

MEMORIES

MEMORIES OF MY FRIEND: MITCHEL STRUMPF

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INTRODUCTION

Mitch pronounced “Long Island” with a hard “g” when he described where he lived for a time in the north-east of the US. It made us smile. He always followed his words with a brilliant, infectious smile, too. And small groups of us always stood there, smiling back at him, waiting at airports, ships, trains and bus stations for a chance to welcome him with giant hugs as he moved in and out of our lives. Mitch was such a genial, loving human being that we wanted to be near him. He was filled from head to toe with such an overflowing, warm, and caring energy that we felt like we had known him forever. We felt the burst of his positive energy each time we welcomed him from his travels or arrived from ours. And it was like that from the very first day we met him to the last time we said goodbye. Mitch was a reliable force of nature that has affected all of us who knew him in many ways.

I don't think I'm usually conscious of the different ways in which I relate with colleagues in academia. For example, I had never really thought about the different roles Mitch played in my life while he was alive. In the wake of the news of his death, I sat in stunned silence, trying to imagine the shape of the void his loss had opened in my life. What was he to me? How would his absence affect my life from that moment? And, I realised, I was not the only one. His absence was going to affect so many of us, and in different ways. Because of the roles he played and the contributions he made, he was all of these: Friend, teacher, guide, host, colleague, mentor, and ‘family.’

THE LIFE

I began a list of the roles Mitch played in my life and those I observed, over the years, in the lives of his colleagues. Memories of experiences with him flowed through my mind.

To many of us, Mitch was a loyal and loving friend. He was fun! His laugh, his sense of humour, and his delight were always there – though even sometimes with an edge. Mitch was a creative collaborator, a generous colleague, a solicitous interpersonal facilitator, a communicative link between us, an

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effective teacher, a jovial host, a charismatic leader, a thoughtful guest, a gourmet cook, a motivated researcher, a confident organizer, a talented clarinetist, dedicated musician and ethnomusicologist. He shared his encounters with people his students needed to know or know about. He used opportunities to forge links between his students and the musicians, scholars and educators he knew, creating settings in which these relationships could be optimised. The Ethnomusicology Symposium at the University of Dar es Salaam is only one of such examples. The idea came to him when he realised that Gerhard Kubik and I were going to be in Dar es Salaam at the same time, and he could add others to the mix and create a forum for ethnomusicological dialogue. The 10th Anniversary of the Symposium had been celebrated. He was tireless in creating and promoting such socio-cultural educational opportunities for everyone in his neighbourhoods.

One Friday afternoon in the 1980s, Mitch was waiting for me with his suitcase when I got off a bus at a corner of a street in Manhattan near Columbia University. We had decided to meet there when we realised that he would arrive at JFK airport in time to meet with teachers during a two-week summer course I was teaching at Columbia, and he could be a guest in my class that very afternoon. It was so outrageous and worked so unexpectedly well that we just stood there, with our suitcase and briefcase, laughing with delight! He was always ready to create an adventure or take part in someone else's.

He welcomed me to Malawi six times as a music education professor, teaching short courses and workshops. During five of the visits, as I remember it, he delivered me directly from the Blantyre airport to a meeting with choral directors on the plateau above Zomba where, in a house belonging to the Anglican Church, we played and studied the 10 compositions entered to be the first, second and third prize-winners for choral pieces created especially to communicate the theme of the annual Chancellor College Choral Festival. I remember the year that Life President Hastings Kamuzu Banda closed the Chancellor College because of civil unrest, sending home the students who were supposed to be in the choir I was to conduct. The songs written for that choir dealt with the theme of the concert: "Girls Staying in School." The choral festival that year was partly sponsored by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), which was sending representatives to attend the concert.

Because the choral festival was not cancelled, Mitch had to find a choir to sing the three prize songs that we had selected. Of course, the songs were in Chichewa, so Mitch contacted the Ministry of Health in Lilongwe, with whom I had worked the previous summer on a song related to "child-spacing as important to health." Some singers from the Ministry's choir (that performed songs in villages that communicated wellness practices) came by truck to sing in the choir I was to conduct. The word also went out in the neighbourhood,

and many young children came to sing. Mitch made a list of sentences in Chichewa, so I could communicate with the Chichewa-speaking adults and children during the rehearsals each day of the week of the performance. The night of the performance, many of the children on the risers were new to me. They stood at attention. Among those singers from the Ministry of Health were women with babies fastened to their backs. As we began our performance, it was clear that the children who had attended the rehearsals had taught the others the songs, because they were performed very well and with such fervour that one UNICEF representative was in tears at the conclusion of the three prize-winning compositions, the second of which was conducted by a girl from a nearby elementary school. Mitch could always manage to make things work, even if there seemed to be no resources or possibilities. He just made things happen.

