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Sylvia Bruinders - Interview with Mark Slobin

Sylvia Bruinders

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MS: So, it's great to talk. I mean, it's been a long time. You look very well in this picture [both laugh].

SB: You're looking well, too.

MS: Well, still hanging in there. I'm retiring at the end of the academic year.

SB: Yeah.

MS: So I got this idea of making an archive of, you know, conversations with people who contributed to the program, coming from different countries. I'm talking to people in, I don't know where, Australia and England and China, or whatever. So it's very enlivening. It's nice to get people's thoughts about their experience at Wesleyan.

SB: Yeah.

MS: What years were you there?

SB: I was there from '99 to...no no, from '97 to '99.

MS: '97, '99. Ok. And how did you get to Wesleyan, of all places?

SB: Well, it was a lecturer at the University of Cape Town. He was the son of McLean. I forget his name now. He's René McLean, he's a jazz lecturer, a saxophonist.

MS: Oh, Jackie McLean?

SB: Jackie's son.

MS: Yeah, oh I see.

SB: His son René. And I'd gotten the Fulbright, and I asked him where he thought I should study ethnomusicology.

MS: Oh, right.

SB: And he said, "Wesleyan without a doubt."

MS: Oh, oh, I see! [laughs] That's interesting. An unusual connection.

SB: Yeah, I hadn't known about Wesleyan. So I had to give Fulbright three options, I think. And I had two, because I'd spoken to people at Madison.

MS: Ok.

SB: And they said if you can find funding, sure, we'll have you.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: And Fulbright then put me with Wesleyan.

MS: Ok.

SB: Yeah.

MS: That's interesting.

SB: (unintelligible) "Here are the two names," you know.

MS: So, before that, what were you doing?

SB: I was a teacher. I was a high school teacher.

MS: That's right. I remember, yeah.

SB: For a long time, yeah.

MS: So why did you—

SB: Teaching classical music.

MS: So why did you decide to move into ethnomusicology?

SB: Well, I was a bit disillusioned, really, with teaching classical music, and I was, I was usually placed in schools that are called, publicly, "college schools."

MS: Right.

SB: You know this phenomenon, right.

MS: Yeah yeah, yeah.

SB: So it's not, we weren't doing well or necessarily, um, there were very few people or few students who actually played any classical music. Some played very well; others didn't.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: And there were a lot of students who were very musical.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: And said to me, "I wish I could also do music as a subject."

MS: Uh huh.

SB: And I thought, "There's something wrong with this program, here," you know. Because at the time only classical music was offered in all the schools.

MS: Sure.

SB: I then decided to go study African music. Because I thought, you know there's a lot more, it's a lot more egalitarian.

MS: Uh huh, uh huh.

SB: And also, you don't need these years and years of theory and applied skills to make any sound.

MS: Right.

SB: And I could involve a lot of people with making beautiful African music. So that's my initial intention. So I went to, I went back to UCT initially, to study what's called an honors, I didn't really need it, but I thought, "I'm changing fields," so I did the honors level. And I like this idea of studying ethnomusicology. It appealed to me, the sort of openness, the interdisciplinarity of it. But it was quite lacking at UCT, actually, at the time it was nearly [laughs] taught in a sort of anal, very closed, very sort of colonialist kind of way.

MS: Ok.

SB: About, you know, the natives and the music.

MS: [laughs] Ok.

SB: Someone said to me, "You know, if you really want to study ethnomusicology, you should go to the States."

MS: Uh huh.

SB: "That's where you get the best programs."

MS: Uh huh, uh huh.

SB: So that sort of started my search.

MS: Oh.

SB: You know, I was lucky to meet someone, and I went to visit him, and he was in Madison, and that's how I came upon Madison. I went there one day, asking about their programs.

MS: Oh, ok.

SB: And they said, "Sure! It'd be lovely to have you. But we don't have funding for you."

MS: Oh, right.

SB: I spoke to, what's her name, Anderson? I forget her name.

MS: Oh, yeah. Um. Anderson Sutton. Andy Sutton.

