

11-6-2015

## Michael Nixon - Interview with Mark Slobin

Michael Nixon

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### Recommended Citation

Nixon, Michael. "Interview with Mark Slobin." Wesleyan Graduate Studies in Music - Oral History of International Graduate Students. (November 6, 2015) [http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/grad\\_oralhist/12](http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/grad_oralhist/12)

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Michael Nixon: My Skype showed that there was no video available, I don't know why. Yeah, you're looking great.

Mark Slobin: Well, all right, I'm hanging in there.

MN: That's good. A big block of flats outside your window.

MS: Right, yeah, no, I'm in New York. I've moved down here. I'll be retiring next spring and I'm on sabbatical, so I had this little place in New York, so I moved down here. And, so, well, it's really nice, I'm sorry I can't see you, but.

MN: Let me just see if I can fiddle here and talk to the preferences

MS: Oh well. That's technology. So, um, yeah, it's really great to hear from you and it was so nice talking to Sylvia. It's just been totally enjoyable, you know, chatting with people all over the world about their experiences at Wesleyan. I just sort of dreamed up this project and it's been very pleasant to actually do it.

MN: It's a good thing to do.

MS: Over so many decades. So wait, what were your years at Wesleyan?

MN: I got there in '86, and I left, I was there '86, '87, and to '88. In '88 I went to Seattle.

MS: Oh right, ok. So how did you hear about Wesleyan? I mean, how did you get there?

MN: Oh, I knew about Wesleyan through—I knew about two places where ethnomusicology happened, and one was Dartington in England and the other one was Wesleyan. And I think I knew about Wesleyan because of the Explorer Nonesuch.

MS: Oh really, how interesting.

MN: And yeah and then the word got out that this was a very happening place, so. When I went to study music in India I had the intention of spending three years in India and then coming to Wesleyan. So it became nine years in India and then two years at Wesleyan. [laughs]

MS: Ok, ok. So you had this long stretch in India first.

MN: Yes.

MS: I see. That's a long time, nine years, right.

MN: Yes, yes, I miss the place.

MS: Right. So how did you turn your attention to going to graduate school in America?

MN: Well, I wanted to study ethnomusicology and I wanted to go somewhere where Indian

music was also offered. So that's why I thought of Dartington and the US, and somehow Wesleyan came to prominence. Also somewhere they had Carnatic music, where you had Carnatic music, so that was the draw.

MS: But we didn't—yeah, by then we had lost Hindustani music which we had had in the '70s.

MN: Yes, yes. But I hooked up, in India I became a good friend of Zia Mohiuddin Dagar So I had a wonderful contact. And in fact I'm still in touch with his family and some of his students. I hang out with them when I'm in Mumbai.

MS: Oh, ok. Yeah, he was at Wesleyan really back in the '60s, I think.

MN: Yes.

MS: Yeah, that's before, even before my time I think.

MN: He was there before your time [laughs].

MS: They came to perform once in my time, I remember, you know, “the return of the Dagar brothers” or something like that. Which was very impressive, needless to say. Extraordinary people. So, when you, there you found yourself in Middletown CT. So what was it like arriving in such a different place?

MN: Well, I must say I was a bit shocked. I expected that my schooling and everything had prepared me for—I would just fit right in. And I actually found it was really quite other. Actually more culture shock than I did moving to India.

MS: Ok! So you can talk about that a little bit because that's so interesting.

MN: And I was most surprised that that should be the case, and I found, I think, afterwards I came to understand it as living in a place where white people were in the majority. [laughs] And I accepted that, then I thought, “Oh, ok. Now I understand.” That's the big difference.

MS: Really.

MN: Because I had never lived in a place like that before. I think it was also New England. I found New England quite an odd place. People's kind of sense of humor and so on, I found it quite strange. [laughs]

MS: In what kinds of ways, right.

