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Andrew Dewar - Interview with Mark Slobin

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Mark Slobin: Okay, right! So, Here I am with Andrew Dewar, on October 2015, sitting by the Moundville Archaeological Park in Alabama where he's ended up. Alabama. So Andrew, you are in this list because you are a person who came to Wesleyan from abroad in some sense. Do you want to say something about that? Give us a little background?

Andrew Dewar: I was born in Argentina in 1975, grew up in the States but, yes, technically born abroad, and lived all over, you know, different parts of the United States. So I grew up in Minnesota, in Minneapolis, and I lived in New Orleans; Portland, Oregon; the Bay area; lived in Australia for 9 months in Melbourne; and it was from the Bay area that I went to Wesleyan. When I decided to go back to school I applied when I was living in the Bay area and moved to Middletown.

MS: So why, how did you hear about Wesleyan? And how did you become interested?

AD: My mentor, as you know, was Dr. Mirjana Lausevic at the University of Minnesota where I did my undergraduate studies, and I was involved in a project she was doing there, as her research assistant. It was a project called "The World in Two Cities," and it was looking at different immigrant communities' music and so I was one of her research assistants for that project, and she encouraged me to do my own work, and she encouraged me to do my first public presentation, so I went to a regional SEM conference. It was in Cincinnati, at the conservatory, and I presented about the Oromo community that we were working with. We were also practicing, you know, performing with these groups, so we actually, with Minja and her husband Tim, we performed with a group of Oromo. There were three sisters who wrote songs. And then we were sort of the backing band for the three sisters and then their extended community was a choir, the Oromo Choir, and we sang the songs of these three sister composers, and I was also doubling on bass and saxophone, depending on the arrangement for the tunes that we were playing. We performed at one of this sort of multicultural Christmas type events in Minneapolis and it was a really interesting scene, with a little taste of this part of the world and then a taste of that. The idea of inclusivity was, you know, that's what they were trying to do. There were all these issues with how they framed it and how they spatialized the performance and how they had all the immigrant performers sort of down in the basement. And then there was like the other area where the churchgoers were milling about and having their breakfast and things. I wrote about that performance and that was my presentation at that regional SEM. [train whistle] Gonna have an interesting soundscape on this, yeah...[laughs]

MS: Yeah right! This is great, I love it! So you were exposed to the Wesleyan style of things because you had a Wesleyan mentor.

AD: Yeah, and I was interested in ethnomusicology before that. When I was living in New Orleans I came across a couple of books by John Blacking, and I got into those and then I, you know, had a long sojourn in Indonesia, in Southeast Asia where I was there for almost two years. And primarily studying gamelan music in West Sumatra, flute and vocal music, ritual music, and I was studying that just on my own, and I was there for over a year and then travelled around Southeast Asia and came back and finished my undergraduate degree. So at that point I was interested in ethnomusicology but, you know, sort of studied it outside of the academy and then it was Minja who kind of brought me into it. Actually I did take some classes with her predecessor before I left school. I did my undergraduate over the course of eight years. Her

predecessor was Alan Kagan. He was very nice to me and there was a community gamelan at another college nearby, at the College of St. Catherine. It was run by a guy named Joko Sutrisno, and so, this was before Minja was there. And so I was studying the gamelan in this community group. Professor Kagan actually was able to get me credit through the University of Minnesota to take gamelan in this other university in town. So I, you know, for a while I was involved in ethnomusicology. I knew what it was, but I was doing it largely outside of the academy, so it was Minja who said, “You can do this in, you know, in the academy, and you can learn more,” and she encouraged me. And I think you might have even come to visit us in Minneapolis when she was there.

MS: Yes! I did.

AD: And I know Neely also came to visit, so I met Neely...

MS: Okay, well yeah, she sent this letter saying, you know, “Just take this fellow, he’ll be fine at Wesleyan,” so I said, “Okay, if she says so, that’s enough for me,” you know.