SB: I think the surname is Anderson.

MS: Oh, uh...I'm not sure. Hmm.

SB: She was in Madison for a number of years.

MS: Oh, Lois Anderson, you mean. Oh, it was a woman. Lois Anderson, yeah sure.

SB: That's who it is.

MS: She's very nice, yeah. And she did African music, right. Right.

SB: Yeah. So it was a a bit of a journey. Took a few years, you know, two, three years maybe.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: Before I came to the States, yeah.

MS: Uh huh. Well, that was good. So when you, you had no idea, really, what it was like at Wesleyan. You just turned up, kind of.

SB: In a way, yeah. But I turned up—I just knew it was a great school for world music.

MS: So what was surprising when you arrived? You must have been surprised by a number of things. Middletown, and, you know, everything else.

SB: [laughs] Well, I was a little bit disappointed in the city! In the town. [laughs]

MS: Right.

SB: Because I come from a big city.

MS: Right.

SB: I wasn't sure how to survive for two years in this tiny place.

MS: Right.

SB: But it was very wonderful, I must say. It felt like, just coming into a big family, you know.

MS: Uh huh, uh huh.

SB: So yeah. The music school in particular. But even the, the larger university, to some extent. Particularly the international students.

MS: Ok.

SB: We were all becoming close, and I met a number of people, you know, from different parts of the world, and that was just great. And there was a very strong caring, you know, spirit among those people.

MS: Huh.

SB: Particularly among the international students. But, I mean, coming back to the music department, there's a lot of peer there as well, you know, and just, meeting great people. And, you know. I think the fact that it was a small place, we just, you get to know people.

MS: Yeah.

SB: So you see them more regularly, you can hang out with them. So I made quite a lot of meaningful connections and relationships with people. Certainly I haven't kept them all up.

MS: Of course. Who was in your group? In the department, then.

SB: Sathya was one, and I still sort of Facebook him occasionally.

MS: Oh, really.

SB: Remember Sathya?

MS: Yeah, I lost track of him. Yeah.

SB: David Novak.

MS: Oh yeah. Yeah, David's done very well, yeah.

SB: I saw him at a conference, actually at Wesleyan, I think.

MS: Ok.

SB: You know, when SEM was at Wesleyan.

MS: Oh! Ok, right. Yeah yeah yeah. That's right, you were there. Right.

SB: You know, I'm trying to remember.

MS: Right, sure.

SB: I can't remember people, it's terrible. I can't remember the name. I know there was an African American with very long braids. Julie? No, maybe not Julie.

MS: Oh.

SB: She lived in New York, I know, and she used to travel in.

MS: Right.

SB: And she had extremely long braids.

MS: Right, she was, she just kind of disappeared. She was the one that, yeah, just kind of left.

SB: Yeah.

MS: Right.

SB: Very very long hair.

MS: Oh wait, I know who you, wait. That was Judy Casselberry, was that?

SB: That's right!

MS: Yeah yeah yeah. I lost track of her. She did fine. She did very well. Yeah, I kind of lost track of her. She was very good, yeah. Huh.

SB: Yeah.

MS: So how did you find people to work with in the faculty? You had to take the regular seminars. What did you think about the seminar structure and the way, you know, you were, people did classes.

SB: It was all very new to me.

MS: Right.

SB: Yeah. And I guess I struggled with some, when you really sort of had to go out, you know, make a point and have yourself heard, and I'd never been, I'd never been taught in that way.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: And even when I did try and make (unintelligible) voice at UCT, you know, with this woman who was teaching us ethno, she almost didn't hear you, she just kept speaking above you. So it was very much, "I tell you how to think." And so Wesleyan was so open it was almost scary. [both laugh]

MS: Right, yeah.

SB: It was, initially, it was just so open I just didn't know where to turn, sort of. I didn't have a foothold, almost, you know.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: And then it's the structure of the space where, you know, the education is, there's a kind of overloading of information.

MS: Right.

SB: You know, I learned very little before I got there [laughs] so, suddenly, I'd to read so many texts every week and it was coming from all over, so. I was very overwhelmed, initially.

