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Sooi Beng Tan - Interview with Mark Slobin

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Mark Slobin: Great! Nice to see you. [both laughs] It's really good to see you. Thanks for finding the time to talk. I've just been having such a nice time talking to people in Africa, and China, talking to people about their time at Wesleyan. It's been very enjoyable. And because I'm retiring I just felt like I should leave an archive of these little conversations. I'm sort of hoping that someday somebody will write the real history of the Wesleyan program and it's whole impact on the rest of the world. I just want to leave some materials there, since it's been so extraordinary.

Sooi Beng Tan: You are not writing, you are just interviewing people?

MS: Right, yeah, I wrote a little book called *Music at Wesleyan*, you might like to see that. It has pictures and stories going back to the beginning in the 19th century. But it's, you know, it's just pictures and little stories without a lot of depth. And the whole story of this program is so enormous in its impact in the world that I hope somebody will do that sometime. So I'm just asking people how they got to Wesleyan, why they got to Wesleyan, and what it was like being there. You know, very informal conversation.

SBT: Mm, so.

MS: So how did you hear about Wesleyan, why did you end up there?

SBT: I heard about Wesleyan when I was doing my B.A. in Music at Cornell University, Ithaca. I was playing in the gamelan ensemble there; Pak Sumarsam from Wesleyan used to visit Cornell and I took gender lessons with him. He introduced me to the music program at Wesleyan where I would have the opportunity to continue playing gamelan and to learn music from other parts of the world.

MS: What year was that?

SBT: This was, 1979.

MS: Wow, ok.

SBT: Besides Pak Sumarsam, John Pemberton, who had just come back from research in Java, also told me about Wesleyan. I was able to go to Wesleyan because of a scholarship that was given to me by the university. Otherwise, I would not have been able to afford the high tuition fees and living expenses.

MS: So you had already been in America so it wasn't surprising for you to be in another college town or something like that, right.

SBT: No, no—Cornell was a much bigger place than Wesleyan and I had already adapted to life in America there. I had also learnt about my own post-colonial background and identity as Cornell has a very good Southeast Asia program. Initially, I wanted to be a pianist, but after I started taking courses in politics and anthropology, I learnt about alternative history that was not

taught in Malaysia. That changed me. I wanted to learn more about other cultures from other countries. And I think Wesleyan was the best place for me at that time. We did not have internet or computers then, so there was no way I could learn about other cultures except at Wesleyan. [laughs]

MS: Exactly, exactly.

SBT: It was a good decision for me to go to Wesleyan. At Wesleyan, I was given the part time job of taking care of the world music archives in the basement of a building. As I had to archive the recordings, I had the opportunity to listen to the field recordings of many researchers from all over the world. I learned a lot in that basement space.

MS: Oh, that was in the anthropology department, right. When the archive was still in the anthropology department, yeah, in Winchester House.

SBT: I think the field recordings of all the students and lecturers were kept there.

MS: Right. Yeah, that was the only place, and then the tape started to get moldy there and it was terrible. Fortunately we were able to move it out to the new building later, but yeah, oh I had forgotten about that space. It was the only space we had. It's because of David McAllester, right.

SBT: Because of David McAllester, yes. David McAllester was a very good friend and teacher, he guided me when I was working there, what to record, what to listen to, yeah. He was my main supervisor.

MS: Yeah. So you were there two years, so that was like '79 to '81?

SBT: I think I was there for only one year, after that time I came back to Malaysia to do my field research. Yeah, so I was only there for one year—then I went back to Wesleyan to write up again in the second semester of the second year

MS: Oh, I see, so you did the fieldwork in the middle and then you came back and finished.

SBT: Yeah. During that first year, people like Jon Higgins and Tsuge were there. I even learnt to play the shakuhachi with a Japanese artist who was in residence. I was introduced to Indian music, Japanese music and African music—I think there was somebody else there who did Chinese music, but I can't remember his name, I think he was just a Ph.D. student—

MS: Right, a grad student, was that Wu? Was that when Wu Wenguang was there?

SBT: Maybe. I can't remember. I can't remember.

MS: He played the qin.

SBT: Hmm, yes, yes.

MS: Ah, yeah. There will still a lot of different kinds of music going on.

SBT: Yeah, at that time there was African music, and of course there was gamelan music—

MS: Right, you continued gamelan with Sumarsam.

SBT: Yes and other different types of music, I could try everything, that was the good thing about being at Wesleyan.

MS: The performance side, right. And what did you learn in the seminars? You took seminars with David, you took something with me, I think.

SBT: I think it was the methodology course.

MS: Methodology, right.

SBT: That also helped me to do my research when I came back to Malaysia. It was a practical course where we had to do small projects on collection of data, writing and paper presentations. You gave us films to watch and we had to write reviews as well.

MS: Do little projects, yeah.

SBT: That was quite nice, yeah.

MS: Well. And who were the other grad students? Did you become friends with some of the other grad students?

SBT: Uh huh, the people who were there were Alex Dea, Alan Feinstein, Marc Perlman.

MS: Oh, ok, a big gamelan period, right, yes.

SBT: Yes, they are close friends that I stay in touch with. Especially Alex Dea who is now based in Yogyakarta and Alan Feinstein in Bangkok.

MS: I talked to him recently, it was really nice to talk to him. Yeah he's one of the people I've found.

SBT: We also meet up at conferences in the region.

MS: It's a continuous connection for a very long time, 35 years.

SBT: And we visit each other when are conducting research.

