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Mike Davis

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Portrait of a Collector Interview with Mike Davis

Transcribed by Kate Browne

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Meg Miner: Well, why don't you just start by telling us who you are and the nature of your relationship with Minor Myers?

Mike Davis: Well, my name's Mike Davis. I'm class of 1998 from Illinois Wesleyan. I was a chemistry major. And my relationship with Minor Myers began when I was the station manager of WESN. He was the license holder.

Miner: (*laughs*) Okay. Um, and you had some particular dealings with him through the station if you want to go ahead and talk about that. Tell us a little bit about what was going on with the station at the time.

Davis: When I got to the station, it was prob—I don't know, 1994 was when I started working at the station. And, uh, I actually got turned down for my first proposed radio show at the time. You would, uh, write up a little proposal for what you want to do in a radio show and some people would read it and say whether or not they want it. And, uh, but I did not get accepted. But we had January term at the time. "J Term," as we called it. And during J Term, I noticed when I turned on the campus radio station there'd be a lot of dead air. So, if that was the case, friends of mine had shows and I'd watch them do what they do so I went down and started playing music and I would just do that until somebody else showed up and when they showed up I assumed it was just their show and so I would leave. And, um, that's how I became one of the DJs at WESN. And then I started writing to record companies asking for copies of CDs that I didn't think we had at the station and started delivering to my dorm. And when WESN found out about that, they made me music director. And then, um, at the time, you know, you kind of—four years go by pretty quick so our seniors were aging out and, uh, going on to things that they were going to do so I was able to grow up into the station manager role. And when I assumed station manager, um, I mostly had a vision of doing concerts and things like that. But I was contacted by Minor's office to begin what would be—to begin the long process of reinvigorating WESN. It had become—it wasn't bad. I didn't know where it started from. I only had a few years history, but it was, uh, it was in the basement of the International House. It was really quite dingy. It hadn't received upgrades in a long time. One of the jokes was that you can get the station if you're standing next to it. And your antenna's touching the building. So he, um, he gave us the opportunity to buy some software—sorry, some hardware. And some things to kind of pretty up the place.

Miner: Why'd he do that?

Davis: If I looked at it in context, um, I think it was the beginning of a building period that was unrelated to purely academic space.

Miner: Hm.

Davis: He made some comments about, you know, you get a free t-shirt if you can find the bookstore. And, uh, I picked up on that, like, yeah, that is funny. It is hard to find. And, uh, but also the other hidden gem our own campus radio station which broadcast to all of Bloomington-Normal and a little bit beyond when the antenna was working right. You know, it was in the basement and it was more or less dilapidated. Without any sort of care, we would either lose our license with the FCC or we'd lose our relevance by not being heard because we'd let our antenna fall into disrepair. So, um, this was around the time that the Memorial Gym was probably seeing its last year or two of classes That—the plan for what was the old science building to become the new State Farm building. Well, is it State Farm building?

Miner: The old science building became the, um, Center for Liberal Arts.

Davis: There you go.

Miner: Yeah. Yeah. And then the really old science building became the School of Nursing.

Davis: Yeah, the nursing building. So the, um, so what I think I noticed is that he probably had this idea as a little project that could go on and, and beautify the campus. Both the things that you can see and the things that contribute it to being a campus. And I think he was making contributions in those areas.

Miner: That's great. What was the proposal you had that wasn't accepted and was Minor part of that group?

Davis: no. no. I, uh, I would have been surprised if anyone at the station at that time knew that Minor was pretty much involved.

Miner: Okay.

Davis: So, no, it's probably about four or five guys that would look at all the different things. You know, at the time, I didn't really notice or care but the station had a bit of a diversity problem. And, um, had, I don't know, just, like, really no oversight. Sometimes you would turn in and hear some really horrible stuff. Things that shouldn't be on public radio at all. And public, like, you know, anyone can listen to it not NPR public. Uh, so, we tried to clean up some of those things, again because Minor put some faith in us. It's amazing when you're 18, 19 years old and someone tells you that you can do something, um, how good, how good you want to be at that. How diligent you want to be towards that end.

Miner: Hm. That's great.