MS: Yeah.

SB: It was a great baptism, because it just got worse when I went on to, you know, UIUC and the Ph.D., of course, then it got, you know, just even worse [laughs]

MS: Right, right.

SB: So I did, I had Julian Gerstin who was sort of sweet.

MS: Oh right, he was there that year. Right.

SB: Yeah, he didn't push too hard, but he was sort of a sweet guy.

MS: Yeah.

SB: (unintelligible) that he, the students, basically, just sort of took over the seminar.

MS: Oh, ok. Right.

SB: Anyway, he was sort of finding his way, I think, how to adapt to seminars.

MS: Yeah.

SB: So that was the first year, with him. I can't remember who else I had, actually. And then I, I remember I did a course in anthropology.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: On race, you know.

MS: Was that with...

SB: I think her name was Mahon

MS: Oh, Maureen Mahon. Yeah. Yeah. She's at NYU now. I've seen her lately, yeah.

SB: Oh, ok. So that was sort of a mixed undergrad, postgrad.

MS: Right.

SB: You know, high-end undergrad course.

MS: Right, she was...

SB: And there was Eric, I forget his name, Eric took the course with me. He taught us samba.

MS: Oh, Eric Galm, yeah.

SB: Eric Galm, yes.

MS: Yeah, he's done very well too. He's at Trinity College in Hartford. He's tenured, you know, he's, yeah. Well a lot of these people did very well, actually.

SB: I saw some (unintelligible), I saw him on Facebook a couple times. Initially, you know.

MS: Right.

SB: But, you know, it's great that I can actually catch up with people. So yeah, and then I did the film course with you.

MS: Ok.

SB: (unintelligible) the course, I couldn't watch film again [both laugh] All the lightbulbs going, I couldn't concentrate on the narrative, you know.

MS: Right, right.

SB: It was like a music with picture, I think I lost it. But it came back to me the other day because somebody was saying, one of my students, he can't read a text now without wondering about all these things.

MS: Right.

SB: Race, gender, all these things. And I said yeah, (unintelligible) with you. I don't think I could even look at film. Too many things interfering.

MS: I know, I know. It's one of those classes where you know you're going to change everybody's life, you know. Whether they like it or not, right.

SB: Yeah.

MS: Oh, interesting. So how did you find—so you did an M.A. thesis, right, yeah. And who did you work with?

SB: Um, it was finally Su Zheng, but she had sabbatical the very first semester, so I worked with Eric Charry for a while.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: Yeah, but mostly I worked with her, actually. He sort of kept it burning, in a sense, you know. I really only worked on the thesis in my last semester there.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: Which was when Su Zheng returned. And I really enjoyed working with her. I must say

[laughs] Su was an advisor, you know. I tried to figure it out myself. But I learned a lot from her style of advising.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: You know, I probably apply it now, you know to my own students. And there was enough sort of give and take with her, because I remember I hurt myself very badly, I went ice skating and fell and knocked my head.

MS: Oh!

SB: Yeah, sort of in February some time. And I was meant to produce something in two weeks for her, but one week, I said, "I'm sorry but I just can't."

MS: Right.

SB: And, because I was so ill, and then (unintelligible) actually take the class

MS: Well you had a concussion, right.

SB: A little bit of a concussion, yeah. And then for a while, I think I just couldn't write. I was saying, "I don't know what's happened, I can't even, you know, pen a word any more." And then she said, "You know, Sylvia, that's fine!" You know? "It's the same thing as writer's block." [both laugh] So even though she pushed me quite a bit, you know, there were times when she just relaxed.

MS: Uh huh, uh huh.

SB: It was cool, you know, that she, that she understood.

MS: Yeah.

SB: Because she always seems very hyper.

MS: Right, right.

SB: Like she's really just going to push you. But no, she's, she was quite understanding. So.

