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Maria Mendonça - Interview with Mark Slobin

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Mark Slobin: All right. So, I am here with Maria Mendonça. It is the 22nd of July, 2015, and we're going to try the first in this series of interviews. So, tell me how you started out in life. When were you born and where? How did you grow up in music?

Maria Mendonça: OK, I was born on the fifth of January, 1966, in London, in Wimbledon. And my musical background—well my father's a jazz musician, a professional jazz musician in Britain. My mother also has been quite musical, or was, and she sang professionally in a choir in Karachi, in Pakistan for a while, when she was a teenager. But they both separately emigrated to Britain, met in Britain, properly, and my father has been a jazz musician since—professionally, well probably since he was about fifteen, off and on. And then when he got to Britain, after a year of being here, he ended up—or a bit more than a year—doing more music than anything else, and then he focused on music.

MS: So what did you mostly hear growing up?

MM: A real mixture of things. My mother's a very eclectic listener, lots of classical music from my mother, she grew up with that, and lots of, you know, show music and all sorts of things. For my father, it depended on what he was gigging, although for his own listening that was all sort of like bebop-era and just afterwards. One of his big piano heroes was Bill Evans, and Chick Corea and that kind of thing. One thing about growing up in that background, he was very interested and encouraged me to do a lot of work by ear. But wanted me to have all the classical training, 'cause he never had that and he always thought that was a really great thing to have. So I was packed off to all these teachers, but I remember quite early on, you know, I was whistling along to something on the radio, and dad's going, go play on the piano, and he's like, and what chords would you do with that? And I was always all right with that sort of stuff, so I enjoyed it a lot. And we had supervised practice everyday. It's, come back from school, tell him all about what we were doing, I was doing in school, and then go off and have an hour's supervised practice with dad, and then he would wander off to a gig or whatever and then the rest of the evening, whatever.

MS: So it's a combination of family and classes.

MM: Yes, exactly.

MS: And then you went to school...

MM: I went to school and then I got a scholarship, a junior scholarship to music college when I was about fourteen or something like that, so I was at Trinity College of Music on a Saturday, for four years. And that was great...

MS: I mean, what were you playing?

MM: I was playing, studying classical guitar, piano, and composition. And Trinity did a lot of working by ear, which was one of the reasons why I was very interested in it. So we'd have these amazing musicianship classes where the teacher would come in and go, OK, today we're going to improvise in the style of Debussy. Here are a few chords, here are a few things that Debussy did, now go for it! And we all used to sort of do that kind of thing. But I also had, you know, individual lessons, not only in classical guitar and piano—I tried to learn piano with my dad for

about a year when I was four, didn't work out—and then violin, I played a lot of violin, particularly for orchestra, which I loved. Our local youth orchestras. So I had all that going on until I went to University of York, where I first came across a gamelan. And Neil Sorrell, of course, he was a graduate of the Wesleyan program, and actually it was as a result of having that connection, I think, that I ended up being at Wesleyan, although it wasn't that straightforward.

MS: So how did that work, then? So, you came up there and you said, there was a gamelan, and he said, this is what you do?

MM: Yeah. And well he used to teach a course called the music of Java and Bali, and a few other ethno courses like improvisation in non-notated musics, this is going back a while. And I remember the music of Java and Bali was one I took to “broaden my mind,” in scare quotes, because when I went to York, they had this promotional video, and part of it had the gamelan, and I turned round to the person next to me, and I said, you'll never catch me doing that. And she said, you should keep an open mind, it's supposed to be really good. And what was funny was when I got to York, I was the one who decided to do gamelan, and she never did any, you know. So, but I really enjoyed it, I found that all my sort of multi-instrumentalist interests could be sated in one go, so I got involved in gamelan. And, you know, I did the projects and all the rest of it, and one thing I remember about ethnomusicology was it was the subject I got the lowest grades in. And this drove me insane, you know. And because it was the one that made me think, there was nothing that I could say or write down glibly. You know, I couldn't throw it out, 'cause Neil would bring it back with a, well, why do you think this? And is this your opinion? And, you know, blah blah blah, all those niggly questions, drove me mad, and I got the lowest marks for all my papers. And I think because of my personality, that was one of those things that made me—I've got to crack this, you know. Although I didn't really think about it very much. After York, and during York, I did a year in San Diego on an exchange scheme. We had a sort of competitive thing, and I won a year's scholarship. And I went to San Diego mainly to do classical guitar and composition. And I did a little bit of gamelan at San Diego State, which took me a two-and-a-half hours on the bus to get to from UC San Diego, so I did that only for a little while. But I came back, and I was determined that, actually, composition and analysis were what I should do in grad school. Anyway, I carried on playing on gamelan. I was in London, I carried on playing gamelan. I went to grad schools across the U.S., I saved up some money and came and did a little, you know, move from coast to coast. So, I started in California, I went to Berkeley and just poked my nose in about their program. I went to Penn, I went to all sorts of places. And then I came to Wesleyan, not to look at grad school, but because I had friends here, who had lived in the corridor along from me in York. And I thought, oh, well I'll just go into the music department. And I walked into the music department, and went to say hello to Sumarsam, 'cause Neil had said, oh, if you're in Wesleyan, you must say hello to Sumarsam. So I went and chatted to him, and we were in his office for hours, and when I came out, I was going to apply to Wesleyan to do a master's. And then I bumped into you in the corridor actually, and you were talking about (unintelligible) I think, and then he said to me, come back for our gamelan rehearsal this evening and meet some grad students. I met Barry Drummond and Jennifer, and they took me out for a drink, and by the end of my time, I was like, “I'm only going to apply to Wesleyan,” and that's what I did. I only applied to one grad school. My parents thought I was insane, they really did. They were like, what if you don't get in? And I was like, no, this is, this is where I want to be.