MN: Well, just judging from the typical New England grad students across the campus, and so on, and people in restaurants, somehow kind of pick on one aspect of one's personality and then kind of hone in on that and not, you know, I think teasing is fine, but this seemed to me a bit going beyond. It just seemed to be a peculiarly kind of East Coast thing. Maybe I was, I didn't find that in Seattle. There was a different kind of a sense of humor over there.

MS: I mean, a need to stereotype people and kind of make assumptions about them? That's sort of American.

MN: Yeah, I don't know if it was stereotypes. I think they just picked on one, yeah, I guess, they did make assumptions and then hone in, and I was like, "This is a bit odd."

MS: Oh, interesting, interesting. But the music community of course was rather different, though?

MN: The music community was very different. And wonderful, actually. Yeah. That was fantastic. And yeah, and both the, I mean the sense of the American people coming from all different parts of the country and bringing all sorts of experiences, so that was big, as well as obviously the international students. Yeah, I mean, it's just a pity about distances. It's not easy to keep, maintain those friendships and contacts. As casually and as often as one would like.

MS: Yes, that's the trouble with getting global and cosmopolitan, is that you never see anybody you really like, you know.

MN: Exactly.

MS: So who was in your cohort of students?

MN: A whole bunch. I think I sat in your class with Jay Pillay. Matthew Allen. And then there was also Maulu Purba. Fred Stubbs was around. And Marcie had, was just leaving - she had finished up. Off to do fieldwork. Who else? Uh, David Yih— And so on, yeah, quite a few. I think David, Dennis Waring had just finished up working with David McAllester. Yeah so it was a nice bunch, a really nice bunch.

MS: So you still managed—in the faculty—was McAllester still there?

MN: No, he had just...

MS: He had just left, right.

MN: But he, but there was quite a lot of contact with him. Yeah, he was a lovely guy. We actually got thrown out together, we got thrown out of the sauna when we went to an SEM meeting in Ann Arbor. Because there were a bunch of people sitting around in the sauna late at night, chatting, and then they threw us out because we weren't hotel residents.

MS: Oh, I see! [laughs]

MN: At two in the morning, David and I and others were very sheepishly going out into the night.

MS: Oh, I can imagine this, right. I remember that convention. I don't remember there being a sauna though, that's funny. Yeah, David would still come to meetings for a while, yeah. Yeah. And who else in the faculty, who did you study with actually?

MN: Um, apart from you it was Viswa and Cynthia Schmidt.

MS: Oh, Cynthia Schmidt.

MN: Yes. So she did a lot of the kind of theory stuff with us, the methods courses and so on. And then I took a few extra courses, it was, Bill Lowe was around. I sat in on his African American music course.

MS: How did you find that?

MN: That was great. I really enjoyed it. We got his version, his take on things. So we got on well. It was an interesting class. Interesting because of who was also, the other students who were in the class.

MS: Was Barlow, Jon Barlow was still around?

MN: Yeah, Jon was around. But I never, somehow never took classes with him. I would love to have, but I just didn't have space on my platter for it. [laughs]

MS: So what was it like studying Indian music in New England with somebody like Viswa, you know, it's kind of—

MN: It was actually frustrating because I had so much schoolwork to do. So much reading and so much writing to do. And then I needed to really, really spend hours and hours on what he was teaching me. He straight away started teaching me at quite an advanced level. So I was quite frustrated, actually. I felt I could never do justice to what he was bringing. Yeah, that was rough. [laughs] I would have had to get B's all around, if I had, if I had put in the time I needed, you know. It was a shock to the system.

MS: And it's different learning that, because you had learned so many musics in India, but this was a different pedagogy, right.

MN: Yeah. Yeah. Because here (unintelligible) for working in America, which was great, actually, I mean, he was an excellent, excellent teacher. I must say his teaching really influenced the way I teach today. Working with students, with the handful of students I have. So I kind of blend the way I worked with my vina teacher and with Viswa, you know.