MS: Uh huh. Uh huh. Really good, really good. So right, so you went, yeah you did some courses out of the department, and you, yeah, you interacted with the grad students. You know, the sort of, the question of how people went through our system, and what their, kind of their experience was like. Um, so, you went on to, so you decided to go on to the Ph.D. elsewhere.

SB: Well, I wasn't accepted at Wesleyan.

MS: Oh, ok. Oh. I don't remember that.

SB: Yeah. That was so unfair! [laughs] I just sort of found my feet and then I had to leave. And

you, know, that the day I realized, because I was never sure if I wanted to be in academia.

MS: Ok.

SB: I was sort of feeling it out. Because I taught for, you know, more than a decade.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: And then I knew I was a teacher. You know.

MS: Yes.

SB: But just thinking about research and academics and so I wasn't too sure what was happening. So I put off, I'll try the master's, and then I thought, "I really like this."

MS: Ok.

SB: And (unintelligible) to continue. So. I applied to Wesleyan and then there weren't many other schools left to apply to, by the time I sort of woke up to this idea. And then, UIUC accepted me, which was very nice of them, but you know, the difference was major because Wesleyan was this lovely small school with one graduate office and...

MS: Right.

SB: Everybody was very sort of kind, and, you know, people were very caring, and you could find your way around.

MS: Mmhm.

SB: So I think it was perfect for me to come into that place. Before moving off to a big scary school (unintelligible)

MS: Ok, ok.

SB: You know? Because then I just, I just, for days I was lost there.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: Because there were so many departments you had to go to for different things, and at Wesleyan I think it was one office that did everything for the graduate students.

MS: Right, right.

SB: So just, yeah, just very comfortable. And I think it's, you know Wesleyan had that, that's why I just wanted to stay, it was a very sort of comforting, sort of, zone about it.

MS: Wow.

SB: You know what I mean, you felt there were people who cared for you.

MS: Yeah.

SB: You could cope with the system, it wasn't too huge and unwieldy. And then I was sort of kicked out of that program...

MS: Oh dear, I'm sorry about that! [both laugh] I do not remember the circumstances, right.

SB: Just that I was kind of was enjoying it and getting used to it. Well, it was fine, in the end, it was quite fine.

MS: Wow. So you went on and got the Ph.D. and then, what did you work on in your research, now?

SB: They're called "Christmas bands."

MS: Ok.

SB: They have a parading practice.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: Around Cape Town.

MS: Ok.

SB: There was not much written about it at all. There was no research on it.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: But there are similar practices, there are three parading practices in the city.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: The two others are much more known. Particularly the one that's, the Carnival.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: That's quite well known. There's been lots of research on it. And so I wanted to do the Christmas bands because nothing had been written about them. And they've been going for most of the last century. So I figured it was an important cultural practice that needed some attention.

MS: Yeah, sure.

SB: And, yeah, initially, of course, I thought I could cover many more things. And then, quite soon after I returned from the US to do my fieldwork, I got the job at UCT. Yeah. So the, the system is quite different. They, you know, since I had the master's, I was employed, and then there's a three-year probation period.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: And after three years I was tenured, but then you get tenured at a kind of low level, you know.

MS: Right, right.

SB: Once you're at the Ph.D. you get tenured at a higher level, and so on. Well, I'm protected, but then you get promoted. Yeah. So that's a different system.

MS: Yeah, that's the European system, right. Yeah.

SB: Yeah. Maybe not quite as brutal as the States, I think.

MS: Yeah, the States is, yeah, we have our weird way. Yeah.

SB: Tenure is such a thing for people, my colleagues, you know, in the States.

MS: Yeah. Yeah.

SB: As you know.

MS: Yeah, it's different. Well, tenure's disappearing here. I mean, tenure-track is disappearing. It's—almost all the teaching is being done by non-tenured people now, and they, tenure-track positions just keep disappearing. They hire everybody as temporary workers now. So the system is just sort of eroding as we retire.