AD: I think she even told me that she wrote a letter that was something like, “Just take him in,” or something. [laughs]

MS: Yeah! Yeah! Right! Right! [laughs]

AD: I said, well, I hope that works. [laughs]

MS: Right! Well, I trust her judgment.

AD: But of course the other side was that I’m also a composer and a performer and I had known about Braxton’s work and Alvin’s work also, actually. I had a copy of *I’m Sitting in a Room*, the LP, that I had scored, you know, as a teenager. I was very, you know, I had big ears, as many of us who are who became ethnomusicologists. You know, we had big ears for a long time, so I was picking up all kinds of random records as a teenager, because that was when everybody was dumping their vinyl to buy CDs. So there was tons of amazing stuff that, you know, for pennies on the dollar, and I scored a copy of *I’m Sitting in a Room* and a lot of Braxton’s early work, his 1970s work, so all that stuff blew me away. And Braxton’s work, especially, was really close to me throughout my development as a composer and a saxophonist. And so it was like this amazing fusion world. I was like, “Wow! I can go to a place where not only is Mark Slobin there and this amazing history of global music culture studies and ethnomusicological studies, but there’s also this deep, deep world of experimental music and African American experimental musics through Braxton and Alvin and Ron and that whole scene, and Cage, right?” The Cage connection ties it all together with the world music and the experimentalism. So Wesleyan was actually the only school I applied to because I said, “If I’m gonna go to school I wanna go somewhere that that is right for me and this is the place,” so I put all my eggs in the one basket and I was fortunate [both laugh]. You took a chance on me, because I had a rather non-traditional background in some ways.

MS: Yeah, but you’ve been to a lot of places and had a lot of experience and that counts, you know.

AD: It didn't hurt to have her as a reference, and actually, Steve Lacy wrote one of my other letters.

MS: Oh! That's right! I forgot that.

AD: I was kind of a fusion student from the beginning where I was—it was absolutely the perfect place for me. And I was right, I was right.

MS: So you got there and nothing was surprising. I've been asking people what was surprising when you came, and they are like, you know, coming from a different countries and whatever, like, "Oh, this place is so different," but, you know. Not for you, right.

AD: It was different in the sense of it was so much better than I expected. I didn't realize that you could have so much fun at school, you know, that school can be all of the things that you want it to be. The Wesleyan program as you know is very self-driven, right? It's not a hand-holding program; it's a program where you are given lots of leeway and, as a composer, aesthetically lots of leeway, and as an ethnomusicologist it's like, "What do you want to do?" You know? Find your own voice. You know, you've been a mentor to generations of students but you don't turn out carbon copies, and the composition professors there, your whole teaching style from my experience has been to facilitate a student to find their own voice, as opposed to, "Oh yeah! That's a Mark Slobin student because they look at things this." I think that's there, that's always going to be there, the imprint of the teacher, but I feel like the pedagogical style at Wesleyan is very much facilitating a student to find their own voice, which I think is great, and that's what I tried to do, you know. That's the teaching style I've approached down here. Not to force myself onto my students, but to expose them to things, to say check this out and tailor, you know, using their interests to help gauge how far I can push them. But ultimately they have to find their own voice and their own direction, and I think that's the best way to approach things, because it gets boring if it just becomes, you know, creating carbon copies of yourself. It doesn't really serve the purpose. So that was what was surprising for me about Wesleyan, was how open it was, and that's a little bit disorienting for some people. I thrived in that environment because I've always had an idea and wanted to go in this direction, but I know for some other students it's overwhelming and intimidating and disorienting, like, "Wait! What do you mean I can do whatever I want, you know, as long as it meets certain standards...right?" I think it is a certain kind of student who thrives in the Wesleyan program, because it is someone who has their own vision or who can generate their own vision over time.

MS: So you were on both sides? How did you perceive those parallel program—you were mixing it.

