International Journal of Multiculturalism
Volume 2, № 2, 2021, 89-96
DOI: 10.30546/2708-3136.2021.2.2.89

70TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION: INTERVIEW WITH MR.JEFFREY WERBOCK

The American who devoted his life to the goal of raising the profile of Azerbaijani culture, people, and history among the countries of the world and making it recognizable.

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Our guest is Mr. Jeffrey Werbock. He was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1951. In 1971 he moved to Los Angeles, California and the following year he met an elderly man from Daghestan who played traditional Azerbaijani music on one of their native instruments, the kamancha. From the first moment of listening to this strange and ancient music, Jeffrey was completely enthralled. With the guidance of Mr. Avshalomov, he began to study the cultures and peoples of the Caucasus Mountains, with a strong emphasis on the traditional music of Azerbaijan. Only one year after they met, Jeffrey and his teacher moved to Brooklyn where they shared an apartment. After three years of intensive work together, Jeffrey moved to Manhattan in order to be closer to the center where world music began to acquire a following while continuing to study music with his teacher until he passed away in 1987. Mr. Avshalomov's passing prompted Jeffrey to go to Azerbaijan in search for more teachers, wishing to advance his understanding of Mugham. Since then, he has given hundreds of concerts and lecture demonstrations at museums, colleges, universities and community concert venues in the United States, Europe, Israel and Azerbaijan.

KHM: Let's begin with introducing yourself to our esteemed readers.

JW: I was born in 1951 in Northeast Philadelphia, a sparesly populated rural suburb at some distance from the older neighborhoods. Next to our house was a field of corn with an occasional cow that would poke its head through an open window. My grandparents were Jewish immigrants from Austria, Romania and Ukraine and my parents were born in Philadelphia. Our neighborhood, at the time, was almost entirely Christian; we lived next door to my maternal aunt, uncle and grandmother. Except for them, we were the only Jewish family in the neighborhood. The significance of this escaped me; I was too young to understand the meaning of it.

There was a piano in our house; Mom would play on it, sometimes Dad would sing. He had a marvelous baritone voice. My aunt's older daughter took piano lessons; music making seemed normal and I thought everyone did it. Mom died when I was four years old from an undiagnosed heart condition aggravated by some pharmaceutical drug she was taking to help her lose weight; it was 1955 and no one thought about those things back then. I was present when she collapsed and died; the memory is with me until today.

We moved and the piano came with; Dad decided I should have piano lessons. That lasted for a few weeks; I didn't like the lessons. The melodies were insipid little compositions interesting for children; rather than practice them, I enjoyed pressing on the keys and just listening to the effect the sounds made on my feelings. I was amazed by the phenomenon of the octave interval; here are two notes that are clearly different, yet they sound the same! I was perpetually shocked by that. I remember thinking, what is reality that something like the octave actually exists.

When I was ten, I "borrowed" my older brother's acoustic guitar and observed a similar effect on the guitar when I played octave intervals, but on a guitar, you can pull on the strings, raising the pitch slightly which caused the guitar to produce these weird vibrations that you could control by the amount of pulling, or stretching, of the strings. I could make the intervals produce a soft "wow" sound, or a rapidly beating pulse. I was amazed. Soon I tried to copy the Spanish Flamenco music I had heard from our record collection but it was way too difficult to reproduce so I just started to make up my own melodies. Eventually I learned

chords too but I did not take music lessons. My middle brother wanted to take guitar lessons and I went with him to audit his lessons; the music teacher was a strange man with a large head and fingers with almost no fingernails; he cut them back so far they looked like alien digits. I asked him why and he said something about how fingernails made it harded to play quickly. I did not like him and I did not like his music; I think it might have been jazz.

I studied the sciences and maths in school and thought I would study to be a doctor. Those plans changed after I got a government grant to work in a medical college in Philadelphia; music began to dominate my life as I lost interest in pursuing a medical career. I grew up during a time of revolutionary music making during the 60's. I was 12 years old when the Beatles barged into our world with amazing force, followed by many other young, energetic and talented musicians and singers. Before this time when I was still a young child, cousin Claire, four years older than me, entertained us from time to time with classical European music on the piano. I became familiar with all the great name composers and enjoyed much of their compositions; at the same time, I didn't take it seriously because I was fond of all the children's cartoon shows on TV and they all used classical music as background for the silly antics of the cartoon characters so I associated that stuffy self important music with those silly antics and enjoyed mimicking conductors with their exaggerated flourishes, much to the noisy amusement of my relatives. By the time I was a young teenagers, I had no interest in classical music, thought jazz was remote, abstract and too "grown up". I liked blues and rock, like most of my contemporaries, yet I also liked some of the more exotic compositions like Strangers in Paradise by Borodin, and Sheherazade by Rimsky Korsakov, and Peter and the Wolf by Prokofieff. Then when I turned 16, I discovered The Doors, The Cream, The Moody Blues, and most significantly, Frank Zappa and his band, The Mothers of Invention. They turned my musical world inside out and upside down. Music was capable of having an unexpectedly deep and powerful effect on the human mind, and I wanted to explore that with my own compositions. I knew that staying in Philadelphia was not going to work for me so I made my way across the country, age 19, to seek out the company of other musicians who felt like I did about music, and perhaps form a group and build a following. I moved to Topanga Canyon because it was beautiful, quiet, and was known to be home to many musicians in the general area, some famous ones too. I played house concerts, performing my compositions on guitar.