MS: It's kind of sad, you know, because the graduate students...there are very few jobs for graduate students to look for that are tenure-track. They're offered this adjunct and temporary work, everyone. It's about saving money and the understanding about the importance of this kind of education has seriously declined in this country. It's the old American utilitarian ideas, you know. It's just the mentality. It's also very American to think that way, too, you know. So it's not too surprising, but it's very disappointing, particularly for the grad students. And the younger people, you know, who want to make their, you know, find their place.

SB: It just has to do with the global economy, I guess.

MS: Yeah, it's an outcome—it's ideological, too.

SB: Not quite here, but I can see how things are starting to shift, you know.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: So it's less money for the universities—you really have to motivate—so Michael Nixon's going to be retiring next year.

MS: Wow.

SB: Yeah, because we have to retire at 65.

MS: Oh, right. Right.

SB: And, I had to motivate very very strongly, why we needed this job. You know. It's a tenured positioned. And I think that we'll get it.

MS: Oh, well, that's pretty good if they're still giving them to you, that's nice.

SB: (unintelligible)

MS: So I dropped Michael a note but he didn't respond, about talking with him.

SB: Ok, I'll deign to check.

MS: [both laugh] Right, right, check him, check his email sometime, right, and we can..

SB: He said, give you his love, actually.

MS: Yeah.

SB: That's what he said.

MS: Oh, ok.

SB: "Oh, give him my love!" Because I had a class with him now and I said I'm going to be speaking to you.

MS: Oh, ok. Well, yeah, tell him to drop me a line about setting up a time, you know. To chat. Right. Um, so, in your, as you came back and, you know, and the rest of your time, now, I mean, is there a way that Wesleyan experience has been integrated into what you do, the way you teach or how you work?

SB: I try to have ensembles.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: It's not always easy. But that is the one, I guess, way, Wesleyan seriously influenced me. It was such a vibrant world music program.

MS: Uh huh.

SB: So we've tried to institute that.

MS: What ensembles did you do at Wesleyan?

SB: I played samba.

MS: Oh yeah.

SB: And I worked with Abraham Adzenyah.

MS: Oh, ok, great.

SB: And I did a little bit of steelband. At that point Gage was gone so it was Amy Ingraham—
Gage, Gage.

MS: Right.

SB: So it was just being maintained.

MS: Amy Ingraham, yeah.

SB: Yeah, she was faking it. We also lived in the same house and it just didn't work out. Um,
yeah. And I wanted to do it, I just really didn't manage it. Because my (unintelligible) was just
so short. I did a number of courses.

MS: Right.

SB: Did some ensembles and had to get the thesis out, because I was being funded for two years
so, you know, it was a very pressurized time.

MS: Yeah.

SB: So the idea was, you know, if I stayed on, I would have tried all of them. I was very
interested in the Indonesian ensemble.

MS: Oh, ok.

SB: The gamelan.

MS: Yeah.

SB: And also Indian music.

MS: Yeah.

SB: When I went to UIUC, I managed to do some gamelan.

MS: Oh, I see.

SB: Both, you know, Javanese and Balinese.

MS: Oh, that's nice.

SB: Yeah, I ended up going to Bali for a month.

MS: Oh.

SB: It was sponsored by the Ford Foundation and, you know, took a number of us out. Over a
couple years they did, and I made it one year.

MS: Uh huh, great.

SB: Yeah it was. And I think also with—Michael and I—we both started together. He was there sort of on a temporary basis, like an adjunct or something, two years before me, at UCT. So when we started this program, because we had to change it, you know, and redesign the curriculum and syllabuses and all of that, because it was so sort of dated, you know?

MS: Yeah.

SB: He and I had a very similar way of thinking and doing it because of our exposure to ethnomusicology in the US. Maybe more specifically at Wesleyan, because we were both there at some point.

MS: Yeah, right.

SB: So I think that a lot of ideas like, you know, teaching a course—we don't call it "being an ethnomusicologist," but, you know, that kind of thing. Just courses that were similar. I guess he did some courses at Seattle as well, I think Washington.

MS: That's right, he went on to—he went to, yeah yeah.

SB: It was a mixture of things I've sort of gotten from Wesleyan and UIUC and what he'd gotten from Washington. But I guess the notion of—we tried, we were not successful—of bimusicality, you know, which is so strong in Wesleyan, I think.