MS: Really.

MM: I just had this feeling that I could carry on being all these different musical things simultaneously at this department, which I didn't get from any other of the sort of discussions or interviews anywhere else. So I thought, ooh, I could come to Wesleyan—I have a strong interest in contemporary music, I could learn all this stuff about gamelan of course, that was a big bonus. I could write ethnomusicological essays, which were the things that made me think the most and got the lowest grades, and I could maybe develop in all these different directions, you know, there were all these different musics here. And I just thought, this is where I want to be, and luckily enough I got in. So, I came in 1988 and I started the M.A. here.

MS: Right. So, do you think that Neil—actually Neil's one of the people I'd want to talk to, you know, on this list. Do you think that he was somehow shaped by being at Wesleyan?

MM: I think so. I think—even though he wasn't here for an enormous amount of years.

MS: Right, it wasn't a very long time.

MM: They were very important years to him. And it was, you know, the late sixties, and he talks about all this stuff that was happening here then, you know, the black music department being separate, and the students occupying, you know, the campus and—the buildings, and all the rest of it. But I think there were a number of things that he he found quite amazing about this place, that used to sort of leak out in his great anecdotes. Even about gamelan, and this is an odd thing, but I remember doing the course, and at the end of it I just had this image of gamelan, and then of, like, New England picket fences, and odd buildings, right, that was in my head every time I heard gamelan. And then I came here, and I took one look at the campus, and I was like, that's what I've been imagining, you know, with gamelan.

MS: Really?

MM: It was a very odd sort of thing.

MS: That is very curious.

MM: And he says, he swears to me he never mentioned anything about, you know, New England architecture or anything like that, but, yeah. So, anyway, lots of connections, so I ended up sort of being at Wesleyan, even though I had all of these contacts in Neil, it wasn't an intention of mine. It was just one of these things, at the end of that trip, that seemed obvious. But I do remember, Bonnie Wade, bless her, she took me aside when I went to poke my nose in Berkeley, and I must have caught Bonnie on an odd day, because she wasn't in a good mood—and subsequently she's been wonderful—but she sat me down and said, "Why do you want to do a master's? We don't offer a master's here, they're a waste of time". And I was like, "Well, I don't know about Ph.D. at this stage." And she said, "Well, where else are you thinking about?" And I said, "Oh I don't know, I'm going to look at different places, and maybe I'll look at Wesleyan." And she said to me, "If you like Wesleyan, you'll hate Berkeley, and if you like Berkeley, you'll hate Wesleyan." And I do remember that, and I was thinking, I think I'm going to like Wesleyan when I get there.

MS: That's curious.

MM: Yeah, it was odd.

MS: She has changed on that.

MM: Yeah, I mean she was never like that to me...

MS: That was, 1987, '88 or something? Yeah, she's definitely...

MM: So, anyway, yeah.

MS: Oh, interesting. Well, then, there was nothing surprising or confusing—one of my questions is, like, what was surprising and confusing about coming here? But, did you all, then, just, found it exactly what you...

MM: In terms of the actual program?

MS: Just coming here, you were sort of...

MM: No, America always confuses me. Each time I come back, and I've been living here for thirteen years, because—you see it on the TV, right, and you think you know it, and we all speak English, and we're so familiar with everything American. And then you arrive in America, and there're all these things that just don't make sense. And I find that every time I come back, there's always something which niggles me, I'm like, why doesn't this work this way? You know, that's not logical, or whatever it is. But I, I do remember the weirdest thing about arriving at Wesleyan was—I was determined I was going to do it myself, and I didn't realize that public transport really didn't exist. And I came from New York, and somehow I caught a bus and I ended up, oh, in a town nearby, I can't remember what it was, and I booked myself into a three-star hotel to stay the night, and then I had to pay a fortune to get a cab from there to here. And I was just like, how can it be so difficult to move around, you know, without a car? So that was a shocker. But apart from—you know, it was a very odd sort of beginning, and I think I was here quite ahead of time for the beginning of the semester, so that felt quite strange.

MS: Oh, so you had a lot of time to do nothing and figure out—right, right.

MM: Yes, although I do remember, with my—when I—close to the beginning, I met Maeny in Sears by accident. Yes, that was quite interesting. And I was like, Indonesians! In Middletown, this is so great.

MS: Oh, that's nice, that's nice. So you, so then you picked up on the social atmosphere and, you know—I mean, how did you understand sort of the social atmosphere of the department or the university? Because this is not like York or whatever.

MM: It was very odd, you know, realizing that we were the only humanities or, right, graduate program. I only realized that when, you know, my house, they were all scientists that I ended up sharing with, because I wasn't in India House or anything like that. But, you know, in terms of the graduate students, we were such a tight bunch. It was extraordinary, and everyone was so

friendly and supportive, and, you know, it sounds like I'm sort of obliterating the mean parts or something, in some kind of nostalgic exercise, except that's not how it was. We were really super supportive of each other. And it was such an interesting collection of people. I was definitely the youngest in my year, and I had taken a year off.

MS: There were a bunch of, yeah—that was a nice period, there, with those families, and kind of, people who had been around...

MM: And been professional musicians, yeah. So I felt really out of my depth in one way, but, you know, that was wonderful feeling, because I learned so much from everybody else's experience. It was me and, I think the nearest in age to me was Brian Pertl.