AD: Yeah, socially, I would say people were much more mixed across the programs, because it's such a small program so we all knew each other and we all hung out and we all went to parties together and, you know, went to the pub, and all this kind of stuff together. But it's interesting, there was not a whole lot, except for people like me and a few other folks who were sort of straddling the two worlds. Chris Miller is another one, right? Who came in as a composer and did his master's in composition, but then turned out to do this amazing ethnomusicological work, so there's a few of us that were, you know, fusion-type folks really bringing the two worlds together. But in our work it seemed very separate, and partly because most of the ethno students

were not taking composition seminars, you know, 90% of them were not. I was really happy and lucky, even though it was a lot of extra work, to sort of live in both worlds because I was writing new music at the same time I'm trying to write research and do the research papers and things, but for me it was exactly what I needed to do to be whole. Because that's who I am: it's both of those things. I do think that more interaction between the two programs would've been nice. The thing that's interesting is that I feel like at the faculty level there was more interaction between the two worlds. I mean, you and Alvin go way back and Alvin writing a piece for the gamelan...

MS: Right. That's one of my favorite of Alvin's pieces, and which is funny in that it only works with the Wesleyan gamelan because of its tuning, but I think he tried to do it on a different gamelan when he was in Indonesia. It didn't work as well because, you know, the tuning is different. It was all this stuff with resonance and specific pitches and stuff like that, so he said it's really for the Wesleyan gamelan [laughs]. The model was there for interaction at the faculty level, but graduate school is hard work and you have to sort of put your head down and work on your thing, so I understand. But people came out to concerts. I shouldn't say that it was that separate, right? Because, you know, a composer would do their thesis concert and everybody showed up. It wasn't just the composers, it was everybody, because we were all friends.

MS: What were your years?

AD: Fall 2002, and I took the position here at the University of Alabama in the fall of 2008.

MS: Really good timing. Very few people get through in 6 years.

AD: I was ABD when I came here, so my first year here I was finishing my dissertation. I officially graduated Spring 2009, but I still kind of charged through the program. Definitely, I don't know, it was one of these things. In hindsight I wouldn't say I was aimless, but I was a wanderer for many years and then when I finally decided what I wanted to do I just kind of zeroed in and went for it. What's interesting being in both the composition and ethno worlds for that period of time is I saw several generations of composition students, because they are only there for two years typically, and also master's ethno students, so yeah, so I had a whole range. You know, there's a whole different range of folks that were there during the time that I was there, and I also overlapped with people like Julie Strand, and Chris Miller, and Nick Hockin, who I recently got back in touch with. He's still doing that summer program in West Africa. And Andy McGraw was there for, I think, one semester before or maybe he was just starting his research here, but he and I collaborated, so we did a composition project, because he also is involved with performance and new music, so with Chris Miller and Andy McGraw we did a summer-long composition project in Indonesia. We each wrote pieces for this group that included Suwardi who was a graduate of the program. You definitely have to talk to him. He is one of my favorite people, you know, one of the most creative people on the planet, as far as I'm concerned, with the instruments he constructs and just his whole take on the world. He's a special composer, for sure, and he's an interesting person that's in between new music and traditional music as well, because you know he's a very fine player of traditional material as well.

MS: There's lots of connections there across generations. The Wesleyan community is like this network that's global.

AD: And you stumble across people. I've played concerts in Europe and someone comes up and says, "Oh yeah, I graduated from the composition program at Wesleyan," and it's like, "Oh wow!" And for Alvin's 80th celebration at Wesleyan, there was like all these generations of composers, and it was really nice to see how wide the reach is, and I think we're gonna see a similar thing at the gathering for your celebration in the spring. It's just, you know, the generations of people that are all over, you know, I didn't even know there were students of yours in Tennessee even. We are everywhere [laughs]. And it's such a diversity, and that's why I said it's not turning out carbon copies, but turning out people who find their own voice, which I think is really unique to the program. And I hope it continues, because we, you know, Wesleyan is at a big changing of the guard right now, in many ways.

