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Interview with Professor Mark Slobin for the Wesleyan Oral History Project

Heather Zavod

February 3, 2017

HEATHER ZAVOD: Good morning. The purpose of these interviews is to talk about you and your experiences at Wesleyan. For example, what is your background? How did you come to Wesleyan? When you first arrived, what was being taught in the music department in terms of your specialty, ethnomusicology?

MARK SLOBIN: Ethnomusicology was already about 10 years old at Wesleyan when I came in. I’ll give you the basics. I finished my degree at [the University of] Michigan, I had a post-doc there, and then Wesleyan hired me in the spring of 1970 to start in the fall of 1971.

HZ: What did you study as an undergrad?

MS: I was at Michigan, spent a couple of years at the Manhattan School of Music, and then came back to Michigan and got my degree there.

HZ: So, right from the start you knew you were going into music?

MS: Right, but I only discovered the existence of ethnomusicology, which was new, in 1965 at Michigan when I went to do my graduate work. My dissertation was on the folk music of Afghanistan, so I did my fieldwork in Afghanistan and that’s what they hired me for at Wesleyan. They needed a young person with a PhD. There’s a lot of history—I wrote a book called A History of Music at Wesleyan: From Glee Club to Gamelan. The program started around 1962. They needed a young person with a PhD because the department was up and running. They were offering a PhD but there was no one in the department with a PhD, so the university said you have to hire a smart young person who can begin to train graduate students and shape a
PhD program. The department was kind of chaotic, everything was chaotic at Wesleyan then—they had just admitted women, they had just admitted black people. 1969-70 was a very tumultuous period at the university. I was among the waves of hires that began in the late ’60s to replace the Ivy League grads who were the complete faculty—white males. Ivy League didn’t even include Columbia; they were suspicious of Columbia because there were too many ethnics at Columbia, but they changed. I was in that wave, one of the only people from a state university probably at that time at Wesleyan, in 1971. So the university was in turmoil, the music department was particularly in turmoil for various reasons. I arrived and I had to figure out Wesleyan, which I couldn’t understand: this liberal arts college that was very white, male, Protestant, with a certain “old boy” quality to it. I realized that I had to take this as an ethnographic challenge—what was this tribe, what were their rules, and how did they operate? It was very different in the music department, which was the only bastion of multiculturalism at the University because we had zillions of people from all over the world teaching, and that created its own problems of colonialism, post-colonialism, materialism and a lot of issues that arose in the early ’70s around the idea of world music. So there were two different worlds that I was in—the music department that was its own particular enterprise that had graduate students—we were the only graduate program in the humanities or social sciences. We had almost every minority faculty member in the University in the Music Department. Then there was this University that was still operating under these old-boy rules and understandings and you had these Young Turks in the junior faculty who made the junior faculty organization. Their papers are in the Archives. It was kind of a funny, amphibious life I was leading—first as a grad student and then a professor in a liberal arts
college that was undergoing serious changes. Within a couple of years I got interested in Jewish studies, and ended up putting on a four-act Yiddish melodrama in 1976, which is not exactly what they hired me for. They all thought that it was interesting and that I was opening up a new area. I would never advise a student or faculty member to do any of this before tenure, but it worked fine for me. So I was tenured in due course. So the rest of the time at Wesleyan I had a couple of big-time offers that did not interest me for one reason or other. Wesleyan was very good about retaining me. Wesleyan was a pleasure to work for; I was there for 45 years, and that’s the story.

HZ: Were you involved on different committees?

MS: I was never elected to the main committees, advisory or EPC [Educational Policy Committee]. I was on Honors and Rights and Responsibilities only. I did an interview for the World Music Archives where I went into great explanations about the music program and the internal politics. So that’s available. They may have typed it up; I think it’s a written document.

HZ: Has the student body changed over the years?

MS: Well, you know, there are two things there. Things go in cycles. There was a period in the beginning of Reagan [the Reagan era] when they all wanted to be pre-law, pre-med. The overall differences are not great. Admissions is always tapping the same market, the same kind of feeder schools, the same parents. The Wesleyan kids are wonderful. They are very smart but they are a little offbeat. You talk to colleagues at Yale and Harvard and they are very envious because the[ir] kids are very straight, kind of uptight, and they are not as open to ideas or as creative as Wesleyan students. So that’s been the great pleasure all the way through. The other thing, of course, is that in the graduate program we have a lot of students
from other countries. The other thing that’s available at the Archives is a set of interviews I did last year with international grad students and some Americans who work abroad. I did about 30 of those interviews of people, which really gives the perspective of people coming from other places to work in the program. We have people from everywhere and many of those people went back and are serious people in their home societies. It was a mission of the department educationally, which had nothing to do with the rest of Wesleyan. Half of my work was with grads, half with undergrads.

HZ: Was there tension around the curriculum in the department between the traditional curriculum and ethnomusicology? What was Dick Winslow’s role? And, Did Bob Brown coin the term “world music”?

