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M. Usman Malik - Interview with Mark Slobin

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Mark Slobin: So it's good to talk. I'm talking to Mohammad Usman Malik in December 2015. You graduated with a Ph.D. in 2015, yes. So it's a pleasure to talk. So tell me, how did you first hear about Wesleyan? How did you get there?

Usman Malik: Actually, I was placed there by the Fulbright. They asked us for our choices, but I told them that I wanted to study in a good program. So they sent my proposal to various universities and among them I choose Wesleyan. And evidently for me, the biggest attraction was world music ensembles. So that was the biggest attraction for me.

MS: How did you hear about Wesleyan and its ensembles?

UM: I actually didn't know about Wesleyan before that, but when they told me that they had sent my proposal to Wesleyan, and then I searched on the internet, there were courses offered, so that was good.

MS: So why did you think of getting a Fulbright to come to America?

UM: Well, actually, we in Pakistan don't have opportunities to [video freezes]

MS: Oh, we have an interruption— So we're back talking about how you got a Fulbright to come. What year was it that you came to Wesleyan?

UM: Actually, I was talking about Fulbright. So Fulbright was the most appropriate option for me to study in the US or somewhere else. I was looking for financial independence, who could finance my studies, because I didn't have resources. I didn't have any other option, that's why I came to Fulbright. And at that time they were offering a lot of Fulbright scholarships in Pakistan. In fact, still, the Fulbright program in Pakistan is perhaps the largest program outside USA.

MS: Really! And you came to Wesleyan because you heard there were ensembles. What kind of ensembles were you interested in?

UM: Actually I was interested by Western music, and then African music, and then of course gamelan.

MS: Uh huh. So you knew about ethnomusicology from Lybarger, he's an American ethnomusicologist who was in Pakistan for a while right.

UM: Yes.

MS: So you had some idea of the mythology of American ethnomusicology.

UM: [laughs] Yes.

MS: So when you came, what were you surprised by? Was this the first time you were out of Pakistan?

UM: Actually, the most surprising thing for me was, which you don't think in Pakistan that in the area of the ethnomusicologist was that diverse. You just do ethnography and that's it. But when I came there and I started exploring that there, there are a lot of diversity in ethnomusicology. And you are going from history to ethnography. It's a broad field and that was fascinating for me.

MS: Oh, that's interesting. Was that your first time to travel outside of Pakistan?

UM: Of course!

MS: Oh really, so you must have been very surprised by everything.

UM: Yes.

MS: Coming to Middletown. So what surprised you?

UM: What surprised me, I don't, I couldn't, I don't remember now what surprised me most. But definitely it was a new place and I was a bit homesick and I wanted to explore this area that [video freezes]

MS: The weather, and the small town, and the college must have been unfamiliar. Oh, not again. Another break.

[third clip]

MS: We keep getting disconnected, it's a problem, huh. Are you there?

UM: Yes. Yes, I am here.

[fourth clip]

MS: Ugh, oh well. So it's hard to talk. So you came and you were taking ensembles and you understood that ethnomusicology was a much bigger field than you thought. So who, did you study outside the department too, or just in the department?

UM: Well actually, mostly I was focused in the department, but that was my major, I was mostly busy in my department, I didn't do anything out of my department, that's true.

MS: And how did you get along with the other grad students? Who were the people that were with you? You came in, what, 2011? Or?

UM: '09.

MS: 2009? Six years. Wow, I forgot it was so long. That's amazing. So how did your perspective on the place change over six years?

UM: Then or now?

MS: Well, both, right.

UM: There it was actually changed at the time because everything around me was different and I was in a totally new world. I had some problems, like people when they speak and they speak some kind of phrases which were very local, were difficult to understand, but I didn't have that kind of (unintelligible). What does it actually mean? So I had difficulty to grasp the idea so most of the time I kept asking people, "What you said? What you said? Can you explain it?" They were patient enough to explain. But it was, the group of the grad students. In the big classes with the undergrads I was having a lot of difficulty. Because they were having different (unintelligible). They were different than the other grad students.

MS: Right, there's a lot of cultural differences even though you had the language, but the, it is quite different. And doing so many readings and different kinds of readings.

UM: I really worked so hard during my first year and the second year. I really did work hard in these two years particularly. In the first year I used to just stay inside my apartment for many days. I used to just study, study, study and try to do my best. One of the things I learned there, was that at Wesleyan or perhaps all of America, you guys look for something really new. Whenever you give us a project or assignment or something you expect something new. And this is the thing that I learned there. In Pakistan, we didn't work that way. We just take anything from anywhere and just start—we don't think we have to add something, or we have to come up with a new idea. So when I went to Wesleyan, I learned that, and that was the most difficult thing for me. Especially in Pakistan, we assigned, "You have to do this, you have to do that," but at Wesleyan, there was complete freedom that we had to suddenly do our own project, and that was again trouble for me because I didn't, I was not used to the standards.

MS: Yeah, yeah.

UM: I had to learn on my own.

MS: Yeah, that is a big difference from a lot of places. This American need for independence, self-reliance and innovation. We just take for granted that that's how things work, you know. Most other places don't work that way. So among the graduate students, who did you get to know? Who was with you?