One evening, I heard a knock at the front door of the little house I lived in; I opened the door and recognized one of the two people standing there, a man named

John Abbate who was a friend of one of my neighbors who hosted several of my house concerts and invited him and his friend to come in. John explained to me the reason they came to visit; he was telling his girlfriend about my musical compositions and the interesting mood they evoked in listeners. She was intrigued and asked if she could hear this for herself; I got my guitar and played one of my more practiced compositions and at the end of the piece, she said with surprising urgency that I "must" listen to the music of some old man another friend of hers knew who played a strange instrument from a foreign land. By this time (I was 21) I had read many books about the cultures of the Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia, especially the more esoteric, mystical writings, was practicing Tai Chi Chuan, ancient martial art from China, and learning acupuncture (1972, when it was still unknown in the USA), and spent time discussing Eastern mystical philosophy with like minded friends in Southern California. I had been listening to traditional music from India for some years, thanks to the Beatles and the Moody Blues fascination with it, as well as the old Ottoman music of the Whirling Dervishes, which I had just recently seen in concert, twice, perhaps only two months before this fated meeting with the couple who drove all the way to Topanga Canyon just to hear me play my compositions. Intrigued with her insistence that I find this old musician, I asked for information and she said she didn't remember where he lived exactly, but she remembered it was in a part of Los Angeles where many Middle Eastern and Israeli immigrants lived, and that the people around called him Mr. Z. So I drove down to Los Angeles and walked up and down Fairfax Avenue, asking random strangers if anyone knew an old musician named Mr. Z until I found someone who said they knew him and wrote his full name on a piece of paper: Zevulon Avshalomov. No wonder they called him Mr. Z!

I drove home and looked up his name in a big book we used to use when all phones were land lines called the White Pages, called the number listed and a man answered who couldn't speak English. I only knew some Spanish I learned in school so that was no help; I called back a few hours later and his son answered, we talked and he invited me to visit. I drove back to Fairfax Avenue, parked the car, and as I walked up the path from the sidewalk to the front door of the apartment building where they lived, I could feel the most extraordinary feeling come over me, like a big wheel was turning, the wheel of destiny. So this was the reason I came to this part of the country, to meet Mr. Z. It turns out Mr. Z was born in Dagestan and played the Azerbaijani kamancha. From the first notes he played, I was frozen in my seat, unable to move, utterly "blown away" by the power of the sounds he made. I begged him to teach me. He refused, at first. It took a few months to convince him it would be worth his while. I became his devoted student. We both

moved to Brooklyn, New York, shared an apartment for three years, played music together, taught myself the basics of how to play the Azerbaijani tar, and found a young American man who learned to play the gaval, the Azerbaijani frame drum, and dance Lezginka, and we played concerts together for some years until Mr. Z became very sick, moved to Israel and passed away in 1987. I was despondent at losing my dear old friend and mentor. He taught me not just how to play his music, he also taught me how to make the instruments, how to use tools, how to love work and never be afraid of any task requiring the skills with tools and materials. I loved him like a father, and he loved me like a son; his own children did not show much interest in his unique talents; I gave him the respect he deserved and never received from his own family. He might have been the reason why; I was told he was rough with his children.

Meanwhile, I missed him terribly and some of my Iranian Azerbaijani friends in NYC urged me to go to Azerbaijan and find another teacher. So I did.

KHM: How did you get in to this line of work? What is your background?

JW: My background is scientific. My line of work was engineering. For 41 years I was an architectural lighting produce design engineer, in manufacturing, design, production, and sales. Music was always a sideline, a hobby, not my profession.

KHM: What do you understand of multiculturalism? Could you share your views on this issue?

JW: Multiculturalism is the belief and practice that sharing culture is the best way to achieve peace on Earth.

KHM: What opportunities have you had working and collaborating in diverse, multicultural and inclusive settings.

JW: Since I lived all my life in the USA, my interest in foreign cultures with a sharp focus on the musical culture of Azerbaijan led me to form friendships with the few people who shared my interest. I formed groups, small ensembles of musicians, collaborated with visiting artists when they would on occasion come to USA from Azerbaijan, worked with percussionists from Uzbekistan, and played concerts whenever the opportunity would present itself. Eventually I moved to the suburbs and travelling to NYC to practice was not worth the effort anymore so I went solo and confined myself to the occasional solo performance, focusing on programs in colleges,

universities, academies and music schools where I developed a specialized program to prepare first time listeners to actively listen to Azerbaijani mugham music (only mugham because the songs and dance music of Azerbaijan required an ensemble, whereas instrumental mugham did not).