MS: He claims to have. We have a bit of an exception to that. We looked up all the possible origins of the term. It seems to have been first used at a music society conference in the late ’50s. He brought it up and kind of claimed it. It was never a degree of itself. The degree is in music itself. The radical vision that Dick Winslow and David McAllester had is still very distinctive in American higher education. It began with Winslow’s annual report to the faculty in 1960 saying that in the future world music, in our terms, would have to do with advanced technologies and experimental composition, and with the idea of intercultural exchange, and that this department had to be in the vanguard of that. It was a small department—there were three or four people in it, and so it expanded with the idea of an integrated view of music, which no other department anywhere in the country ever did. There were established music departments that added ethnomusicology. This was a department that said we are expanding on the basis of equality of all the contributions of the world to music and on the idea of new technology. That was radical. Basically, the challenge of the
music department, which continues today, is how to constantly be innovative, how to continue to be experimental, rather than to settle into the kinds of things we always did, and that’s what I tell my colleagues. We’ve done a good job. The new hires that we make are people in new areas where people are needed, rather than say we have to continue that slot or that approach to music. So, it’s a very unusual, radical approach—thinking about how music works within the context of a liberal arts education. When Wesleyan had all this money, which they later blew, they asked the faculty for ideas. Winslow and McAllester were the first to step forward and they said, “We have these ideas,” and they said, “Fine. We’ll fund it.” They said, “We need graduate students,” and they said, “Fine. We’ll give you a graduate program.” So, it was that moment of generosity and largesse, which—you know—disappeared. But Brown was an empire builder, and so he talked them into huge numbers of graduate students and faculty. The department would not be so huge without that enterprise. Now, Brown was problematic at other levels—the way he treated the people who came, the philosophy about how you do this, so when he left there was a kind of sigh of relief. And then I was brought in a year later to do something slightly different. Brown came from UCLA and that was the original academic [ethnomusicology] program—ethnomusicology started around 1954-'55 at UCLA where he was a student. And the person who built that empire was his model for his techniques, which he brought here. They worked very well structurally in some ways, but in terms of philosophically and ethically and other ways, there were questions about it by the time he left. He did convince [Victor] Butterfield of the need for a large structure to make the department’s vision a reality.

HZ: Regarding one of your students, did you know Andy Toth ’71?
MS: He was a lovely man, one of a huge contingent of people we sent out. We sent out people, many to Indonesia, who never came home. We are the University’s representation in Southeast Asian cultures. We’re the only people who do it. The Indonesian ambassador comes to our events, and so on. We have a particularly strong connection with them.

HZ: Was there dissention when the sciences wanted to offer PhD programs?

MS: The long-range story is that the administration has always understood that the music department gives Wesleyan an international profile that they otherwise would not have, and that we are doing something interesting. The attacks have largely been from the faculty over time. Whenever the department looks slightly weak, there were faculty people who would ask, “What’s this? We have to look into this program.” Yes, there has been some envy or some misunderstanding as to what we have been doing over time. I would say that the administration almost never—except for telling us you have to cut your budget, or the University is going under, which happened in the ’70s, but there wasn’t a question about the basic project. There were a couple of periods—I mean, that hasn’t happened in years. I’ve lived through all of that. There was a period in the early ’80s when we made some bad hires, and then people would say, “Oh, this is a problematic department, blah, blah.” But that always got dispelled by the administration and some outside committee would always say don’t touch this program, it’s got genuine merit. We weathered a couple of those things, but it’s been a long time since that happened.

HZ: How have Wesleyan presidents typically treated the music department?

MS: This president has been incredibly supportive. I mean, this is a guy who played jazz piano at his inauguration. He understands the department very well. He’s very supportive.
HZ: Why was there controversy about the World Music Hall?
MS: That was before my time. When I came, they were building those buildings. The first few years the department was in 12 buildings around campus and really hard to keep track of. In ’73 it opened [the Arts Center], so I was there for the opening, but the decisions about the design of the structure—the actual physical Arts Center—had all been done in the late sixties, and I wasn’t around for that. The Arts Center is extremely problematic as a working space and to this very day it has limitations as a working space. It’s a very nice conceptual structure. Kevin Roche [the architect] had no interest in the actual day-to-day needs of the people working in those buildings—it’s a conference building—ever since it opened—to make it work. For years my office was in a wood frame building that got torn down where the parking lot is between Shanklin and High Street. There was a little wood frame house there. I had to have a gas heater in the room because it was so cold. So, it was actually pretty nice to move to the Arts Center from there. We were in 12 buildings. What is now the dance space on Pine Street was where the gamelan was. That was the former West Side Market. What is across from it, which is the little liquor store, is where we did teaching. Teaching was held all around the campus. The headquarters were in 200 High Street, which is the administrative whatever-it-is now. That would be the building that was the music building. We were scattered all over the place. Of course [the Arts Center] was a big step up. The Concert Hall was built with no sense of acoustics. It was built horribly. Horribly bad acoustically, and nobody had thought about that. It took 25 years to get it fixed. It was ridiculous and the architect had no interest in that. He put a ventilation unit next to the recording studio. You just don’t do those things. All that got fixed over the years as we got budget and tried to
ameliorate everything. The recording studio was between the recital hall overlooking Adzenyah Rehearsal Hall, so you could record from Crowell. Everything about him was thoroughly uninterested in the day-to-day management—I mean, you don’t do that if you are trying to do recording. The concert hall had no lobby, so there was no place for people to wait when it’s cold and snowing outside. Second, they walked right into the actual acoustic space of the concert hall—I mean, you don’t do that—walk into the actual acoustic space of the hall, which is not functioning anyway, because it has no acoustic support. How could you design something like that? So, it had seats that matched the green of the playing fields, but this is what we needed?