MS: Uh huh. And you had students who came to Wesleyan, too, right.

SBT: They were really not my students, but I know of them. One of them, May, Christine.

MS: Yeah, Christine, Christine's very good.

SBT: Yeah I know her quite well.

MS: Uh huh.

SBT: I think there's another student.

MS: Sie Ai, yeah, Sie Ai.

SBT: Christine is doing her research now.

MS: Right, she's in fieldwork now, and then she'll come back I suppose and write her dissertation. She's a very good student. Yeah. And then you met Aaron Paige, probably.

SBT: Yeah, when he was doing research here. I think he was based in Kuala Lumpur.

MS: Yeah. So do you have other thoughts about Wesleyan, the experience?

SBT: [laughs] Actually it's the whole American experience.

MS: Oh, ok, yeah.

SBT: That changed me, yeah. When I went to America, I really wanted to become a pianist. My whole life I was brought up to think that European music was superior and something that was worth learning, but at Cornell and then later Wesleyan, I realized that there are other types of sophisticated music in the world [laughs] Yeah, yeah. So I try to pass this down to my students. The students that I'm teaching now are like me when I was their age. They play piano and they don't know anything about their own culture, or other people's cultures.

MS: It's surprising that goes on so long, you know, it's really surprising.

SBT: The effects of colonization persist for a very long time. We have been brainwashed. It is very sad that the young people actually reject their own cultures. They think that indigenous music is backward. As a result, the traditional cultures are dying. Western classical music is very big in Malaysia. Parents send their kids to learn piano rather than their own traditional instruments.

MS: That's really too bad.

SBT: Yeah, but we're trying really hard to change the situation through our teaching, and also community projects—

MS: So you have the American way of thinking about music broadly, more broadly.

SBT: Yeah I think that experience in Wesleyan is helping me now to formulate courses. I received good training from Wesleyan and Cornell. In Wesleyan, I learned about the practice of diverse musics and in Cornell, the theory of practice in Southeast Asia.

MS: Area studies, right. We don't have a lot of area studies, we still don't have Southeast Asian area studies at Wesleyan.

SBT: Yeah. Later on when I went to Australia to do my Ph.D., I picked up a lot about Southeast Asian history. History books in Malaysia are really skewed towards Malay nationalism and how the British came and controlled us, and there's no other popular history, or alternative people's history. I learned a lot about that in Australia, yeah. That's how I developed my orientation towards activism.

MS: Well yeah, that's nice. I mean, it's the long term effect of kind of opening up new ways of thinking. It's really nice to see. And you see it in your students and you're always engaged with the world, you come to conferences and international events.

SBT: Yeah, yeah. But I'm also into community engagement now. I bring young people to learn directly from the traditional artists.

MS: Oh, good, yeah.

SBT: I was trying to learn traditional music from my professors and my teachers at Wesleyan and Cornell. Now I'm trying to teach traditional music to my own students and also the young people from the public schools in Penang. But I attempt to engage the community practitioners because otherwise it won't be sustainable. So I'm trying to develop methodologies to engage the community artists in the teaching as well.

MS: That's what we called applied ethnomusicology now, right.

SBT: Yeah, correct! [both laugh] But Wesleyan was already doing this when I was there.

MS: Yeah, we were doing it a long time ago.

SBT: You had all these artists coming in and they were teaching using their own methods.

MS: Yeah, and they went to public schools in Middletown, too, in the '70s we had people going to public schools. Yeah, it's not new. But you have to keep doing it and doing it and hope that some of it gets out there, changes things.

SBT: Yeah, and also to influence the younger people to be engaged.

MS: Well, that's really, that's really good. I mean, that's basically, right, what I wanted to get by talking to you. Some sense of how this worked in your life, and what's been going on and continuing, so many decades, it's really nice. I mean it's, 40 years since you came to America, almost.

SBT: [both laugh] Almost, almost. But I think, if I didn't go to America, I wouldn't be what I am today. So I am thankful. As I come from a Chinese family who is not rich, I would not have been able to afford to study America. At the time, scholarships were only given the Malay people because they are considered the indigenous people. America provided the opportunity for some of us to study abroad.

MS: Yeah, it's just wonderful, over time, so many people from so many places have been able to come and have the experience. It continues, now, we have two grad students from Ghana right now. Last year we had the first grad student from the Bahamas, you know, so we just keep having different people coming through and it's always a pleasure to get to know their backgrounds and try to give them ideas. Well, it's great to talk!

SBT: Yeah!

MS: If you have any other thoughts about it, let me know, you know.

SBT: Oh, ok!

MS: But that's really helpful. We'll put some of this online. We have to find a way to put these different interviews online, so that people, when they come to our website, they can see the history of the program.

SBT: Are you writing anything about this?

MS: I don't know about writing, but we'll make the materials available. I hope that somebody really sits down—because the influence of Wesleyan in composition, for example—did you interact with composers at all when you were there?

SBT: Um, not really!

MS: There's the whole composition—

SBT: I was only there for one year, basically.

MS: Yeah, it was a very short time. Right, I know, you didn't stay there long enough—but there's the whole composition side, as well as the ethnomusicology. So yeah, it's a big story. Right. Yeah. Well, probably see you at another meeting somewhere!

SBT: Yeah! Will you be going to Limerick?

MS: Yeah, next year is Limerick. That'll be nice to go to Ireland. Yeah.

SBT: So I might see you there.

MS: Ok, great!

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SBT: Yeah, thanks a lot!

MS: Thanks for talking. See you soon! Bye bye.