MS: OK, Brian was, yeah.

MM: Who was a couple of years older than me. But, you know, there were all these sort of moments where I'd connect with odd bits of music, because I remember going to my first solkattu class with Raghavan, and he sat me down and he said, oh where are you from? And I said, England. He goes, ah, England, yes, yes, I know two English people really well, you know that classic—Oh, who are they? And perhaps I know them, you know, big joke. And he said, "Mm, guy played the guitar—what's his name? John McLaughlin!" And, he said, "And the other guy, oh I went to his house for a party, what's his name? George Harrison," he's like. And I was like, "No I don't either of those," you know. But it was quite funny because John McLaughlin was a big guitar hero of mine, and I just thought, that's the only time, you know, my name's going to be with his in the same sentence. And I felt very proud of that.

MS: I used to to run into him, his friends coming to Wesleyan, right.

MM: Yeah, but another seminal experience I shall never forget was—one of the early days when I was here I went to the library, and I went to the music library, and I looked up all the old, all the dissertations, you know. And I felt so overwhelmed, because here were all these famous ethnomusicologists and players, like Shankar, and stuff like that. And they'd all been at Wesleyan, and then I felt so proud to be part of, you know, people who had been here. I'd remember that a lot, that was a really odd moment, and I was like, "Oh my god, what am I doing? I'm out of my depth," you know. It was a nice touch with Wesleyan's history, yeah.

MS: Yeah, even then there was already quite a backlog, the nineteen eighty...

MM: Oh god, like Paul Berliner's, you know, stuff, and all these people, I mean—Alan Thrasher, you know, and all these people I'd sort of maybe just heard references to. And, of course, Sumarsam, and...

MS: Well, yeah. So, the sense of lineage seems to be pretty strong.

MM: Yeah, I definitely felt it.

MS: It's so interesting. So, how did you see the faculty as a group? I mean, were they all just individuals, or did you, was there any kind of collective sense of who the faculty were? It was such an assortment of people.

MM: It was a very odd time, I think. So, you might have been the only ethnomusicologist who was actually...

MS: Oh, that was an inter-

MM: Bill Noll came for a year-

MS -period when

MM: Sammie Ann was—I saw her back once.

MS: Oh, right. That was the bad period, right, when we didn't have enough people. It was just before Gage, or...

MM: That's right, it was before Gage came.

MS: Was it before Gage—that's right, because Gage came when you were here, right.

MM: Yes. So in terms of that, it felt—I suppose it felt a bit fractured, though, you know, I never noticed it because, as a group of students we were all so tight. And also there was so much going on, I mean, the music department has these mini-departments of, like, Indonesia and South India and all the rest of it, and West Africa, at that point, you know. And it was, like, it was a bit of a playpen really, and it felt that way.

MS: Well that's good. So you, yeah. Yeah, so you could concentrate on the gamelan.

MM: I was also the only graduate student who was doing gamelan at that point. That was a bit of a surprise, because having heard and known about all these people who had Wesleyan connections...

MS: Well that's interesting. See, it's hard for me to remember the periods and when things peaked and fell, and...

MM: But for at least two, maybe three years.

MS: But Jennifer was already gone.

MM: She was out, in the field, yeah.

MS: Jennifer was away.

MM: Marc was away.

MS: Oh, OK, and Marc was away.

MM: Had been away for a long time.

MS: And then there wasn't anybody really.

MM: But, you know, that really worked in my favor, in the sense that it was like, if they needed something done quickly—ah, teach it to Maria, she'll do it. And I remember being just so excited because at the end of that first year I ended up playing gender in a wayang and gambang in a wayang, and god knows what else. And it was only after a year, and it was simply because we need someone to play in this pathet for, you know, three hours—I'll teach Maria that, you know. So, I got to just live at the World Music Hall, practicing all the time. In fact, Brian Pertl's daughter, Sid, who was about two then, she used to call it "Maria's house." We're going to Maria's house, for a performance.

MS: Oh, that's funny.

MM: Because I'd always be there in the background sort of doing some kind of practice.

MS: Yeah, who was here besides—well, Harjito was...

MM: Harjito was away the first semester.

MS: He was away, so some—there were visitors, right. Oh, the first semester.

MM: Yeah, and I only met him later, so it was just Sumarsam at that point.

MS: But over time, because you were here a while, it kind of then—other people came in, I just can't remember.

MM: Yeah, Jennifer came back with Peter, and Marc came back.

MS: Oh, Marc, right, right.

MM: That was in my third year here, I think, or something, maybe even my last year, I can't remember, it was quite late on. So, yeah.

MS: That you got more of a community.

MM: Yes. So that was quite odd playing gamelan without the community, as it were.

MS: Yeah, that's funny that you did that.

MM: But I learned a lot, as a result.

MS: Yeah, that way, you got extra treatment, right. So, how did Wesleyan seem to you within the gamelan world, then? Because by then you knew something about the gamelan world.

MM: Yes, well, I'd been to Java just before I came to Wesleyan, my first trip. And I remember, in Java, meeting, like, you know, Barry and Jennifer and Marc Perlman, and—of course, I sort of knew about Wesleyan through Neil and all the rest of it. So, yeah, it had this huge reputation. Although it was interesting because there weren't that many dissertations that were finished in the gamelan world. They'd all go off to Java and then do other things, you know.

MS: They disappeared, right.

MM: So that was quite a surprise, it was like...

MS: Yeah, the Ed Van Ness and the Molly McNamara, and these people that didn't...