MS: Yeah.

SB: We tried to accentuate it, but we have other challenges here!

MS: Well, yeah! Yes indeed.

SB: It didn't work as well as we wanted. But we do—we still run ensembles. In fact, I take his Indian music ensemble. I just started this year, because I figure he's retiring, you know.

MS: Oh, nice.

SB: When am I going to ever do it? So. I'm doing this year and hopefully next year as well.

MS: Oh, good.

SB: Yeah. Because you know, that was his specialty.

MS: Yes, right. He did Indian, right. Yeah. Well, so that's nice, because you ended up with somebody who had similar experience, so that's very congenial.

SB: Yeah, it's very very fortunate. I think otherwise we might have fought a lot, you know.

MS: So you've made a little enclave there. That's nice.

SB: [laughs] We did indeed.

MS: That's a good story. Is there anything else about Wesleyan that comes to mind that you would want to talk about?

SB: I didn't really prepare for the interview! [laughs]

MS: That's fine! It's not that kind of thing.

SB: I'm thinking, you know, people were so—there was such a, for me, a sense of sort of freedom in the way people thought. The kind of things people said, and the kind of music that people produced. Even the composers, you know, made (unintelligible) kind of music and there was a generally an idea that— I think I came from a place, you know, in South Africa, where academia, and maybe it was more the music school than anything, seeming quite conservative. (unintelligible) within a very narrow lens. When I got to Wesleyan, it all opened up. And that's why it was so scary in some ways. I had to sort of find my feet again. Where I am, how do I think, you know. Academia in this new place. Everything was new. But in the end, I really liked that, you know. I cottoned on to it eventually and liked that sense of freedom. With ideas, freedom in writing. I think that's the main thing that I, actually, pass on to my students. Because they often come to me still writing in this really archaic way, and I can't believe it! In the 21st century, still writing like we did in 1950 or something. So, you know, I think for them it's also pretty scary that, you know, you can actually write in the first person, for instance.

MS: Sure, sure.

SB: They just didn't know, "Is this allowed in academia?" Those kinds of things. It wasn't this straightjacket and you entered speaking a certain way, writing a certain way, otherwise it was not academia. You know. Of course, all backed up with very strong theories and ideas.

MS: Yeah.

SB: The language could be freer. Ideas could be freer. That's probably the most important lesson for me.

MS: Well that's great to hear. That's just wonderful to hear. It's really a pleasure. It's really good to talk to you. And you go to all these conferences, and you're very—

SB: I'm actually going to be on the East Coast next month!

MS: Oh, really?

SB: Yeah, I'm going to a conference—the African Studies Association. But I've been selected as the Presidential Fellow.

MS: Oh, nice.

SB: I've got a postdoc from the ACLS. They have an African humanities program.

MS: Really.

SB: So part of this is you come a week before, and a university hosts you, and so Rutgers is hosting me.

MS: Oh, Rutgers.

SB: So I'll sort of be on the East Coast!

MS: Well, if you're in the city, let me know! You know, I've moved down to the city now, anticipating retiring. So I'm living in the heart of New York. So, let me know if you're coming in! You could come over for tea or whatever. It would be nice.

SB: Sure, I'll check out my itinerary. It's all be sort of fixed, you know.

MS: Right, right, I'm sure they've got you very well organized!

SB: I'll see if there's anything in New York, I'll let you know.

MS: It depends when it is in November. I'll be away a little bit in later November, but I don't know. Anyway, if you see what your schedule is, it would be very nice, yeah.

SB: Yeah, it's the middle two weeks, though.

MS: Oh, that's good.

SB: The second week I'll be on the East Coast.

MS: Ok, yeah, no, I'm around here! So drop me a line and maybe we can find a way to get together here. That would be delightful.

SB: Yeah! And thanks for contacting me.

MS: Sure, it's a pleasure.

SB: It was a surprise.

MS: Hope to see you soon, then. Take care, bye bye.

SB: Bye.