Davis: So he, uh—it was very empowering to get that attention. And then we would fight among ourselves. The staff that I was working with. You know, what's important? We get this board or we get this other thing? But we got a lot of recording equipment. The idea was we would have

local musicians come in and record stuff with us that we could use as part of later radio shows. Uh, maybe, maybe even having some, um, you know, “Live at WESN” sort of CDs. And also, had we been—we updated our phone systems. So that the—we could actually take calls in over the air. The way we did it before is we just took one of the studio microphones and lowered it and put on the phone on speakerphone and just lowered it. So that was—my dad thought it was hilarious that I could turn the whole place on from a power strip.

Miner: That’s great.

Davis: That’s literally it. I walked down, flipped on a power strip and we’re on the air.

Miner: Oh my gosh. That’s something.

Davis: It’s a very simple set up.

Miner: Come a long way.

Davis: Yeah, and any decent radio station needs, um, you know, an engineer who’s at least somewhat dedicated to making sure that our signal is going out and being heard. It had been degrading for a long time.

Miner: Hm. And that was through lack of equipment repairs?

Davis: Yeah, I just don’t think anyone had paid close attention to it for a very long time. And, um, this was probably—we had a system here we would take—CDs would come in from, you know, various companies and we would take some of the better tracks from those CDs and put something that was a lot like an 8-track—it’s called a cart. And then we would put those out for DJs to use. So we’d keep, like, most of the library away from the regular DJs and, um, that actually—it wasn’t, it wasn’t a good thing in the long run, but it also sort of—if we had them in this closet that people would learn how to break into and then steal from. So, because we were hiding these things, people wanted to steal them.

Miner: Unintended consequence of it, right?

Davis: Yeah. The one, one thing that stood out to him is that we—we started putting up a mural down in the radio station and—so, one of our artists—you know, we gave him a little bit of a money and gave him a budget for paints and stuff to put up a mural. And it was coming up quite nicely until a, um, some not very nice images made it to the mural.

Miner: Okay.

Davis: So it was supposed to be a heroes versus anti-heroes kind of thing. Heroes from history and anti-heroes. So there was a Hitler visage as part of the mural and as soon as it went up it got defaced and there was a lot of—there was a lot of outcry particularly from the group that did Fade to Black. They did not like what they were seeing there in the mural. And it wasn’t done yet. Hello?

Miner: Yes. Yes, I'm here.

Davis: Meg?

Miner: Yes, I can hear you.

Davis: Hello, this is Mike.

Miner: Mike, this is Meg. Sorry about that.

Davis: Hey. There we are.

Miner: Some craziness, there.

Davis: Mm hmm.

Miner: So, you were talking about a mural. And people defacing it.

Davis: Yes. Yeah. So one of the images on the mural was heroes versus anti-heroes. It was supposed to be something sort of Kafka-esque. And, uh, so there was this picture of—profile of Hitler that someone didn't like and defaced. And, um, I had heard around dinner time that night that the Fade to Black director was, like, really pissed off and he was going to the President's office to complain and do something about it. And so, I heard that was going on, and so I decided to write, you know, our defense of what was going on and, like, what we intended to do about it. You know, what's inappropriate, what is appropriate, and what we'll fix. And I left that—I basically put it under his door. Like, that night I was able to get in the building and slide it under the door. And so I knew the guy was going to be there the next day talking about it and he was and Miner had this little thing I wrote to, you know, to speak to and to, you know, help make things better.

Miner: That was very clever of you.

Davis: It was—it was good for, um, him to, to have something there and I think it worked out. And also, he put a lot of faith in me to do something about the station. I did not want to let that go to waste. So the last thing I would want to do it, you know, is seem unresponsive or petulant or something. I haven't been down to the station in a long time. I have no idea if it's still there, but from what I've seen it's taken on a much more business tone.

Miner: Hm.

Davis: They, they have a revenue stream from advertising. They seem to do a lot of really neat stuff. So I'm very impressed.

Miner: That's great.

Davis: Music still sounds sufficiently college-y. But it looks like they really professionalized the field there. I like to think that what Miner did by picking—by picking some students that looked

responsive put it on that path. We didn't get it there. Not by a long shot. We certainly benefitted from his intervention.

Miner: But that was your passion and that's what it takes to make things happen, right?