MM: So, all these people I knew about and even might have read a little about, M.A., or the odd article, you know, like, in *Balungan* or *Asian Music*, which had a lot of gamelan stuff in it in the early days. Ah, no Ph.D.s?

MS: It's—yeah, there was, well, there was Alex Dea, after years, finally. Yeah, it was the famous place where they never returned, right, right. They'd go to Java, they don't come back.

MM: It was very exciting to work with Sumarsam, having read his stuff, you know, in Britain, and all the rest of it. I mean, that was a total treat, and I was his research assistant for a while, and that was very exciting.

MS: So, yeah, it wasn't hard to find a mentor, shall we say.

MM: No. A number of mentors.

MS: So what did Harjito contribute to you in a way that Sumarsam didn't, or...?

MM: Harjito is this—he's kind of like a player's player. And there's something about, having been around a lot of player's players when I was growing up, and things like that, I felt very at home with him. Because, he just does things so musically, and maybe doesn't even talk about it so much. Although he does, sometimes. It's just, there's something that's extraordinarily deep about his—the way he plays, and the way he thinks about music. And, you kind of scratch the surface and it's so exciting, you kind of want to go deeper and deeper. And I think lots of people have had that relationship across the U.S. with Harjito, you know. And he's also, he's such a refined person, in that Javanese sense of *alus*, which doesn't mean he hasn't got a wicked side to him, in the nicest way possible, you know. But, I mean, there's a lot of sort of musicianship and social calm he spreads. But it was wonderful learning with him, because the depth of his playing and his musicianship comes out in everything he does.

MS: Something just came to my mind, but it's already gone. Oh, you're the one that instigated him to do composition, so maybe you could talk about that a little.

MM: Oh, well, you know, when I was a student here, there seemed to be—and I never understood it, and I never really asked—there seemed to be some kind of schism felt between ethno and composition. And then when you talked to people they'd be like, ah, stuff happened in the past, and, you know, whatever. Or there's—there was a separation. And I remember being really really nervous when I had that money for the recital for my Ph.D., and I decided to put on a concert of new compositions for gamelan, because this what I had done a lot of in Britain. And I just thought it might be fun and might kind of, you know, a little bridge across the schism or something. Because it felt like an unnatural schism, because what I'd grown up knowing about Wesleyan was all this stuff going on simultaneously. And so, yes, I asked people to be involved in the concert. So I was sort of directing a few performances of pieces, and there was stuff like—I asked Harjito to write a piece, I asked John to play Godowsky's Java Suite—what else? Marc Perlman did a transcription of an improvisation by Marto Pangrawit, which he did, and there

were a few other things. Oh, I asked Markus Trunk to write a piece for gamelan. So we had a real sort of spread of stuff, and, yeah, and Harjito wrote the piece. And he wrote lyrics as well, and he had to go on sabbatical before it was performed, but we rehearsed it a little bit with him and without him. And he told me later that that was—he hated the process of composing that piece, he found it very difficult, but he said it got him hooked in composing, and then he started composing. So, that was very exciting, very exciting indeed.

MS: Oh, you really, yeah, started a nice chain of pieces. I always bring him to classes to talk about that, that work. And he says, well, you know, it was Maria.

MM: The poem was an acrostic that spelled my name. It was very delightful, the whole thing was—I felt very overwhelmed.

MS: The pieces are so interesting. Are—those piece are played elsewhere, right? Some of them are.

MM: Yes, I think Andrew McGraw got a Balinese group to do a Balinese version of Pak Harjito's piece.

MS: The orchestra piece or the...

MM: This is the one for my recital.

MS: Oh, right, right.

MM: And he recorded that, and Harjito sent me a recording of it.

MS: I know the orchestra has been done a couple of times.

MM: Oh yes, yes.

MS: And the bagpipe piece.

MM: All those, yeah.

MS: And the fiddle piece.

MM: The one for tap dancer and gamelan. I haven't seen that one.

MS: I've not seen the—have I seen that? I don't think so.

MM: I think Royal might have performed it on kit at some point. I'd have to check that, do a—he did a kind of version of it for drum kit and gamelan. But it's worth finding that out. I may have got some of the information.

MS: I don't get the impression that he's composing anymore.

MM: Ah. But you know, it's interesting.

MS: But he's writing these gendhings at the same time.

MM: Oh yeah.

MS: And they're being played in Java.

MM: Oh, and they are definitely compositions of his, because of they have such weird garapan at different points, in wonderful ways.

MS: Oh really?

MM: Yeah, and—another teacher of mine, who was after Wesleyan, Pak Sunarno, who was an amazing dancer—he passed away a few years ago. But he told me, he remembers when they had a klenengan, a nighttime sort of performance gathering, and Pak Harjito came back from America, and he'd been at Wesleyan for a little while, and he brought a koto with him to this klenengan. And he played on the koto.

MS: Really?

MM: Yeah, and he said he played, the way Sunarno talked about it, he said he played—it was all very Javanese style, in some way. And he was quite amazed at that.

MS: Oh, so that's a real Wesleyan thing. Yeah, I think when Harjito was first here, we had koto still, right?

MM: You might want to ask him about that, yeah. But the other thing that made me think that Harjito would write a really interesting piece was because, you know, so many performances at Wesleyan, and at that point, I think, no faculty member could manage to go to all of them. But Harjito was there, all of the performances. I remember thinking, so much stuff must have gone in, you know, it'd be really interesting to see what comes out.

MS: Interesting, because he doesn't anymore.

MM: I imagine you could only keep that up for a while.