MS: And Ranga was still there, at the time, right?

MN: The day that I arrived was the day that Ranga had the stroke.

MS: Oh, really.

MN: Yeah, and I had dinner with Viswa, and he dropped me home around 9:30, and then he went home to get the news about Ranga's stroke. So I went down in the morning to see him, to the hospital, and Ranga was busy teaching. I mean, he'd had the stroke the night before and was busy teaching me some solkattu.

MS: Really! Wow.

MN: This is extraordinary, he was unaware of the stroke. And he was going on with this energy of rhythm that was extraordinary. Really, really quite something. I've got it written down, and I'm not quite sure that I wrote it down accurately [laughs] Yeah. And so, yeah, so I used to try to see him, but I was stuck, you know, without a car. It wasn't easy to get out to see him as often as I would have liked.

MS: What a different encounter.

MN: The person, you know, who I learned a lot from, although I don't think she would remember me as well as her formal students, though, was Betsy Traube. I took a course with her and then I sat in on one or two of the other courses she taught. She was a really good, really good teacher.

MS: Oh that's nice. Yeah, I was gonna ask you what you did outside the department.

MN: Yeah, mostly stuff with Betsy, and there was also Greg Schremp. So yeah, those guys mostly.

MS: Yeah, I had forgotten about him, right. He did sort of, Pacific, or something? What did he work on? I forget.

MN: Yeah, he, I really just sat in on a course where he was doing the kind of philosophical—it was kind of a course where Betsy taught the history of, historical aspects of anthropology and he did the philosophical side. So we looked at the great chain of being, and we looked at Boas' contribution as an intellectual, and his contribution to the intellectual history of the discipline and America. He was very good at that, it was great.

MS: So anthropology, and yeah, it's funny what else was going on in that period. You know, there's so many generations, I've been so long that it's hard for me to remember particular periods, what was going on in the particular period of time.

MN: Well the other think that was happening, performance, I guess I took, I sat in the gamelan for a semester, with Harjito and Sumarsam. I did a course with Wu on Chinese music. That was fantastic. I hung on to that and tried to build a kind of interest in Chinese music. I always insist on teaching it. I can remain in touch, you know?

MS: Oh, well that's nice.

MN: I try to keep in touch with him although I must say it's a couple of years since we chatted.

MS: I did see him in China, a bunch of us went to China and he was so glad to see me and everything. It was very nice. Yeah.

MN: And also that was, Cage came, you know, for that—

MS: Oh, of course, he was there for the big festival.

MN: That was great fun.

MS: That was an amazing event.

MN: Yeah, yeah, so, when you guys were doing that clock, that star—

MS: Oh, Atlas eclipticalis.

MN: Star piece, we were down below, doing the tape loops while you guys were sitting up on the bridge there, playing away. With the orchestra. It was really lovely. [laughs]

MS: It was one of the, yeah, more memorable Wesleyan events, that festival. Yeah, it was nice you were there for that. So what was your interaction, then, with the composer people and the experimental music wing?

MN: Great. I must say. Well, I really enjoyed, especially, you know I was sharing an apartment with Mladen Milicevic and of course there was Doug Kahn, and the wonderful Chris Schiff. A wonderful Sovietist of note. [laughs] Or some such thing. Dadaist, maybe. Yeah, I had a lot of fun with those guys. And yeah, and I think, also the, with Alvin, was a big—I just loved the way that he, he works with nature, you know. Kind of Pythagorean stuff. But that was a big inspiration, I loved that. More than the Cage, I must say. But I must say I loved the way that Jon interpreted the prepared piano pieces, Jon Barlow. I thought it was one of the best of the conference.

MS: Yeah, it was, quite, it was extraordinary.

MN: Outstanding.

MS: Yeah, he did the concerto with the orchestra. That was very good quality. Yeah.

MN: It was very very good.

MS: Wow, that was a nice period you were there for, actually, thinking about it.