MS: It's all about getting the replacement slots which are not guaranteed by the administration. Other than that, when we get a chance, you know, we just replace with somebody spectacular like Paula Matthusen.

AD: Yeah, she's great.

MS: A great successor for Alvin, and she's just, you know, in her 30s, a woman coming in, and she got the Rome prize right off and her teaching is phenomenal. You can't get the old people anymore, you see, so you get these young people that are sharp, and that's fine, you know. Let's see what else. All kinds of things I've got to ask you, right, you are giving me all this good stuff already. So, yeah, so you've been a Wesleyan kind of spirit, and you still have the Wesleyan connections, and you bring the Wesleyan experience to your teaching, right?

AD: Because I'm in kind of an experimental program, an interdisciplinary program, I'm given a lot of leeway in terms of my teaching. And also it's seminar format, so we can really get into pretty heavy readings. I almost run my undergraduate seminars like graduate seminars, I mean, we are reading Benjamin and we are reading all this heavy stuff. They are also four-credit seminars, so they are longer. So we have a lot more time to dig into heavier readings and the other thing that's very Wesleyan—the Wesleyan style of ethnomusicology—is that the application of the theory is as important as the hands-on experiential learning, right? That's a big part of New College, and so New College is founded on experiential learning, and self-directed learning so students all design their own majors, combining different disciplines.

MS: That's very Wesleyan.

AD: Yeah! They have experiential things, so every class has a, you know, real hands-on thing, so, for example, I teach my electronic music history class. It's a hands-on history where we actually build circuits. They make simple synthesizers and they build things as we go along through the history and I have them make a musique concrète piece and things like that when we are talking about that period and my sound studies seminar here, they go out and make recordings every week, so I have a bunch of little recorders that I give out to the class and they go out and make field recordings, and then we have a Google map, and they geotag or post their recordings at the place that they recorded it with a little essay about why they recorded that sound.

MS: Oh nice!

AD: Why it is important to them, or what drew them to the sound. Why should we listen to the sound, this kind of thing, and that becomes a really interesting way to teach about, you know, sound studies through application, listening to the world around them and that's also, again, a very Wesleyan thing, you know.

MS: Yeah, Alvin, at one point has this seminar where they went up the Connecticut river from where it starts, and they came all the way down recording things, he did that once, forget how many years ago, you know. Right. Did you work outside the music department at all?

AD: At Wesleyan?

MS: Yeah.

AD: I took a class with Richard Elphick, which is great. It was a globalization class, so it looked at different models of globalization. That was an awesome class. I sat in on a few of Tölölyan's classes. Dude, he was amazing. I mean, just a fantastic teacher, you know. It was a masterful seminar. He kept things rolling [snaps fingers rapidly] like that. It was a very high tempo class, the opposite thing to Alvin's classes, which were sort of, you know, relaxed and languid and he would tell us a story and then we would think about it for a while, and then someone would, you know, this is a very different tempo. But Tölölyan was an amazing teacher. I never officially took one of his classes, but I sat in on a bunch of his, you know, when he had a specific topic, I would sit in. Amazing!

MS: Yes, he's been a good—great resource for us. He's open to us. But he only wants to deal with the good students; he'll say, you know, "Should I be taking this student in?" [laughs] "You know, what do you think, is this worth it?" And then he'll say, "That was a good student you sent me." He was a selective, but he's very open to the idea.

AD: Aha. He was great. I also took a class with John Paoletti.

MS: Oh, really? Oh, okay.