MS: Yeah, yeah, no, it's true. I progressively went to fewer concerts over time.

MM: And he studied Bharatanatyam, he studied all sorts of things.

MS: Did he really?

MM: Oh yes, yes, I think he's done most of the classes in performance that were happening at Wesleyan. So I think he had a very sort of cosmopolitan context in which to put his composition.

MS: Oh, very interesting. So yeah, he and Sumarsam seem to be this team, this extraordinary team, where they respect each others'...

MM: Differences...

MS: Contributions, differences.

MM: Yeah, it seems to work very well in class.

MS: It's really extraordinary. Who else did you take classes with?

MM: In my first semester, I did West African drumming, with Abraham. And it was, actually, I think the last semester that Freeman taught. Well, he didn't teach my class, but he came in and played, and he looked very frail. And I did solkattu for a year with Raghavan. And then, later one, I didn't do as much—oh, I did learn shamisen for one semester.

MS: Oh yeah?

MM: I didn't do that much performance, I did steel pans a lot, I remember, when Gage came and started, and I did one of Anthony's classes, which was amazing. When he came. I think it was sort of his 101 improvisation, whatever it was, where we had just millions of people bringing their instruments, and we'd just sight-read Anthony pieces, and—extraordinary.

MS: Which is not easy at all.

MM: No, and then we'd come in and there'd be sort of a free album, on the music stand—go on, take it home, just whatever, I got these in the post, just take them away, that's great, spread the materials, you know. That was an amazing class too.

MS: So, did you use the university, or how did you use the university at all?

MM: That's a good question. I think I only did one class outside of the music department, actually, which was an anthropology class with Ákos Östör.

MS: Oh, with Ákos, oh yeah.

MM: It was Anthropology and Histories. So we did a lot of Sahlins and various other things.

MS: Yeah, because we don't have a Southeast Asian studies, it wouldn't have been that many things to—right.

MM: Oh, I learned Indonesian at SEASSI, the Southeast Asian Summer Studies Institute, in my, end of my first year here. Which—and it was in Hawaii that year. So that was an added incentive. So, ten or twelve weeks of intensive Indonesian in Hawaii, that was quite a mind-warp, in the best way possible.

MS: Definitely, definitely. Yeah, so, it's interesting—there wasn't much of a way for you to use the faculty here.

MM: Outside of the music department, no, not really. I wish I'd done more anthropology, actually, because I've always been interested in it.

MS: Yeah, because, you know, Betsy Traube was actually an Indonesianist, worked in Timor.

MM: But there was so much to do in the music department.

MS: Right, right, it's a world unto itself.

MM: And I feel I didn't do enough of that, almost, as well.

MS: Really, even with all those things you did.

MM: I suppose so, but I remember thinking, oh I should have done more West African drumming, I never did West African dance. Oh, I also did Javanese dance with Maeny for some years when I was here.

MS: That was a nice forty years that's gone. It was a nice, a nice run to have the dance integrated...

MM: Oh, completely. It made me think about music in such a different way, very interesting. And of course, you know, having—Maeny having studied at the academy in the same generation as Sumarsam, she had all this kind of historical information about how dance had changed, which used to come out occasionally, which was really nice.

MS: So then you took some kind of method things with me.

MM: Oh yes, completely.

MS: I don't know if you remember what you took.

MM: Oh, Being.

MS: Being an Ethnomusicologist, right.

MM: And all sorts of—lots of your—I think all the seminars you offered. There was the one on interdis—wasn't it?

MS: Interdisciplinary studies, right.

MM: And we did the image, we did everything about the image.

MS: Oh, OK, it was like visual, right.

MM: Yeah, the visual sort of things.

MS: And here you are doing film and...

MM: Well, I remember in Being, you made us make a film.

MS: That's right.

MM: And we used the studios on campus, and I remember the editing process, where you were actually moving tape and all these ancient things, for that film, was really addictive. I went in

and I somehow came out seven hours later and I hadn't realized the time had gone. I remember thinking, at that point, I really want to do more of it. And it's only now I've come back to that.

MS: That's curious, because as I remember, I didn't allow any editing. I'm just wondering—the whole idea was you had a Super 8 camera, and you had to do a three-minute film, where every frame had to be accounted for, and every shot had to be listed.

MM: It wasn't a Super 8, at this point. It was video.

MS: We didn't do video, did we?

MM: Yeah, yeah, Dora and I made a film about contradance.

MS: Oh wow. The original assignment, well the assignments were always extremely concentrated, and you weren't supposed to...

MM: You allowed certain types of editing, and not others. I remember that. But, you know, we were sort of like, oh, you must get this bit, you know, like that kind of argument in the editing studio, which was wonderful, very interesting.

MS: Which we never managed to teach, we never made a connection with—Ákos would never let anybody take his ethnographic film course.

MM: Well, he was very uncomfortable about having us graduate students. I think it was the first time he'd had us.

MS: Yeah, I know, he was very uncooperative. I could never understand why.

MM: We were a bit confused because, I think he felt that we might dominate the class, so we didn't say much. But then he would criticize us a lot for not being developed enough in our ideas and all the rest, at the end. And we were like, but we couldn't, because we couldn't speak much, you know, without feeling uncomfortable. So, it was an odd situation.

MS: Yeah, I wish he'd been a little more forthcoming, training people because, yeah, he knows that whole world inside out, and worked in it for...

MM: Having taught at U Chicago, where they mix undergrads and grads, I know how difficult that can be, but you just kind of have to go with it, I think.