Years later, Mitch picked me up at the airport in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, five or six times, in as many years. The first time he drove me from the airport, in his car, to the national Saba Saba Festival at the Dar es Salaam show grounds, at the University of Dar es Salaam pavilion where the UDSM Choir, under the direction of Dr. Kedmon Mapana, was gathered to sing for the people attending the Dar es Salaam International Trade Fair (DTIF). It ended up being such fun, because Mitch decided to move the choir out of the plaza in back of the building, where they could not be heard, to the street in front of it, where people by the hundreds stopped to hear the choir and the instrumentalists' accompaniment (The performance became even more audible after I convinced the neighbouring merchants, up and down the street, to switch their amplifiers off, which were featuring Tanzanian "Bongo Flava" music, so they could hear the choir, too.) Unexpectedly, even Kikwete, then President of Tanzania, came by with his entourage, and paused as the choir sang. Mitch changed the physical settings and contexts to make them more welcoming and effective not only to optimise his students' performances but also to make meetings and academic gatherings more welcoming for those involved.

One time, Mitch spent several hours with my husband, Elon, and I in our only visit to the airport in Harare, Zimbabwe when we were on transit on our way to Mozambique. We sat on coral-coloured plastic chairs, enjoying Zimbabwean beer as we reminisced. He was such a social being, who would make every effort to be in contact with friends who appeared, however briefly, in his neighbourhood.

Countless times, over the years, he arrived at Sea-Tac Airport in Washington, and we took him home with us. We had many adventures in the North-west, and, of course, I knew him, in class, was grateful for his work in Robert Garfias' Ethnomusicology Archive, and was on his doctoral committee at the University of Washington, with James Carlsen as his Doctoral Supervisor.

Some of the experiences with Mitch featured his gourmet cooking! His peanut soup, Ghanaian-style, was highly respected. All of us, around the world, remember his cheerful “Bon appetit!” as he served us food.

Mitch had a shell-fish allergy, and we were all careful about that. One time, he had a terrible reaction – anaphylactic shock – after eating at a Seattle restaurant. I called to alert Swedish Hospital staff in the Ballard area of Seattle, while my husband raced him to the hospital with Mitch gasping for breath. He was there for 24 hours - at the end of which he was healthy, and deeply thankful. However, clutching his new Epi-Pen, he was also rueful because his favourite, gorgeous, Tanzanian-made dashiki-style shirt had been cut away by the medical staff and was ruined. Mitch valued the material things he utilised in his work, including his equipment and all his belongings (including the briefcases which he wore or carried with him at all times). However, he was completely generous with everything, as well, including putting so many students through school either by paying fees, providing room and board or both.

What is it of all that going and coming that I will miss most? I am astonished at what has flowed from my keyboard. I think the greatest loss is that he was such a loyal, loving and responsive friend to me. And I think many others will agree.

Mitch paid attention to all those around him. He was curious and interested in us all. He delighted in our diversity, listened to our plans and made use of our unique qualities. He had a powerful effect on us. He saved Peter Dubbey, the youngest son of the Vice Chancellor of Chancellor College, from an attack of “fire ants” by ripping his clothes off and picking each of the ants off his little body after the tiny boy had interrupted a line of ants on a path as we hiked on Malawi’s Kuchawe plateau above Zomba. He brought the Head of the Department of Education in the Gambia to lunch in our home in Seattle as one instance of the times he worked for the US State Department, guiding summer trips in the US for visiting dignitaries from African countries while he was getting his doctorate.

At some point, Mitch was introduced to an outstanding singer and story-teller in Malawi, who accompanied himself on the flat, several-stringed board zither which the musician identified as a “zeze.” Later on, after renewing acquaintance with him and getting his permission, Mitch invited me to make a recording of his performance. I was thrilled to be allowed to do it, and recorded him the only time I had no tape in the tape recorder. Mitch never teased me about it, just gave me a hug and recorded him, himself, with no fuss. The zeze player’s wife had two very young grandchildren with her, observing the performance, and gave each of them a large grasshopper to eat when they became restless. I remember her with such pleasure: A lovely

woman, on a lovely day in Malawi, with wonderful music, a powerful musician and kind, ethnomusicological hospitality for an all-too-human guest. This was one of a host of memorable events during the first of many trips with Mitch, and, later on, with Dr. Kedmon Mapana, into rural areas in Malawi and Tanzania to hear music and meet musicians.

One could go on and on, asking Steve Friedson about our visit to his research site with the healer, Chicanga, in northern Malawi, or Jeanne Zolezzi about our time in Eugene, Oregon in the US putting Mitch on one of his many US bus trips to visit his brother Burt and sister-in-law, Christl, or his brother, Leon in California. Or when Mitch, with Dumisani Maraire as an Interport Lecturer from Brazil to South Africa, substituted for me on the faculty of a 1998 voyage of Semester at Sea, after my diagnosis with cancer, and my chance to substitute for him on the faculty of the Fall, 2005 voyage of Semester at Sea, after his heart attack in Myanmar. Or adventures with Lewis Kashiri, including *gruyere*, scrambled eggs from Aaron Urio and his wife. Or Emmanuel Muyenza and game parks. Or Garvey and clarinet lessons. Or...Or...We will always remember him with grateful smiles.