UM: Uh, I got to know people first, Akiko, Stephanie, Sie Ai. They were, and Min Yang, they were the first people I met with. So yeah. They're good people and they helped me a lot in the beginning. Especially Sie Ai. Sie Ai helped me a lot. In the beginning I was looking for some food, and where there's stuff for my apartment, and she helped me a lot. Because she had a car.

MS: And the Americans were not as helpful? [laughs]

UM: Actually Park Washington was mostly non-Americans. Non-Americans were living there. The only American was perhaps Tyshawn Sorey. And he was on the fourth floor and mostly he was away. He was always somewhere else.

MS: These students, they were living there. I also, Andrew Colwell was good, but he was away, somewhere on Brainard, and Sarah Politz was in New Haven, and—so they were away. They weren't in Park Wash, my building, that's why! Andrew Colwell helped me a lot, during the second. Whenever I had some problems to know the meaning of a local phrase, I used to go to him. He explained a lot of things.

MS: So little by little you were able to feel more comfortable in the environment.

UM: Yeah.

MS: And you decided to stay. So as you decided, in the seminars were, you had to adjust to the idea of how to do that kind of work, right, right. And the ensembles, what did you learn from being in gamelan and African music? What was it like?

UM: Actually, very frankly, the ensemble wasn't that easy for me. Because in Pakistan most of my training was in vocal music. In vocal tradition, you are leader, you have to lead. But in ensembles, you have to go with the other people and there's also the leader, so I had difficulty to adjust with other people. Because when you are (unintelligible) you are the improviser, in a way. To play music by reading, and that was a difficult area for me because I didn't have any training before, in reading and playing.

MS: Oh, right. So gamelan, and adjusting to the idea of ensembles. And African, also, right, then.

UM: Yeah, I was also curious about the intonation and sound quality. Because in Pakistan we are always taught to keep in mind the sound quality or to correct intonation. I learned that in world music ensembles we were not taught that way. And we just play at right pitch at the right time in the song.

MS: So you had to learn rhythmic structures, and coordinating with other people. Oh that's interesting. So when you went in to your research, how did you find, so you worked with Eric Charry mostly.

UM: Yes.

MS: And you studied also with Su Zheng and with me.

UM: Actually no I didn't have a chance to work with you or Su, I worked mostly with Eric Charry. But during my class project, I used to talk with you and Su Zheng.

MS: So how did you decide on a topic to research? How did you develop your research?

UM: Actually, while I was in USA, I had lost my job. So I had no intention to do something with popular music, initially my intention was to do something on the classical music of Pakistan. But then I realized that everybody knows about, knows Pakistan from the perspective of Sufi music. That's why I decided to do something with Sufi music because I thought this is what they want to know about, this is what they want to read about. Because I was very conscious about my career, I thought, Sufi music. And after people will know me and definitely I will get a job somewhere! [laughs]

MS: Uh huh.

UM: [continues laughing] So that's why I switched my research topic. But, from the beginning I had an idea in my mind that I had to test the limits of my understanding while I would do my research. Definitely I had in my mind that I had to come with something really new. That's why—I had to do my best. That's why. And in my research I wanted to test the limits of my understanding and my listening skills very directly. And I made draft after draft and I discarded so many drafts of my chapters. Because when I read them after I did them, I said, "Oh man, this is not (unintelligible). This is something that the other people always talk about, and I would just follow in their footsteps." I had to do something really, I had to take it to other other directions. So that's what I tried to do in that part of it.

MS: Interesting, interesting. So that's more of an American approach, then, right. And you ended up writing about all these very interesting popular adaptations of the traditions and different angles on vision. What did you, well, reading in ethnomusicology, what areas interested you most, or what kind of writers attracted you the most?

UM: Really, I really like film music the most! And I really loved your film music book because that was a really new thing for me, a new world for me. Because you know (unintelligible), so when I started to read your work and I came across your ideas, that was the most fascinating thing for me.

MS: Oh, that's nice! Right. So you're still watching a lot of movies I suppose. But now you listen to them differently maybe.

UM: Yes, definitely.

MS: Well, I don't know, what other thoughts do you have about Wesleyan and they way it worked and what it's impact was on you?

UM: Definitely it has a great impact on me. I really liked the resources I had during that time. Whatever I wanted for my research or I wanted to read, it was there. And the technology was so improved, and the people were so knowledgeable. And that is something I really miss now. Because conditions are different here.

MS: I suppose. Are you staying in contact with any Wesleyan people?

UM: I'm in contact with Eric Charry. I just sent him an email, two, three weeks ago. But otherwise, a few of the graduate students are my Facebook friends. I do not share so much on Facebook, it's just we get up to date.

MS: Oh, ok, yeah. So it's part of the greater Wesleyan network. Yeah. Oh, looks like we lost you again. I'm sorry our connections are not good, but I got some idea about the Wesleyan experience and your connection. Let's see, are you there?

UM: (unintelligible)

MS. Well, that's basically the story. I don't know if you had other things to say about Wesleyan, you know.

[connection lost]