MS: Yeah, I mean, that's always been the issue here, there are two kinds of faculty, the ones who say, oh sure, you know, that would be nice, and the others say, absolutely not, right? They have too much to deal with, the undergrads. So, the, yeah, we've always appreciated the partners. So, in composition, you didn't actually take formal composition classes.

MM: I didn't, when I was here. I guess I sort of let all that stuff go a bit. I was never the most committed composer, I always always very interested in the craft of composition, but I never felt I had a vision or anything like that that I wanted to, sort of, you know, give the rest of the world. So, yeah, I never did any composition when I was here. I did a few odd things, like, I remember

Miriam Gerberg deciding that she wanted me to conduct and accompany her opera she did, and so I remember being involved in that and doing a variety of musical things like that, but never—not much to do with composition, actually.

MS: Yeah, the—well, it's nice when the grad students collaborate across disciplines, and in their work. But you can't kind of make them do it, it has to just kind of grow up as a part of a process, you know, interaction—yeah, that was not a period. It does come and go.

MM: You see, I think the only—there weren't that many graduate students doing composition then. And, actually, we didn't have to have classes together at that point. So...

MS: Oh, there was no general class.

MM: Yeah, Ben Pasaribu was the person I remember, maybe the only person I remember in my year, who was doing a master's in composition.

MS: Yeah, I don't know the chronology of the composition program.

MM: And then later on, you know, Markus was around, Markus Trunk.

MS: Right, and Markus was here. Yeah, and then he's one of the people on the list, 'cause he works in England, and he's been continuously active, and he was here, so yeah he'd be one of the people to talk to. Let's see, have I covered everything I wanted to? Ah, now we have to talk about how Wesleyan has affected your life, afterwards. Right, this is going very well. I mean, how did you integrate this whole experience into what you did later?

MM: When I went back to England initially, it was to be in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the National Theatre, and so it was more for my gamelan skills. But then I went into gamelan teaching, and the fact that I had this training with Sumarsam and Harjito, even though I hadn't spent an extended time in Java, I kind of had this Wesleyan thing which was my sort of kudos or whatever. And of course what I did out here in those situations was very intense, so I came back a better gamelan player than I went, which is probably a good way to do it than the other way around. So, I think the unfinished Ph.D.s sort of helped me in that way because they knew about my gamelan stuff here. But then, of course, I went on and I did – I founded a gamelan program at the Hallé orchestra, and then I went and became an editor at Grove. And that of course was all on the Ph.D. experience in America. Because Stanley liked to—Stanley Sadie liked to hire people who'd done American Ph.D.s, or had experience of that. And, so I ended up at Grove doing—being the ethnomusicology editor for the next five and a half years or something, it was a long time.

MS: So what did you—you just shelved the Wesleyan—is that when you were still doing the gamelan...

MM: I was still doing—I was teaching gamelan in different parts, and I was occasionally picking up my dissertation, and doing a bit of work, and then—intermittently, you know.

MS: Yes, yes, I remember this, right.

MM: Yes, and coming back every couple of years going, I do mean to finish, I do. Which I always did, but I, you know, it was difficult balancing all these other things. And I was also quite a lot, involved in performance in Britain at this point, gamelan performance of new pieces and all sorts of things. So, I was four days a week at Grove eventually doing that. But the Grove experience was nice because it also put me back in touch with a whole lot of ethnomusicologists as you can imagine, commissioning—because we were in the commissioning stage then, in the, that dividing up the world and seeing how it should be covered state. Yeah, so Wesleyan was very important there because you knew a lot of people, not only in the British scene, but of course in the American scene, so lots of the contributors of course were American. So that was, that was really important. And at the end of my time at Grove, well the reason I gave up Grove in the end was because, I had a dream which relates to Middletown. Is this off-ramp?

MS: This is good, this is good, I love it.

MM: OK, I had a dream one night and I dreamt that I was back in my house at 124 High Street, and I was just visiting, and people said to me, “Oh you’ve got to go to your old house. They really need to talk to you, and not in a good way,” you know. So I was like, “OK,” so I went and knocked on the door and I said, “Hello, I used to live here. I’m Maria Mendonça,” and then the person who answered the door, I have no idea who it was, said, “Oh, you’d better come in. Come up to your old room.” So I went to my big room at the back of the house, and they were like, “Look at how you left it.” And I opened the door, and I hadn’t packed anything up. And at this point in the dream I just got up, in a cold sweat. It was the clearest and most obvious kind of indication of unfinished business I’ve ever had in my life. I was like, ah, “I’ve got to do something about this,” and the next day I went into Grove and I said, “I’m going on an hourly basis, I can’t do this anymore, I have to finish my dissertation.”

MS: Oh really?

MM: And it was interesting because Carol Pegg, who was my boss then, she said, oh, what was it? And I said, “Actually, it sounds silly, but I had a dream and it just made so much sense to me.” And she goes, “Oh no, I’ve done lots of things on whim of dreams.” So, anyway, that’s what I did. So, there you go, 124 High Street made me finish my dissertation.

MS: Well, well, I hadn’t heard that story.

MM: Oh really? So, I funded myself for the rest of the time doing odd bits of gamelan teaching, but that was, I think it was about two years after that point, bit by bit, I finished.

MS: And then you went to Chicago.

MM: Yeah, then I got a post-doc at Chicago, after a year or so. And then from Chicago on to Bowling Green State University for a year, and then...

MS: So, were you applying your Wesleyan principles to having to do classes and figure out how to be an academic? Did you draw on that, or did you...

