around and doing things?

MS: He is, he is. I just talked to him. He keeps saying, "I have to stop doing this, you know, I'm tired," and then he takes the next gig anyway. Yeah, I'm gonna see him in a few days. He's playing here with this rock band called Yo La Tengo. They wanted to do a piece of his, so he's doing that at Merkin Hall here next week.

MM: Oh my god.

MS: So that's going to get a lot of interest with young people, right. So he said, "Well, what can I do, I can just take these gigs, they come up," you know. [both laugh]. He's 85, right.

MM: Yeah, traveling at that age—

MS: I know, he finds it really difficult, because he doesn't move easily now. But he goes. [laughs] He likes to see how they're going to do his work. He was just in Ann Arbor a couple weeks ago. Because they needed, "You have to come out here and watch how we do this," you know, so he does it.

MM: Well, good. Good for him, good for him. So much better than just sitting doing nothing.

MS: Well, yeah, right. Exactly. Yeah, the composition program is still very strong. I mean, we had all these students that end up at Stanford in the doctoral program. We had three people that we placed at Stanford, from the M.A., which is pretty good, and one at Brown, and where else, Columbia.

MM: Wow.

MS: I mean, these students go to all the best doctoral programs.

MM: So who's gonna succeed you?

MS: Well, who knows. I don't know. They'll take their time and figure it out. I mean, it'll have to be a junior person and start over again. So they'll figure it out. They're doing very good at replacements.

MM: Absolutely. Take new directions. Ron Kuivila is still there?

MS: Ron still runs all this stuff and gets all our facilities together and makes everything happen. He's department chair, you know.

MM: Yeah, yeah. But he could retire, too, soon.

MS: Well, he's probably not going to [laughs] Right. But because he, yeah, he likes being around and doing this stuff. So yeah, it's still in very good shape, the program, I would say.

MM: Well, that's good. But you're keeping the numbers probably still same, or lower.

MS: Same size.

MM: Because you didn't expand, facilities-wise.

MS: No, we never expanded it. Yeah. So people get a lot of attention, still.

MM: Yeah. Well, you know, that's great.

MS: It is.

MM: And I'm happy to see you, and happy to see you well.

MS: So let me know when you're in the city and come over and we'll have a drink or something.

MM: I actually was in December, I gave a keynote in one of the conferences, so, yeah, definitely. Let's exchange the information so that I get your phone number and we'll do that through email. So if I come.

MS: Yeah, just give me a call. It'll be nice.

MM: Absolutely. That's just great. So what are you going to do, are you going to do something with these interviews, or are you just doing them for fun?

MS: Well, we're going to archive them. What I'm going to do is edit them and put them, put it online, I guess. I'm waiting for somebody to write the real history of the Wesleyan program. And, you know, but then they'd have some more material to work with, you know.

MM: Yeah, yeah.

MS: I think that would be nice. And yeah, I think that we'll put these online in some way, you know on the website. We'll just see. I thought it's a good moment, because I'm talking to people back to the '60s and you know, that won't be possible in the future. So you can go back to the beginning of the program, still. And I'm limited to international people, you know, because otherwise it's too huge. It's just the sense of the impact on the world of what, you know, Wesleyan has done. It is, it's a nice story, and I'd like to see somebody really work on it.

MM: Oh yeah, absolutely. I mean, it just, this whole exposure to students around the world, the world music program, that was great. I mean, in every respect. Different cultures, understanding people from different parts of the world, how they think, and you know. Not only music, but [gestures] just being surrounded by all these different people from different parts of the world. It's great.

MS: I did a small book, I don't know if you saw, a small book, I did a small book called *Music at Wesleyan: From Glee Club to Gamelan*, right. It came out in 2010. It's nice, it's pictures and stories and I go back to the 1830s and the beginnings of the school and music there.

MM: Wow!

MS: It's a cute little book. You could get that. And it goes through, you know, all the changes, and through Cage and everything else. It's a nice little book but it's not the real, full story. It's just kind of an introduction, you know.

MM: Oh, but the full story, that would be big research project for somebody to do that.

MS: Well, somebody should do it. Because I think it's definitely worth doing.

MM: Yeah, yeah. Great!

MS: Ok, so give me a call when you're in some time! Great to talk to you.

MM: Great talking to you. Take care. Bye bye.

MS: Bye bye.