

PEOPLE'S TESTIMONIES ABOUT EUGENE SKEEF'S LIFE IN MUSIC

When you meet someone special, it doesn't always register. A friendship can be so natural and so much a part of yourself that it feels as if that it has always been with you.

I'd long worked for the Education Department in Liverpool, as a manager working in an inner city area. I was described as one of the awkward squad, isolated, constantly at odds with colleagues and with the ways we did our work. I was mostly at odds with the latest orthodoxy, occasionally too far ahead of the rest in ideas and mostly too visible in my innovations and in taking risks. I got directly involved with running things I liked doing myself, as an antidote to the tasks of managing and monitoring other people's lack-lustre projects. For several years I had used my holidays to set up "Summer Music" for people of all ages and abilities to come to an inner city venue to make music together. It deliberately exposed people to unfamiliar music and created a performance in a week. It also created a respect, I hope, for a huge range of music and musicians, from early polyphonies to Quayal, junk percussion, classical western orchestras, jazz, renaissance and baroque instruments to Griot stories, song and dance. I didn't use teachers or youth workers, but musicians, composers and luthiers I knew from across many cultures, continents and styles of playing. One of these musicians, Francisco, asked me to help find a venue for a public workshop which Eugene was going to run with Anthony Tidd for "Africa Oyé." So, my office was host to some lovely sessions and I brought several of the adult participants in Summer Music to join in.

You can perhaps see the basis of friendship in a sense of a continuity of our approach and of us having something in common. If so, you might miss what Eugene brought into our lives.

When he asked me to write about how his approach to music might have been of value in the transformation of social relationships, I thought immediately about what I'd want to say, which is about the nature of charisma. In its literal sense, "charisma" refers to being in a state of grace. To me that is a combination of being at ease with the world, of moving instinctively and smoothly through the world, yes, of moving gracefully. It's about having a clear and inbuilt sense of purpose together with a clear and instinctive view of the path to take. Charisma for me is not the same as leadership or haloes or image, but it has a character to transform others. This charisma is infectious in a very special way. Eugene is so positive about his friends, that we feel good about ourselves, too. I can think of all the awkward, jarring and abrasive struggles; things that build conflict and wear you out, feeling degraded and used up. Eugene's presence is the perfect antidote to all of that. Not just his music, but also his smile, his messages - any contact - gives you heart and a bit of faith in yourself, as a bit of the ease and grace he carries with him rubs off. It's humbling in one sense when you hear the nice things he says about you (and he seems to be positive in his praise for everybody he meets,) but somehow you find yourself doing better and living up to that high opinion he's shared with you.

My last project during **Liverpool Biennial, the UK Biennial of Contemporary Art, was a perfect example of all I'm reflecting on.** As a freelance producer and co-ordinator I had a multi-agency arts project where the main artist's actions presented me and colleagues with a dilemma: her artistic vision clashed with issues of respect for the people taking part as performers and volunteers. The artist's assistant spoke about that inhumanity being the nature of true art. Eugene was the person of whom I and the gallery director thought instantly, as an artist with humanity central to his work. Not only did Eugene help create a special occasion when he brought his music to the restaged event, but he also gave us heart, solidarity and self-confidence in all that the rest of us were creating.

So, my response to Eugene's request to write was spontaneous, but heartfelt: he talks about music transforming lives and he clearly demonstrates that. However, his music is just the audible signs of a much bigger process - some organic, invisible machinery he has to find good in people, point it out and build on it. He is a true brother and a great person with whom to sit down and enjoy a tea and sticky bun. He is a charismatic catalyst with a smile that lightens up my heart all the way down to my toe-nails. It was not a struggle to write this, I couldn't do much to polish it, as the writing flowed as easily as smiling back.

Do you see what I mean about his approach being infectious?