MM: Oh, a lot, a lot. I think, at Chicago one of the things I ended up doing was a lot of gamelan again. And I remember, when I came, they were like, oh maybe you can do something with

gamelan, because you know in Chicago it's not obvious that, if you're an ethnomusicologist, it's not obvious that you're going to be involved in performance, and certainly not with their gamelan group, which exists somewhat separately from the rest of the music program, and is more a community sort of—but, anyway, there was a lot of connection there. So I feel like I was a bit more of a performance orientated person than maybe—I felt I come from a different background than, definitely, quite a lot of the University of Chicago grads. And for that reason it was a great year, because I sort of explored a different side of things.

MS: Right, so it would've been nice for them.

MM: Oh, well nice for me.

MS: Well, nice for you, you got to use the gamelan. Was that...

MM: Yeah, and also, you know, the kind of atmosphere of the department was very different to Wesleyan, where performance was sort of integrated, and, not—you know, putting at the center sounds, is the wrong way to put it, because it made it sound like we were all mad about practicing and nothing else, but that's not what I mean. It was there very much, everywhere, as opposed to U of C, where there was a lot of theorizing.

MS: Oh, yeah.

MM: It being U of C.

MS: Harvard or Chicago or Yale, and...

MM: And, you know, performance was separate. Lots of people did it, but it was separate, and it wasn't part of the program.

MS: Right, part of the program. So, so you were able to (unintelligible) in designing courses when you were going, like, to Bowling Green, I mean, how did you...

MM: You know, quite—things that have come back again and again—OK, one particular memory which I go over again and again, is being in solkattu with Raghavan, and he'd sit down with people who were, you know, if you were coming at it from an outsider's point of view, you'd go, oh, that person hasn't have much musical talent, or that person can't keep a beat, you know, and a lot of sports players who used to call the course "clapping for credit" in the alternative syllabus, I remember that. But he used to sit down with them, and through thinking about rhythm in terms of maths, because it was all about subdivision, you know, of different sorts, he would get them, at the end of the semester, performing the most complicated things in the most ridiculous time signatures, perfectly, and they weren't thinking about it as being a musical skill, but they were doing it, right. And that blew my mind entirely, because I thought, oh this is, this is what it's all about—you get somebody doing music extraordinarily well, and then—because most of them have hangups about, I'm not musical, I can't keep a beat or whatever. So, that model stuck in my head all the way through my time from Wesleyan, 'cause I was like, you can approach music from a totally different angle, and get the same result, you know. You can bypass all that angst that people have, or those years that people have been told, you're not talented, you know, you can't do this. And I remember trying to be as creative as

Raghavan was, in my own teaching, particularly in gamelan, because I did a lot of stuff with different groups of people who were supposedly not musical talented, if you're going to look at it from a point of view, or, you know, have problems accessing that talent. And I remember thinking, well, if you go around the houses and around the back, you can get to the same destination. But that was something I thought a lot about, the way Raghavan used to teach rhythm. It was all maths. Very effective, you know, and they'd perform these extraordinary things at the end.

MS: Yeah, well, yeah, we still have that with David. They do that particular—yeah it's a particular Wesleyan odd lineage and heritage. That approach to, say, Indian music, is so distinctive here. So those kind of things, in general, though, taught you about pedagogy or something.

MM: I think so, yeah. And also just having all these different—there were lots of things about Wesleyan which were just about, there were a whole lot of little cultures here, you know. I mean, you'd go to Raghavan's house again, you know, for puja or something like that, or just for dinner, and you'd feel like you were somewhere entirely different, and there was a lot to be gained from just sort of being around all these things.

MS: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, definitely.

MM: Oh, one thing I didn't mention is I learned a lot from my fellow students, and I think that's really important, because they were all so skilled at different things that they'd done –

MS: At different things, right.

MM: I was so young, and I just used to think, ah, you know—But they used to bring all that skill into the classroom, and that was something I'd been lucky enough to experience at York as well, where quite a lot of people who were undergrads there had lives in music. And it always, you know, made me think that all this mixture across age is really beneficial for everyone. I learned a lot from that.

MS: Yeah, there were older people, it's like, the Webbs, and, what's his name...

MM: Yeah, and Dora and Stan, you know.

MS: Dora and Stan and Rapson, and...

MM: Rapson, and...

MS: Rumbolz?

MM: Yup.

MS: All those people were here...

MM: Who I met this summer actually in London. But there were lots of people, yeah.

MS: Yeah, they had families and they were...

MM: Mr. Wu.

MS: Mr. Wu, right.

MM: Who I had great discussions with, about gamelan.

MS: Oh really.

MM: Where is the emotion? He thought it was a music without emotion, he couldn't see or hear where the feeling was, yeah. It was quite interesting, we used to have long discussions about that.

MS: That is interesting.

MM: You know, and people like Fred and Hafez and all their discussions about mode, because they were madly into mode, if you remember.

MS: Right, right.

MM: All those things I learned so much about, really, through graduate students.

MS: Yeah, it's one of these programs where the grad students know more than the faculty about all kinds of things, you know. It's just not true in chemistry, you know. It just isn't going to happen. But with us, we had all these extraordinarily qualified people, who know all kinds of things, and, so—let's see, is there anything, yes, that you wish Wesleyan had done that we weren't able to do or that we couldn't get together?

MM: A write-up grant. Seriously, I think that postponed the ending.

MS: We do have that now, we do have that.

MM: That's great, but at the time there wasn't anything. The other thing was, which actually made things tricky but I think I learned from it, was the fact that as a foreign student, and that's nothing to do with Wesleyan, you fall in the cracks when it comes to grants and things like that.