I would explain the structure of mugham melodies, demonstrate very simple examples and point out the effect, then perform the actual mugham which is very complex for them, and then solicit questions from the students who were often musicians themselves or just taking courses in world music. Some of their questions were surprisingly sophisticated, inviting me to think deeply about the nature of this music I was presenting. Over the years, the program became more and more effective at producing the effect I wanted, which was to impress educated people in English speaking countries all over the world with the power, beauty and majesty of Azerbaijani mugham.

KHM: How do you evaluate the importance and perspectives of the Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism as the mean serving peace and stability in the world?

JW: This question is outside of my area of expertise. I can only tell you that I have been practicing cultural diplomacy informally for 47 years ever since my first public demonstration of Azerbaijani music on kamancha, at UCLA in Los Angeles, and I believe that cultural diplomacy works.

KHM: Please tell us about intercultural performance and the roots of your interest in Azerbaijani national Music , how did you get involved?

JW: From the beginning of my interest in presenting Azerbaijani mugham and related traditional Azerbaijani music, I leaned toward being more of an educator than an entertainer. It made more sense to talk about the music, not just perform it, as most audiences which I was presenting to were unfamiliar with the genre and were curious about it, had questions. Also, first time listeners need preparation to better appreciate the experience and it took some years to develop a proper repertoire and method of explaining this complex, nuanced musical tradition to people who had never heard it before, or knew very little about it.

KHM: Do you believe that mugham has evolved since Azerbaijani independence?

JW: Yes, that seems like a reasonable statement to me; the government of Azerbaijan made big investments in the development and promoting of mugham music; they built a new conservatory of national music, a magnificent building staffed by the best musicians and teachers in Azerbaijan, they built the International Mugham Center, a beautiful concert venue that I have had the honor and pleasure to perform in numerous times, and the government sponsored mugham competitions that were televised for many years, a great concept because it incentivised the whole nation to become familiar with their traditional music, appreciate its beauty, and consolidate the feeling of national pride in their traditional heritage, key ingredient in national unity.

KHM: Mugham Society of America was established by you. What does your activity comprise?

JW: It consists of my lecture demonstration programs in schools, museums, colleges, universities, academies and civic centers, occasional house concerts, publications and a website www.mugham.net

KHM: How do you remember your meeting with Azerbaijan's National Leader Heydar Aliyev?

JW: I remember it very well of course. It was May of 1997; I had been invited to participate in the opening of the Opera House after renovations and at the end of the week of constant practice and rehearsals, I was told I was invited to meet with the president of Azerbaijan. I expected we would have five or ten minutes together, since his schedule was very busy with important meetings. I was surprised and honored that we met for more than half an hour. He spoke at length about the importance of traditional culture for building and consolidating the feeling of national identity, essential to the survival and thriving of any group, any nation. He said he wanted to thank me for my work promoting Azerbaijani musical culture abroad, and for inspiring Azerbaijanis to pay more attention to their own rich cultural heritage. I promised him I would do everything in my power to help with that important cause. Thanks to that meeting, I resolved to think of the best way to promote Azerbaijani musical culture around the world, and that led me to the idea of making a documentary film which you know about, called Young Voices, Ancient Song, now on YouTube (27 Young Voices Ancient Song – YouTube

KHM: What motivates you to do your best?

JW: When the people of Azerbaijan express their gratitude for what I have done, it makes me want to do more.

KHM:Thank you for your time, any final words for our readers?

JW: The producer of the documentary film, Tale Heydarov, expressed his interest to make another documentary, now that Azerbaijan has liberated nearly all of the occupied territories, especially Shusha, the spiritual capital of Karabakh and the legendary birthplace of mugham. Mugham was made a refugee too, just like the Azerbaijani people who were forcibly driven out of their ancestral homelands, and must be allowed to return home to Shusha and Karabakh, the "vatan" of mugham. The mountains and valleys of Karabakh must ring with force from one of the world's greatest, yet still relatively unknown, musical traditions.

KHM: I sincerely thank you Mr. Jeffrey Werbock for sharing your thoughts on multiculturalism and Azerbaijani music with the audience of the International Journal of Multiculturalism.

As you know, this interview is devoted to the 70th anniversary of your birth. Wishing you a lovely and healthy 70th birthday! Happy 70-year anniversary!

JW: Thank you.

INTERVIEW HISTORY
Received: 20 September, 2021
Accepted: 15 October, 2021
Published: 30 October, 2021
Available online: 30 October, 2021

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTICULTURALISM