

Glynis German's Radio Interview With Eugene Skeef

Recently Glynis German did an interview with me for her online radio station – Mallorca Sunshine Radio (<http://www.mallorcasunshineradio.com/>). Here is the transcript.

Eugene, you have this incredible gift to engage people with your music, but what would you say is your greatest gift?

My greatest gift is the sum of what I received from both my parents. My mother taught me to love selflessly without judgement and to spread joy beyond the boundaries of propriety; and my father taught me to be strong, resilient and to know that I come from a very powerful family, and that I can accomplish anything if I apply myself to it. The combination of these gifts prepared me for my life's mission of sharing these endowments with everyone I encounter, especially the less fortunate.

I imagine that you were born into a community of much music, storytelling and movement, but it was also a time of conflict, injustice and racism. What were the qualities that your elders and family shared with you upon growing up?

My elders and family inculcated in me a thirst for justice, peace, love, tolerance, and to celebrate the joy of being alive, no matter what the circumstances of my life; for there will always be someone worse off than I. They taught me to always share and to treat everyone equally. These qualities have stayed with me throughout my very fulfilling life. Even to the extent that when I'm away from home and having a meal at a restaurant, I feel very uncomfortable not to be sharing it with my wife and children. I am known among my work friends to always take some of my food home to my family.

The topic for today is faith and I think as a South African you must have learned a lot about faith when you were an activist alongside Steve Biko. Please tell us about those lessons and how they have led you to be the positive man and influence that you are.

Along with the sort of parents I had, meeting Steve Biko was the most beautiful event that could ever have happened to me. Biko helped me (and countless others in Apartheid South Africa) to be self-reliant and to mould my sense of myself into this confident, unwavering young man. He consolidated my knowledge of, and respect for, my strong cultural roots. He helped me to never forget that I possess within myself all the tools to carve a meaningful life that placed me on an equal footing with anyone else, no matter their social position, cultural background, political power, religious belief or anything else that might distinguish them from me or determine their lives. Above all, Steve Biko taught me never to let fear derail my vision and dream of freedom in every sense.

Water features a lot in your music, as does the idea of the number 7. What do these mean to you?

Water is the most abundant feature of our planet. It is also most of our physiological make-up. At the best of times we consist of 70% water, just like the earth. The number 7 is regarded as having magical qualities in several cultures. In music I like the rhythmic feel of 7 beats to a cycle. It is ever evolving and forward-moving, and gives a beautiful sense of forever becoming something new yet recognisable. All over the world the two simplest and most popular rhythmic cycles are 3 and 4. Seven is the sum of these, and bears the capacity to feel infinite while constantly resolving in an exciting and odd way.

Water has a spiritual resonance in all cultures. Every culture has some mythology about water holding the answers to the mystery and origins of life. Perhaps this is why we have immersion in many baptismal rituals.

The other quality of water is that when we are in our mother's womb we are protected by her amniotic fluids. Water is also a very efficient conveyor of sound; so we hear the mother's comforting heartbeat clearly. I love this.

You were in Bosnia after the war. Tell us how your music worked its healing powers.

In Bosnia the power of certain rhythms played a very strong part in bringing a state of peace and calm in the participants of my workshops. Using meditation and relaxation exercises in combination with drumming, I used to be able to find the precise tempo, rhythmic cycle and chant to achieve this healing. I would become a conduit for the universal healing power of cosmic vibration – which is what music is truly about.

Was there music in the womb with you? What is your earliest musical memory?

Yes there is no doubt that there was music in the womb for me. My relationship with my mother testifies to this. We had – and still have, through dreams – a very strong bond of love. She sang to me (and my siblings) from earlier than I can remember. She never once scolded me. She was such a peaceful person. She sang me to sleep and sang me awake in this calm spirit, even on cold mornings when I didn't want to get out of bed and go to school. To this day my mother still sings some of my most powerful songs to me in dreams. My Big Big Sing hit Fruits Of Our Gifts is one example.

Biggest influential person in your life?

My mother is definitely the biggest influence in my life.

You have been involved with a great UK Project, Big Big Sing –tell us about it? Are there plans for it go global?

Big Big Sing is the UK's biggest singing initiative. It started as a project connected to the recent Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. Its aim is to get everyone in the UK singing. The idea is inspired by the beneficial effects of singing in all its forms. Singing promotes wellbeing. It's as simple as that!

Yes there are plans for the project to go global. I'm already talking with the organisers about taking it to South Africa, where some of the most amazing singing goes on.

We live in such turbulent and angry times, yet you manage to find the beauty all around. What would you say are the qualities that make you this person?

My life is very deeply influenced by the foundation of love and the tolerance of difference that my mother taught me. She was coming at this concept from the perspective of a central ethos of our culture called ubuntu. This is what Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu used to bring about reconciliation in South Africa. This philosophy contains a Nguni expression: "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", which translates as, "A person is a person through other people", or "I am because you are".