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Jorge Arevalo - Interview with Mark Slobin

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Mark Slobin: So I am here with Jorge Arevalo Mateus on the 8th of October, 2015.

Jorge Arevalo: Ninth of October.

MS: It's the 9th? We're going to talk about Wesleyan and so, what were your years at Wesleyan?

JA: My years at Wesleyan were essentially, almost six years, I walked in 2013, so probably around 2006 or 2007 is when I came up to Wesleyan.

MS: So how did you get to Wesleyan?

JA: Well, it's quite a circuitous story. But I'll keep it brief as best as I can. I had started a program, a doctoral program directly after my master's at Hunter College, CUNY. Which I went to the Graduate Center CUNY and I started a program there. I was a magnet fellow. I was very happy to start on my ethnomusicology Ph.D. there studying with Steve Blum, Peter Manuel, Barbara Hampton. And I was there for four years, it was ok, but I wasn't very happy with the program as such. There was no musical performance aspect to it. A little bit of some of my interests were not, I felt, supported. And so eventually I decided to withdraw from the program. And this was after being fairly well into the program. But I decided to leave the program, in agreement with the department, it was a hard thing to do but I was just not happy with ethnomusicology as defined by that particular program. Although I certainly credit all three of the faculty there for being very supportive for the most part and training me in a sort of ethnomusicology which laid a groundwork for me. In a more of a Marxist approach or historical approach to ethnomusicology at that time. So after leaving the Graduate Center, I was teaching for a few years. I got some teaching jobs in and around the New York, New Jersey area. And then I decided, I really wanted to return and finish my doctorate. Because I had gotten so far along in my program at the Grad Center that I really wanted, for my own edification, for my own education, to finish my doctorate. And it was around that time that I remembered the program at Wesleyan because of you, Mark.

MS: You took a class with me.

JA: I took your film music class at NYU, but even before that I was on a panel at an NYU global-local music conference on global diasporas and you were the chair of the panel.

MS: Oh, I remember that, yeah.

JA: And so that was such a positive experience that I always felt like, wow, Mark Slobin is really just the kind of ethnomusicologist that I really admire. I mean, I admire many ethnomusicologists, but you were always very kind to me and I never forgot that. I was looking around to return to a doctoral program. I looked at UCLA, Cornell, I looked at different institutions, Columbia, and I was accepted there as well but I decided—I applied to Wesleyan because I primarily wanted to do more performance, kind of find the experience living out of the city in a place where I could really focus and finish my work. So when I was accepted at Wesleyan I was very happy. My time at Wesleyan was wonderful. It was a little difficult only in that I was a commuter back and forth between Brooklyn and Connecticut because I was married at the time, on the personal side, but I like the campus life, I like the colleagues, the energy of

Wesleyan. It's just a great university, institution. What would you like to know, anything specific?

MS: So, well, at the time, people came from other countries, talking about what was surprising about it, but here you're talking about another kind of atmosphere of places you've been. So, what changed? [very loud banging noise]

JA: It was a very different atmosphere, with a much more supportive network of friends across different interests. There's often a sense of graduate student competition between the students but I felt it less acutely at Wesleyan than I felt it at say at the previous colleges I'd been to. This seemed to be more of a supportive environment. Of course, the faculty were just first rate. And as professor Zheng Su emphasizes, these are the people you will be networking for the rest of your life. I'm not sure that's always the case but I still remain in contact with some of my colleagues.

MS: Who was the group that you...

JA: People like Bill Carbone, teachers like Pheeroan AkLaff, yourself Mark, you continue to mentor me beyond the degree. I still maintain contact with Su Zheng. She has invited me to participate in her Skype session for applied ethnomusicology course, which has become sort of my area of expertise, so to speak. So who else? Some of the undergrads. Like George Blake, who is now at Santa Cruz studying with George Lipsitz.

MS: Yeah, George, I'm forgetting his name too.

JA: A real sweet guy. So I still stay in contact with him. Again, it was like undergrads and grads blended in a very nice way.

MS: That's interesting.

JA: It's a very unusual thing for undergrads and grad students to blend, and one of the best places was in the performance, African music course that we took, performance classes, African drumming classes I should say. So yeah, that was a very unique experience.

MS: What ensembles were you in, then?

JA: I was in the African drumming, I also was very active with jazz, with the small jazz ensembles of Pheeroan AkLaff, and of course, Anthony Braxton's ensembles; I ran some of those jazz classes myself and performed with them regularly. I also ran a Latin Jazz workshop. That was the other great thing about being in Middletown, which was not directly Wesleyan, but I was able to be in an artist community near the campus and was actually able to generate things that were important to me off campus as well as on campus. On campus, I was on WESU, I had a radio program which, focusing on my area of study, was about Colombian music. It was called "La pipa de la paz" which means "the peace pipe" and that was a Colombian music program that they never had before at WESU, and not since, and that was one way that my Colombian background played into my study and work at Wesleyan. It was great. It was a great opportunity, you know, to do live radio. I mean every kid wants to do that at some point, have a radio show.