HZ: When did you start playing an instrument?

MS: I started playing the violin at age 4. They took me to every classical music concert they could. A Jewish boy growing up at that time who might play the violin. I just finished a book on my hometown of Detroit. Kind of using my story and my family’s and expanding it to the music life of the city in the 1940s and ’50s, when it was a great city. It’s an interesting book because it combines the personal with the ethnography of the music in the city at that time. My family and their crowd were all classical music devotees. But there was also a lot of music from Russia, Yiddish music, and so forth. The city was very complicated musically. Nobody has done a real history of it, so I got kind of intrigued. It was really a very nice project, very rewarding to make contact with people I hadn’t seen since high school, some famous names, and so forth. The book is with the editors now and we’ll figure out where it goes from there.

HZ: Did you get involved with campus politics?
MS: You’re always involved with politics at the University. The faculty meetings were very intense. The academic council meetings were intense—there were always problematic tenure cases. I would weigh in at those meetings. You’re always involved in some way, even if you are not running things. But even regular faculty meetings were very contentious. I was involved in some of those meetings that were very contentious—where the administration refused to give us raises. We lost real income in the 1970s and they didn’t do anything about it. There was the junior faculty organization, which was joined by the faculty who were also not getting raises, getting no pension benefits, and getting their contributions cut. We almost did unionize the faculty. We had a majority; we needed two-thirds. But then we couldn’t have done it. The Supreme Court said that universities could not unionize—public universities and private universities. Of course there are always campus issues that you get involved with.

HZ: Did your wife teach at Wesleyan?

MS: My wife taught at Wesleyan while she was finishing her degree at Yale and later in her life, when she retired from the University of California. She was teaching in the College of Letters, which she would have kept doing if she hadn’t gotten sick and died. She really enjoyed that a lot. COL really liked having her.

HZ: How did David McAllester come to the Music Department?

MS: McAllester didn’t come to Music until I did, 1971. That’s why there was no PhD [in the department then]—because he was in Anthropology. But he had also started the anthropological psychology in the psychology department, and he taught genetics and who knows what—I mean in the days of liberal arts people like him were expected to teach everything—the classics, etc., in the ’40s and ’50s.
HZ: Overall, how have you found being at Wesleyan?
MS: It’s an incredibly supportive place. The sabbatical policy is amazing. I’m very prolific, but a lot of faculty know that they can get their work done [when they have a sabbatical]. It’s one of the few colleges that gives you a full semester with pay after six semesters of teaching. I’ve always been able to get my work done, so I’ve realized that after 45 years, I have had probably seven full years at full pay to do my work. The workload has always been reasonable and the sabbatical policy has always been great.
HZ: What about the trend toward hiring adjunct faculty?
MS: It’s a national trend. So, people will get less individual coaching and handholding and less long-term dedication of faculty, which was the Wesleyan norm. There was one year when the administration was thinking of maybe saving money by cutting the sabbatical policy back, and Richard Boyd, who was the vice president and provost, did a study of how many independent tutorials we taught—like what the faculty really does. And we did double what any other liberal arts college does. In any field you could walk in and get a tutorial in independent study. The adjuncts don’t do that. That’s not how their contract works. Students will not get that much independent study done. That’s not what the faculty is there for. They are there for contract work. That’s one example of the loss of education value that students will get from this set-up, but there’s nothing to be done. It’s like 30 percent now, teaching by tenure-track people—nationally, only 30 percent are taught by tenure-track people. Wesleyan is higher. That’s not the problem. The problem is—as Michael Roth knows very well—is the residential liberal arts college is becoming obsolete, and we will end up being largely a training school for the upper class because there’s not going to be enough money to support middle-class people to come. You’ll have
kids from poor families and you’ll have a bunch of rich kids. And the question will be why send your kids there for four years—that social contract is broken. This goes for all liberal arts colleges. It’s not completely clear why you’d spend $300,000. I mean, where do you get it, and what’s the point? The current administration under Michael Roth is dedicated to a defense of what we took for granted for decades as the value of the residential liberal arts college. The idea of liberal arts contracts being socially valuable, that started in the ’30s. Wesleyan won’t be what it was in my happy years. Higher education will be more and more online courses, training people…America is heading that way after this odd period. People will go in and figure out how to do good things in this new structure. I’m out of it. I was very lucky.

HZ: Thank you very much for your time and assistance with this project.

One of Mark Slobin’s books is a valuable addition to this document: *Music at Wesleyan: From Glee Club to Gamelan*, Wesleyan University Press, 2010.