AD: The art historian. It was kind of a modernism overview course. But I had no idea all the connections he had to that world. I think he was connected to a lot of the Yale artists that became big in New York, and so, he had some really great stories and I ran some of my work by him, when I was doing work on Bill Dixon's art. So when I was doing the work on his art, you know, trying to find connections between the art and his music I ran a chapter by Paoletti, just to see, you know, from an art historian's perspective, "How does this read? Does it read okay? Does it make sense?" Because I wanted an art historian to be able to read it and get something out of it as well. His comments were very interesting and made me think about things differently. He's like, "Okay, well, you know, I get a sense for what you are trying to go for, but I don't get a sense of the work, you know, what is the work here, how can you describe the work? You know, I see a picture of it, but how can you talk about the work itself, more, and connect the material to the material of the music?" So he had some really good, provocative things to say. The one thing I regret is I did not connect with any of the American studies folks. That's like such a world-renowned program. Interestingly, I connected with Hayden White here, in Alabama.

MS: That's right! Hayden told me! Yes!

AD: Yeah, yeah.

MS: Oh, “Your student,” you know.

AD: I gave a presentation alongside him on a panel and he really liked my paper. He was very nice to me.

MS: I was really pleased, because Hayden is nobody’s fool.

AD: Oh, he’s a toughie! Yeah, he was...

MS: And he said, “Yeah, the only person down there who really had something to say was your student, you know, that guy” [laughs].

AD: That was nice. He seemed to really like what I had to say, which is cool. That was another Wesleyan crossing. I’ve tried to do a similar pedagogical technique down here, which is, you know, helping the students find their own voice, giving them access to materials and ideas, and helping shape their interpretation of it, but ultimately giving them the freedom to find their own path, and which doesn’t always go in the direction I’d like it to go. But then again, I think even with Wesleyan alums, their paths take surprising turns. You know, and I’ve checked in with some of my students a few years down the line. I’m like, “Oh wow! So they did come back around to where I was hoping they would go, you know?” I have a student who is working in Montgomery, she’s from Montgomery, went back to Montgomery and started a non-profit that does arts and culture, what’s the word, development! Arts and cultural development. Urban redevelopment, I guess you could say, and she just got huge grant from ArtPlace America. It’s like a half-a-million-dollar grant or something to sort of help develop this arts district in a historically black neighborhood.

MS: Really? Wow.

AD: And they’re really taking a very deep and intense—they’re creating a really deep partnership with the local community, so it’s not sort of overlaying a sort of bourgeois thing on top, but actually working with that community: “What do you guys need, you know, clearly you like art and music as well, but what, you know, how can we connect these things to what your interests are as a community?” Yeah, so, that’s pretty cool to see. So she’s not an ethnomusicologist. She was a French horn player who took my classes, sort of changed her direction. She actually went to an urban planning program, M.A. program at UT, Austin, and did that, and then went back to Montgomery and has started working cultural development. So, I think that’s an interesting path that the student took, as a musician, she’s thinking about, you know, making opportunities for musicians and being invested in the culture and community of her hometown, in this case, but so it’s applied ethno in a sense, right?

MS: Yeah! That’s right.

AD: It’s interesting, my position, because the music majors I teach are the ones who are doing jazz studies, because I teach the jazz history for them, for the school of music, and my other students, they self-design majors, so one guy combined electrical engineering and music studies, and he built circuits, so he designs—he has his own business now, he’s doing quite well, he

builds boutique guitar pedals. The guy from Sonic Youth, Thurston Moore, who was in Sonic Youth, he plays one on them. The Black Keys have one of his pedals, and these kind of things, so those are the kind of students I get here, in New College, are the ones who want to combine these different worlds and do something of their own. But, you know, I'm still infusing them with this, you know, cross-cultural perspective in my classes. Like I said, I teach experimental music in a cross-cultural perspective, so we look at Indonesian experimentalism, we look at experimentalism in Argentina, we look at experimentalism in the U.S., we look at it in various parts of Europe, and in Africa, and in the Caribbean. If we look at dub, like Mike Veal there, we look at dub as experimental music, and so I do get to expose them to the Wesleyan way. [laughs]

MS: Well I think we covered most of the territory here. Do you have other things you think about, in terms of the Wesleyan experience?

AD: Well, I do think it was also really great how committed Wesleyan was to bringing both faculty and students from all over.