Davis: Yeah. And that served to be a, uh, you know, a good lesson for me. The right kind of proactive without being pushy and finding the right advocate in an institution can really make things happen. When I get an opportunity to, I've thought a lot about what did it mean for a college sophomore to meet the college president and do this? I mean, Wesleyan is a small place, so we stood a reasonably good chance of bumping into each other in the hallway. But, um, getting one on one time and, uh, getting resources from it that is really strange. And I wanted—I often think about, well, I'm in a position of authority in a community college, I have the ability to allocate resources. You know, can I do what he did for me?

Miner: Hm.

Davis: Can I make it so someone else thinks about our conversation years from now?

Miner: So you look for those opportunities even today, then?

Davis: I do. Even more so, I try to recognize when they're presented to me.

Miner: Hm. That's great. That's great. So that had an influence on your personally, that connection with Minor. Did you see that in, um, in any other way with them, you know, with him interacting with other people or with the institution as a whole even?

Davis: Yeah. Um. He was, he was, um, certainly quirky when we were able to see him on campus the only other major interaction with him at the institution was from, you know, ABC to pluses and minuses. In addition to the As, Bs, and Cs. That happened while I was at Wesleyan.

Miner: That was a big deal.

Davis: Yeah, and he had to answer for that.

Miner: Yeah. How did that go?

Davis: Um, not great in all cases. Especially for those who came in under one grading system and were leaving with another. They were not—they were not pleased. And they weren't too taken with stances that he had on it at the time. But it was going to come in sometime and my guess is that he had—it would have been a nightmare to have a dual grading system for essentially the same group of students coming through an same institution. So I think he had to show sufficient—I don't think leadership's the right word, but backbone in one area to drive the institution in the way it needed to go.

Miner: That's interesting.

Davis: But I can see, I can see the influence that he had at the time and the strength that I think it built up in the faculty. But I've had the benefit of going back and seeing faculty who taught me as a faculty member and also as a college administrator so I've been back to see, uh, Frank Boyd.

Miner: Sure.

Davis: And, um, you know, sort of—the way he's set up his standing desk and the way things are laid out there. I mean, it just brings a little bit—it reminds me of what I'd see in Minor's office. Um. No—a desk, no real tables, and a bunch of piles on the floor.

Miner: *(laughs)*

Davis: And that's weird. I thought, our college president's like this. I thought, are they all kind of quirky? Not all ones are, but the good ones seem to be.

Miner: I was going to say, has it been your experience borne out—that observation.

Davis: It has not. I have not seen another college president like Minor Myers. Um—I work in a community college system. We've had—we had, um, a turn over of our presidents not that long ago and I've noticed, you know, with the crop of presidents coming in now there's a professionalism and a, you know, my next job will look like this sort of attitude with them. I didn't—I didn't see that when I saw Minor. I saw a presence of mind that he was sort of integrated on at Wesleyan. It was a big part of his personality. It—Wesleyan's personality shared that with him.

Miner: Do you think—is it a chicken and egg thing? Or do you think that he brought that to Wesleyan?

Davis: I didn't know Wesleyan before him. He was always a part of it. Uh—

Miner: That's true.

Davis: It's hard for me to know what came first. But what I could recognize is that the two were inseparable.

Miner: That's interesting.

Davis: But when I'm in the institution that I'm in now I look at the presidents we have now and I think to some degree some of our students do that you can't keep administrative dirty laundry from getting out sometimes. And one of the cool things—I picked this up at Wesleyan was that you should be largely ignorant of the college administration as a student. You shouldn't really be aware of it as a student. It's there, it's important, it's essential, but it has a lot to do with accreditation. But, um, you shouldn't have need for it on a day to day basis. You got your classes, you have your teachers, your lunch, the gym, whatever you're doing socially, but working well and working so that you don't need to be seen I think was a quality that I admired in the administration at Wesleyan during the time I was there.

Miner: That's great. That's a great observation. Um, and it is—it's kind of surprising to me how many students he did interact with because I've got a great response. Yours and several others along the way so it's really helping me sort of—

Davis: Yeah, when I saw him speak early on, I noticed quickly that he likes the quirky stuff.

Miner: Yeah.

Davis: So—

Miner: And speaking to, like a formal speaking engagement?