MS: Oh, they were so bad about foreign students, they could never get their—because they weren't used to it, and they're much better, because there are so many foreign students.

MM: Oh, I mean just generally in America, you know, you can't apply for a number of grants and things like that.

MS: Oh, and then there's things you can't do. And then Wesleyan was never good at managing foreign students.

MM: No, no.

MS: They'd always screw up visas and everything.

MM: Yes, I was lucky.

MS: Housing, and whatever. But yeah, you were very limited and, yeah, and there's nothing...

MM: But, you know, I got a wonderful scholarship for the time I was here, and that was extraordinary because I don't think I would have got that scholarship in Britain, there wouldn't have been the opportunity.

MS: No, right, yeah. Yeah, we do have that ability. It isn't quite enough to live on, but it gets you there, sort of.

MM: Yeah, it got me there.

MS: Sort of gets you...

MM: And actually the opportunities for teaching that Wesleyan gives are really important because, you see, there's only a few courses that people were invited to teach, and often that was very late at the time you were a graduate student, and I remember thinking, oh, I was always somebody's research assistant or somebody's T.A. or something, and I learned so much from that. And that actually became important when I was teaching in Britain, you know, because I had teaching experience, which was something that in Britain people didn't often have.

MS: Oh, interesting. Well, and so you're still very connected to this network of people?

MM: Yes, definitely. Socially as well, and we, you know—and, like I was saying, I met up with Rob Rumbolz for the first time in, I don't know, twenty odd years or something like that, in London.

MS: Yeah, I hadn't heard about him in ages. What is he doing?

MM: He's teaching in Wyoming, Montana?

MS: Oh right, somewhere out there, right.

MM: And doing a lot of—it seems to be a lot to do with sound recording, sound recording for film and all sorts of things, and his wife has a—who's a ceramicist, has a position in the art department, and things like that. And they seem well, and they were there with their seventeen-year-old boy, doing a bit of a European trip. So it was nice to connect.

MS: Wow, wow. So, I guess, wow, this is very precise and very interesting how this worked. So, what do you think Wesleyan's contributed to world music generally? That's my wrap-up question. Looking at the world of music today, where would you see Wesleyan's traces, so to speak?

MM: I think one of the things—well they're everywhere, I mean, just thinking about—I told you, you know, one of my guitar heroes at a certain point was John McLaughlin, and then I realized he'd been hanging out here for a bit, at Wesleyan, right, at one point? And it seemed like a lot of roads sort of involved Wesleyan at some point and moved on, you know, Steve Reich and people

like that, you know, sort of at some point connected to here in different ways. And I think that's one thing it does, which I've never encountered a university department quite like that. It sort of brings together people of different interests, but they all encounter something called ethnomusicology, something called creativity, you know, and they can actually make their own sort of way through that. Because it seems like people like, I don't know, Shankar going back to that, and—he hasn't done much ethnomusicology afterwards, but his master's was obviously a way of him exploring things that he needed to explore here. I think that's quite exciting about Wesleyan. It gives you a very rounded view of music, and I loved being at a place where western musicology was a minority interest. It was one of several bits, you know, of the department. And that seemed to me so right, you know? That was what, to me, world music meant before it became, like, a category, a marketing category.

MS: Right, around your time it became a commercial category.

MM: Yeah, yeah, for a bit.

MS: And then we don't know what to do with this word anymore.

MM: Yeah, bury it.

MS: Yeah, yeah, we'd be perfectly happy to...

MM: Except it has, sort of...

MS: Except we don't know what to call it, right. And then people don't want to call it ethnomusicology, so then, it's like, well then, what do we call this, right?

MM: Yeah, but, you know, for that reason I think, you know, you can encounter all these things at Wesleyan in kind of equal measures if you choose to, and that's quite special. Because most graduate programs, you come in on one track, you stay in that track, or you need to make a deal about it and move to another track, you know. And there's the opportunity to take classes in all these different classes, and more, with Jane starting up all the things that she started up, and your theorist doing things.

MS: Yeah, yeah, we really have good people. It's all about who you choose. And that period you came was that unfortunate period when we had a bad couple of choices and the department was off-kilter for a while, because it's all about who you hire, it turns out.

MM: Yeah, although we were such a strong coterie of graduate students, I think, that we got a lot out of it, you know.

MS: So, Matthew, wasn't he here?

MM: Yeah, Matthew was here.

MS: Yeah, Matthew was here, yeah.

MM: Oh, so many people, and that's the thing.

MS: It was a great period, yeah.

MM: That's another thing about it, I think quite a lot of my cohorts I still see, you know, in ethnomusicology doing all of the stuff that we do at SEM or whatever it is, it's like, we're still all there, you know. And that's quite interesting.

MS: Oh yeah, so many of you are just out there in the world from that period, late eighties, early nineties, was kind of a golden age in a certain way. Of people who stuck with it. Oh, well, not all of them we can interview, but I think eventually while they're all still alive, somebody ought to interview all those people and get the whole thing down.

MM: It'd be interesting—I mean, one route you could do is pick an area like, I don't know, gamelan or South Indian music, and just see all the people who've come through, and what they've done. That would be one angle, and then to think about it in a different way.

MS: There's just too many areas and too many people over...

MM: Cross-cut it in different ways, in other words, you know.

MS: Yeah, wow, look at that. that's exactly an hour.

MM: I just prattled on, I apologize.

MS: This is perfect, no, it's exact –

MM: It's all right? I hope I didn't say anything scurrilous about anyone. I don't think I did.