MS: So yeah, not all grad students make use of the community, or get engaged in the community. So yeah, you were a good, an outstanding case really, of that involvement.

JA: I tried, I tried to get involved, yes. Because community—that has kind of translated to my continuing work in where I work now, for a not-for-profit arts presenter, CTMD [Center for Traditional Music and Dance], where it's all about community initiatives. You learn and really develop that sense of community. And again that ties in a lot with that kind of brand, that Wesleyan brand of social consciousness.

MS: Ok. Yeah, because we don't think of Wesleyan as an applied ethnomusicology place, we seem to be out of the mainstream, but it turns out there actually was a connection.

JA: Which is why I would love to teach a course! [laughs] Had to get that in there, Mark.

MS: Right, right! So, the undergrads—did you work with people outside the department? What other programs?

JA: Yes, I actually was brought in to do some archival work for the Old Town Crier collection, which is a folk music collection at the Olin Library, and apparently there are some collections at the library that needed to be properly archived, and that being one of my areas of expertise, I was able to kind of set up a program, as such. And I see people like Bill Carbone still working on that same project based on some of the stuff that I initially started, working with Jody Cormack and Alec McLane. So that was outside of the department. But there were also projects that I did with you within the department, some of the projects that we worked on.

MS: Yeah, we worked on the *Music at Wesleyan* book.

JA: That was so much fun, yeah!

MS: You did a great job getting the sources, I couldn't have done that book without you.

JA: And I remember my first assignment at Wesleyan—yeah, thank you! I remember my first call was to help work on the David McAllester tribute.

MS: Oh yeah.

JA: It was a beautiful ceremony for David McAllester. And that set the tone for me, for how to serve the department, serve ethnomusicology, and serve Wesleyan.

MS: What about faculty in other departments in the university?

JA: Rob Rosenthal would always call on me in his music and social movements course. He'd ask me about some Guthrie or some Seeger-related material, because I'd worked with those collections. I have to say I was very fortunate at Wesleyan because Wesleyan did accept some of the previous graduate work that I had done, and that's a rare thing to do in doctoral programs, but Wesleyan extended that courtesy to me, and that really helped me move better than I might have if I had to start from ground zero again. Essentially I feel like I've completed almost two different doctorates. [laughs]

MS: Yeah, because you had mentors in other fields, Latin American studies, before you got to Wesleyan.

JA: That's right. Juan Flores, to name one. That's the one area I would have loved to have done more with at Wesleyan, in the Latino area.

MS: So yeah, you didn't need to go out that much to broaden your perspective because (unintelligible). Yeah, those were kind of the main areas. So what has the Wesleyan experience—how do you carry on? What impact does it have on you and the work you're doing?

JA: Well it's huge. It's a huge impact because I'm the first person in my family, born in Colombia, migrated to America at four and a half years old, and I'm the first person in my family to have any kind of advanced degree in the United States, so that's a huge impact. So how does it continue to work? I'm fortunate that I, you know, I've gotten enough support and people believe in me to the point where I've been able to work in my field, which many people don't, these days, 2015, New York City, USA. So in some ways I don't know so much that it's the Wesleyan degree that's gotten me that.

MS: No, but I mean the Wesleyan thinking, you know like in the projects you do.

JA: The Wesleyan thinking absolutely impacts everything I do. Primarily in the area, again, of questioning, and not just accepting any kind of doctrine or policy for the sake of following some kind of organizational procedure. You know, it's like we really value critical analysis, and then of course it has to be a sort of a person by nature, and I think that's why Wesleyan accepted me. And I approach my work with that sort of critical and analytical approach, to what we study and how we serve communities. I think that continues to really affect me. Even when I talk with folklorists at Staten Island today, on new projects, there's a certain kind of thinking that is very much, very much inculcated by what happened at Wesleyan for me and others I suppose. And a lot of it comes from, frankly, from the kind of reasoning that I learned from people like yourself, Mark, you know, that picks away at the underbelly of an area that we want to understand. That's something that continues. I am analytical by nature but Wesleyan really opened up the lens of how to view not just my perspective but perspectives of others around me. And that's huge for me, personally and professionally.

MS: So are there other things that we might have done, or that we could have offered, but that we didn't get to, for whatever reasons, that would be useful?

JA: You can't do all the world at Wesleyan, of course not. But I think that there's always a space to open up to the students. I think that, whether undergrad or graduate students, there's always a space that needs to be open for, like, them to really tell faculty and administration where things are going. And I know Wesleyan students are not shy about these things.