Dave (PhilipDavid) Ellwand – UK consultant and producer; freelance work in education, arts and heritage

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Eugene loves life and invites others to do the same. Is this not the beginning and end of all learning? I've known Eugene for thirty years and I still remember everything he has ever taught me. How could one forget that beaming smile, that generous, sincere, and piercing intellect which cuts through the noise and chatter of the world? It is effortless recall. I can honestly say that every time our paths have crossed, my life has been enriched beyond expectation, and my consciousness awakened. One may not even know that one is in a slumber until people like Eugene challenge us to experience life in all its magnificence. People should do these things for one another, and Eugene is not afraid to break the ice in which our potential hibernates.

Martin Zarzar – Peruvian-American drummer; composer; singer-songwriter; philosopher

Hi sweetheart,

We went to a field one afternoon with all the children, as we did everyday, but this day was special and we went further, into farmland, and we did not take the drums as we usually did, you just took your flute.

You stood by a fence and took your flute out, far in the distance there was a cow looking in the other direction. You faced away from us, toward the cow and started playing. We were puzzled because you usually addressed us while playing but this day you turned your back to us. You did have a cheeky look...

We were very entranced by the music and soon did not think much of your back to us, maybe you wanted some solitude, maybe you wanted to concentrate...

We'd enjoy. A few phrases into the music, the cow turned to look at you over her shoulder. Then continued grazing. The melody shaped up, the cow looked up and positioned herself to face you. The rhythm flowed, the cow could not resist, she stepped across the field totally swinging, stood right next to you on the other side of the fence

and remained there enraptured. Then other cows joined, we were all mesmerized! I would have done the same, had I been a cow! I'm convinced that cow fell in love!

Luciana Proaño – Peruvian dancer, choreographer, percussionist, yoga teacher, poet

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I'm not sure that in a few paragraphs, I could do justice to the powerful and transformative effects that attending Eugene's music workshops has had on my life. On the back of what I shall only call a troubled childhood and early adult life. I first met Eugene when I chanced upon him playing marimba in a park, somewhere in London, in the mid-eighties. Indeed, even this brief encounter had such a deep impact on my spirit that some thirty years later I wrote a poem directly recalling the experience. I stood for some minutes mesmerised by the beautiful polyrhythmic, melodic structures that Eugene was creating, as they seeped into the innermost core of my being and made the first call upon my spirit to be free.

Sometime after this I met Eugene again, when I began attending drum workshops, at The Oval House Community Theatre, and jumped at the chance when he invited me to attend his own music workshops even though due to personal circumstances I was unable to pay. A combination of growing up in a white, working class background, family circumstances, drug and alcohol abuse and three near death experiences had left me seriously traumatised with deep psychological issues that I had recently recognised but had no way of understanding. I can honestly state that through attending many music sessions that Eugene facilitated (by this I mean that he provided the key energy that ensured anyone in the space, first of all came with a positive attitude seeking an egalitarian environment, and was thereby able to offer and contribute to the music, at whatever level, free from criticism) I was able to develop a sense of centre that started and set me well on my way to both a physical and mental state of recovery and stability, as well as develop a sense of community that to this day governs my social interactions.

A spirit of personal awareness so permeated the atmosphere that indeed I witnessed people at many different stages of the emotional spectrum from ecstatic joy, to heart breaking personal realisation, but never an overtly aggressive response. It was quite amazing to watch and also be absorbed into this deep sense of community which Eugene ensured was a constant within the space. Not least to witness him managing the spiritual releases of people with tender words and affection, while also maintaining the essential pulse of the groove and peoples commitment and contribution to the song, or musical composition that had developed, in an extraordinary display of spiritual and mental dexterity.

In over 50 years of a living experience, I hold my experiences of Eugene's workshops and his infectious joy of life among the most valuable and dearest memories. His knowledge of the affairs of the spirit, as affected through the medium of music and song, is so vast it is easy in hindsight to understand that the name Zulu, means people of the heavens. Indeed I'm certain that many of us attending his workshops felt, as I felt, touched by a divine sense of mercy and love as we passed through veils of perception toward a spiritual rebirth. I count myself blessed and honoured to have had any association with Eugene.

Taariq Abzuhair – British musician; composer; poet; scholar