MN: Right, just so rich, it was marvelous. And you know, I went to Seattle, thinking that it would be very good to have a new set of experiences, but in fact they just kill you, killed me with coursework, basically. Yeah, and shortly after I left, they finally had an audit, and they said, well

the said to the folks, “You do realize that you have the heaviest courseload of any Ph.D. program? And the highest drop out rate of any program.” [laughs]

MS: Oh. Who did you study with there?

MN: Oh, with, mostly with Ter Ellingson. In his own, deliberate, way. And with Chris Waterman of course. And then I had to take a bunch of courses, you know, world music courses, so there was Irene Markoff. There was, um, who else taught those things—and then I did a bit of jazz history, and theory, and I had to do Western music, not theory but history, loads of, loads of those courses. And I did a couple of anthropology courses. Simon Ottenberg.

MS: Oh, very good.

MN: And so on. So yeah, I did a few things.

MS: My goodness, yeah. Heavy duty. So you certainly had this prolonged exposure to the American educational system.

MN: Yes, yes. After Seattle I said, I could teach anything in a way—“You want me to talk about—South American stuff, or Bulgarian? No problem, I can do it.” [both laugh]

MS: Yeah, that’s the American world music approach, right.

MN: Exactly.

MS: Particularly Seattle. They did this thing of trying to cover everything. You know. We did, we were more selective because we had more people in residence than they did. We were more selective in our areas.

MN: Exactly.

MS: Yeah, a different philosophy. Huh. So what did you do, what was your master’s thesis about?

MN: I wrote about this, the development, I suppose, of this piece called - it was a music theater piece - called Nantanar Carittiram.

MS: Oh that’s right, I remember that.

MN: Dalit singing, too. And how it moved through different performances all the time. So, yeah, I was deeply dissatisfied with the piece of writing I turned in. [both laugh] I think it was far too big a thing to bite off. I should have taken one small bit of it. [laughs] In retrospect.

MS: Yeah, I think Balasubramanian, who teaches now, in the department, I think he has done more research on that.

MN: Oh. He sings beautifully, I've been looking at his videos. He really sings beautifully.

MS: Well, there's this kind of odd way we could continue the Viswa tradition while getting somebody younger who also teaches film music and folk music and expands the range in a sense, and is younger, and he had studied with Viswa and knew the repertoire, which was quite surprising for us to find someone because that lineage has kind of died out.

MN: Yeah, yeah. That's why I try to keep teaching, but it's hard to find people who are serious.

MS: Yeah, I suppose so, right. Right. Interesting. So yeah, in terms of the long range, kind of impact of your experience at Wesleyan, it sounds like a number of things have stayed with you.

MN: Very much so. I have all my class notes! [both laugh] Occasionally, once every three years, I make a pilgrimage to where I have the file and have a look.

MS: Oh, really.

MN: It's fascinating, I can tell you what you said on the 19th of—

MS: Oh my god. God knows what I was saying in those days, right.

MN: And then of course I've been following people's work. Following yours in particular, I must say. I got a lot of, a great deal out of the interaction with you. I really really enjoyed the small, the seminars we had, they were fabulous.

MS: Oh, ok. Good.

MN: And you know what I liked too, were the colloquia, that you organized. That was specifically on the sister disciplines, you know.

MS: Oh yeah, that colloquium, the interdisciplinary seminar, right.

MN: Yeah, that was great. I enjoyed that. And I used to try and go along on Monday nights to the, is the college—

MS: The Center for Humanities, right.

MN: Yeah, I used to enjoy those. I could never make the following day—

MS: Right, right, nobody ever does.

MN: —the response, unfortunately, because that would have been great.

MS: Yeah, yeah, the Center has actually gotten a new sort of life with this current director, who is quite an interesting guy.

Um, so it continues, actually, as an institution. Actually, Wesleyan has changed remarkably little, in all this time. It's amazing. I mean, the new people come in, the new ethnomusicologists, and we kind of replace people—we're now in the situation of having to replace people that are leaving. We're doing the big celebration tomorrow for retirement of Abraham Adzenyah. Who has been there since 1969, right. Yes, and he's finishing now, there's a big event tomorrow, a lot of old students coming back. African music being celebrated.

MN: Yes, oh great. That's great. Well, I'm due to retire here, next year. The end of next year, I'll be 65 in April, so I will leave at the end of next year and I'll have to reinvent myself because I can't afford to retire, so [laughs]

MS: Well, yeah, right! This is the, you have the mandatory system, I guess. We don't. Right.

MN: Yeah. I don't know why they do it because it's not like there's a plethora of people in many of these fields.

MS: Yeah. So, yeah, I think it would have been hard to quit at 65. One is still energetic and still, you know, running along.

MN: Yeah, exactly. Well I'll be, you know there's at least two things that I'm involved in, we have an archive in public culture thing going here that I'm kind of involved in, and there's also a bigger thing which is, at the moment, called Re-orienting Afro-Asia, which is an attempt to train a whole generation of African scholars looking at Afro-Asian interactions. Looking across, so it's looking at themes and arcs and connections rather than looking at localized studies.

MS: Uh huh. Interesting. So this would be, like India and China probably, right.

MN: Yeah, and at the moment, I'm trying to (unintelligible) my total lack of knowledge about Persia. Which as you know is hugely influential. Especially in East Africa, South Asia—

MS: Oh, that's interesting.

MN: Kind of fun! But the nice part of it is it has a creative component. We just finished a piece now, which is the third instantiation of something called Insurrection, so we did Insurrections III, where three, there were three poets involved, from, two from India and one, Ari Sitas, from here, who's heading the whole thing. And so they did a take on, what's his name, [Sangore's?] tape of the Tempest. And then we had all the musicians coming and working on new compositions for it. [I believe Insurrections III was based on Aime Cesaire's Tempest – hrb] There was a lot of—it was actually blisteringly hot, performance, and it got people going. It really attracted a lot of attention.

MS: Oh, ok. So the world music idea seems to be coming in.

MN: It was very very interesting. They had things like, the musical bow alongside sarangi, sarod, jazz guitar—Jazz orchestra, you could say, It was jazz guitar with pedals and the world. Actors, or one actor, one woman, uh, and then an Indian singer and a South African singer.

And it looked remarkably well. And there was a certain amount of workshopping, but mostly people worked on their own and we got together on the Tuesday, we performed the Friday and Saturday. It was great fun. [laughs]

MS: Yeah, yeah. Well that's interesting, the sort of world music idea is, seems to be implicit there, and it's something that you're familiar with, right, yeah.

MN: Yeah, and well it's, I think it was also the quality of the compositions was that good, that we could get by with, confidently go ahead. Because we had the guy that played the sarangi had worked with that Silk Road—.So it was that quality of musician. We went along very well. [laughs]

MS: If you have good enough musicians you can do anything, right, yeah.

MN: You can do anything. Yeah. As long as it—but the material, the content, was very—very to the point, politically. And very powerful. In fact, I got quite scared at one stage, during the first performance, I thought, my god, this really is a terrifying vision to be working with.

MS: Wow. Huh. Well, are there other things about Wesleyan that come to mind that you want to chip in? I mean, we're just going to put these in a file, and at the archive, you know, and see what happens later. But, so anything else that occurs to you?

MN: Oh, I can go on and on and on. It was, well, my decision to go to Seattle, as it turned out, was not (unintelligible), I really much wanted, very much felt I should have stayed on at Wesleyan. But having gone there, ok, I was there, so then—So that was the overriding thing. I really really enjoyed the undergrads, I must say.

MS: Oh, well that's interesting.

MN: —to do with music. You know, you had this, there were a lot of very wealthy kids, and they kind of fell into two camps, basically, broadly, complete brats [Mark laughs] and absolutely fabulous. So, and it was, that sit-in at the President's office, to try to force something about sanctions. But that was a good time to be—

MS: Oh right, that was the South Africa period, right, yeah, yeah.

MN: Yes, there was this whole protest that went on for two weeks. And so in between writing my thesis I was going, basically, would go and have meals with them. We'd discuss stuff. And, so I got to know some of the undergrads. It was great to meet them at that level, you know.

Their intelligence and that, I love that. I think it's also great to study in a little college, in a little town, although I sent a letter to, in the days when one sent letters, I'd written a letter to a friend of mine in Greece and he wrote back saying, "My god, could you get a more, couldn't you possibly have gotten a more bland address than 'High Street, Middletown'?" [both laugh] Yeah, so, in a small town, you can just walk across and knock on the door and say, "What do you make

of this?” It was wonderful, really really wonderful.

MS: Oh, that’s good.

MN: Although not having transport was very difficult.

MS: Yeah, I know, that’s a problem.

MN: I would have liked to go and explore the coast, and so on.

MS: Right, or go to New York. Or Boston, or you know.

MN: Instead I’d just jump on a bus and go down to New York.

MS: Oh, you did.

MN: Well, I needed to get into the big city, you know, I’m used to being in big cities! [both laugh] These small towns get you after a while. Go and get some live music, and so on.

MN: I miss it!

MS: Nice.

MN: Yeah, I would say, every resource was available, the library was fantastic, I had a little cubicle in the library. And yeah, it was—you just felt, the day was far too short. To take in all that was offered. And then to, I never had enough time to write and do justice to it. To process all the stuff that I wanted. But I mean that’s just a university experience. You force yourself to do it.

MS: Right, right. Exactly. You, well it sounds like you really knew how to take advantage of everything that was around, so. That’s good, yeah. And it left some kind of, you know, lasting sensibility in your mind about doing things.

MN: Yeah, well you, it was, I found it very generous and, you know, one could get sentimental but you notice that sharing as well as debate.

MS: Well, it’s great to talk, I mean, you know, I’ve just so much enjoyed being in touch with people after so long and, you know, hearing the stories and the continuity. These technologies are amazing for this.

MN: And I will, I think at home I will be able to have video access there, so I’ll give you a brief (unintelligible) in the future.

MS: Yeah, that’ll be very nice to be in touch. I’ve never been to South Africa somehow, but it remains a fascinating place, if difficult.

MN: Oh god yes. It’s forever—we’re never uninteresting people. [both laugh]

MS: Yeah, right!

MN: I don't know if you've been following what the students have been up to, all over the country. They marched on the, well first there was a lot of stuff going on on the campuses, "the fees must fall"—

MS: Right. And they switched it back, right.

MN: And then, so they marched, they broke over the gates of Parliament and they walked right up to the doors of the Parliament before they were turned back by the police. Which was, actually it was great because, this is an issue, it's a governmental issue, it's not the universities. So at least they got it right [laughs]

MS: Well, you know, nobody does that here, it has no effect, it's sort of dispiriting in this country. So it's nice that people actually have a tradition of taking activist stances and getting something out of it.

MN: Things are rough, I mean, times are very tough economically, you know, so it's that—and it's also, you know, this generation, fed up with the government and the carryings-on.

MS: Right, right. Well, great to talk and I hope we'll be in touch in some way.

MN: How's your daughter doing, by the way?

MS: My daughter's good. She lives in New York too so I see her. She's fine. I mean, yeah. So that's nice.

MN: Excellent, oh that's great. Yeah, I wouldn't have put you at 73!

MS: [laughs] It creeps up on you, somehow it creeps up on you. I don't know.

MN: I guess it does.

MS: Ok, take care Michael, good to talk. Bye bye.

MN: Ciao.