Davis: No, he wasn't quirky in the way that he spoke, but what he—the things that he liked to speak about. Like, he liked to surprise you with the academics of our athletes. Um, he'd like to surprise you about this guy is doing physics, but, you know, he's looking at the properties of Jell-O. You know, I'm supposed to think about this really hard subject, physics, but there's this really approachable thing that Jell-O and that's weird. Our basketball team is really smart. Shouldn't, you know, that bucks a trend. So, um, it was neat that he always liked to point out those contrasts.

Miner: What do you think—from the position you have now, what do you think that served? The purpose of that?

Davis: I think he had a strong pull toward academics so he really wanted to point that out about our sports teams. Um. I think I'm recognizing it now as something that's called imposter syndrome. Are you familiar with this?

Miner: Yeah.

Davis: This idea that, you know, I clearly don't belong here. I came from a high school where I was very smart, very top of my class and now I come to this Wesleyan place and everyone is smart and everyone is top of their class and I clearly don't belong here. I am an imposter.

Miner: I see.

Davis: And if you do a Google search for imposter syndrome you'll find lots of things like that. It can be really debilitating for a lot of folks.

Miner: I've heard of that but I've not heard the phrase so that's interesting.

Davis: Yeah. So. It would seem—it seems to me that—I don't know if he had a mind on this at all, but, like, in a way of saying because our athletes are smart and because our physicists are playful, um, you belong here. There's a thing about you that's also incongruent. And, um, you—as a result, there's a place for you here. You belong here.

Miner: That's great. That's great. And you mentioned you got an impression of his office as being unconventional, maybe.

Davis: Yeah, yeah.

Miner: So you want to talk more about that a little bit?

Davis: Yeah, um. He had an assistant. Do you remember her name?

Miner: Susan Bassey.

Davis: That's it.

Miner: She retired not too terribly long ago.

Davis: Okay. I got—like, I would get to see minor enough that I also got to know Susan as well. She was wonderful.

Miner: Well, I'm hoping to speak with her. I can send her greetings if you'd like.

Davis: Please do. Tell her Mike Davis says hello.

Miner: I will do that.

Davis: Yeah, the memory of his office was that it was rather sparse. I didn't see any of the opulent furniture I might expect to see. Um. It also wasn't in a building that was all that pretty. Uh, but the, uh—his office was sparse but with was piles on the floor that stood out to me. And things that looked old.

Miner: Mm hm.

Davis: So it was one of those things that sort of stood out to me and reminded me that he was a quirky guy. And then he would refer to Mozart as being a little too new for his tastes. So he'd never be a fan of WESN radio.

Miner: But he supported it.

Davis: Yes. A music fan nonetheless but nothing from the last 200 years, please.

Miner: Do you do anything with radio today?

Davis: I did a little bit of radio when I left. I was on the Northwestern college radio station and lately that's been it. I mean, getting a job and having a family means I don't get to sit in a room for two hours a day and play music. Though I gotta tell you it would be the therapy I would look for.

Miner: Well, when they get older, right?

Davis: Mm hmm.

Miner: Well, is there anything else you think we should know about to maybe to better understand Minor?

Davis: Um. Nothing really comes to mind. I mean, I think you're going to tell a really good story from all the sources that you get. My only hope is that, uh, I've added to it a little.

Miner: Absolutely. You have. Do you think there's anybody else you think I should be talking to?

Davis: No one really comes to mind.

Miner: Okay.

Davis: Maybe Beth Elsasser Mays. She actually lives in town. She's not far from Wesleyan.

Miner: I'm sorry. Can you say her name again?

Davis: Elizabeth Elsasser Mays.

Miner: Can you spell the last name?

Davis: E-L-S-A-S-S-E-R.

Miner: Okay. I've not heard from her yet, but I'll look her up.

Davis: She's in—she was in my year. Biology. She actually kinda got involved with the biology department.

Miner: Okay.

Davis: And, um, maybe was an adjunct there for a while. Can't remember. But she's remained close to the college and close to her colleagues and I think she would have some memories as well.

Miner: Great.

Davis: Well, mike, I really appreciate your help with this and persevering through the technical difficulties.

Davis: I'm glad you're doing what you're doing. I look forward to hearing what you come up with.

Miner: Thank you. Me too.

Davis: All right, take care.

Miner: Take care yourself.

Davis: All right. Bye bye.