You know. But, you know, listening to the students, listening to that next generation, that new class that comes in, I think that's something that I could have easily provided ideas myself but it goes beyond my ideas. It goes to like, it speaks to like the need to have a space for new ideas to really enter. Because as you know, and I now know, older and wiser, we always have to look ahead at that next wave. Totally. And I think the students are where these things waves will break. Not from the corporate funders or the philanthropists or any of that. I think it really lies in

the students. I mean, one of the beautiful things that I noticed at Wesleyan, just in the time that I was there, was that it changed demographically. I could see the total makeup of the student body transition.

MS: How so?

JA: Well, it's very different. When I first started, I was a little taken aback because it was primarily, racially and ethnically, more homogenized. And by the time I left, I could see a different audience in that graduation ceremony. I could literally see that transition, in a matter of six, seven years. So that's much to Wesleyan's credit. And again, I firmly believe that ethnic makeup, that diversity is so important, and not just like the lip service of diversity. Wesleyan is trying to do that, and it seems to be happening. I hope so.

MS: Yeah. It's not easy in this country.

JA: No, it's not. And in that part of the world, too, you know. Yeah. New England.

MS: Well, yeah, there's always the ghost of New England.

JA: That's right.

MS: Right, right. Well I always thought of that as just being another ethnic flavor to the place. I mean, when I came, I couldn't understand what was going on in that place. But that was way back when it was very white. Very WASP-y. Very New England.

JA: But that's the superculture, Mark, I could throw that right...

MS: Well, I realized there was an ethnic, I had to understand it as, these were ethnics and this was their way of thinking and this was their pride, you know. It's like, "Oh, I see." But thinking about it that way, I can understand this better. It's not some objective institution.

JA: Right, right. That's good, that's good.

MS: Yeah. That has changed, it's true. That has changed over time. But it never quite goes away, because it's America. No matter what. So, I don't know, are there other things about Wesleyan you feel like sharing? I don't know.

JA: I think the only other thing I would add is to better prepare students about the hard realities of the world we're in now. Economically and politically. I think that once we get the degree, and we walk, do that walk, you know, how can we continue to have a voice and a relationship with our mentors? You and I have been very fortunate. You and I continue to be able to have a friendship and a professional kind of mentorship, but I think that a lot of students could really use a little more follow-up. And that's a hard thing to do, I understand. Because universities, it's a hard thing to do, I understand, institutionally. How do you follow up with the people that you've pushed out the door now?

MS: Well, we certainly could do more networking, more alumni networking. But Wesleyan tends not to.

JA: Is that, why do you think that's so? Is it because we're all such free spirits? [laughs]

MS: Well, I mean, they do it as part of fundraising, you know, but that's different.

JA: That's totally different.

MS: Or professionally, people know each other, like the film people know each other.

JA: Exactly.

MS: Or they help each other out. Yeah, we do some of that in music.

JA: But I was thinking, like the ethno circuit, I don't really see like an ethnomusicology students association of Wesleyan grad, Ph.Ds.

MS: Well, everyone's happy to see each other at the convention. If we have a party, they all turn up.

JA: Yeah, it's the best party, but outside of that, how do we...

MS: Well that seems to be really up to the students. It's never been clear to me how the department could organize that, but we could do a way better job with the internet connectivity...

JA: Absolutely.

MS: But there's never anybody in the department, you know, that takes it on. It would just be grad students and they come and go. You know, there's no, like, staff person who could be responsible for networking. For designing and protecting our internet presence. It's always a huge problem. It never gets done.

JA: But you know, there are mechanisms now, it's so easy to do that, technology-wise.

MS: Well somebody's gotta run it.

JA: Somebody's gotta run it, sit down and, yeah, I mean.

MS: You need an administrative type of person.

JA: You do.

MS: But the secretaries are too busy, so it never quite takes off. The faculty aren't gonna spend their time doing that.

JA: That's right.

MS: So you need a little administrator slot, which would really give us the presence we deserve in the online world.

JA: Yeah, I mean, a simple, adjunct positions that are opening up, if you're available, where you might be available, what courses you might be able to teach, you know, you just could really set that up.

MS: Big universities can do it more easily. Get more stuff.

JA: Maybe. But the Wesleyan brand, if I can, you know, right now there's such a kind of a kickback against academics, now, you know, right, in the culture.

MS: It's been that way for a while. About two hundred and fifty years.

JA: [laughs] Exactly. So I mean, that's why I keep thinking about the development of public sector ethnomusicology. Make it where I can take my Wesleyan Ph.D. and have it make an impact in the real world environment, whether it's in with a media company or Latino television or Telemundo, where that degree will mean something to a Latino media company in the United States today. That kind of thing.

MS: I think they're working more, Rob Rosenthal's (unintelligible) now.

JA: Is it?

MS: I don't know where they are. But yeah.

JA: I mean, it's huge, and this is off the record, but there's huge potential for Latino/a and applied ethnomusicology at Wesleyan.