

March 4, 2015

**Paul Simon visits Princeton University**

***Grammy Award-winning singer/songwriter talked about his work and career in a discussion led by Professor Paul Muldoon after visiting a course on songwriting***

Photo caption 1: Paul Simon (left) and Paul Muldoon share a laugh during a lively conversation about Simon’s work and career

Photo caption 2: Paul Simon recalls his early musical influences during the conversation that spanned a range of issues and topics from the music industry to politics to his latest musical explorations

Photo caption 2: Paul Simon surprised the audience of over 800 Princeton University students, faculty and staff with a performance of *The Sound of Silence*.

Photo credits: Denise Applewhite

(Princeton, NJ) Internationally renowned singer/songwriter Paul Simon visited Princeton University yesterday, talking about his career and his most recent work in a discussion facilitated by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and Princeton Professor Paul Muldoon. The Grammy Award-winning artist also offered an impromptu performance to a capacity audience of over 800, made up of mostly students joined by faculty and staff at Richardson Auditorium on the Princeton campus. The event was presented by the Lewis Center for the Arts’ Performance Central.

In a relaxed conversation with Muldoon, Simon discussed a range of topics including his most recent work, his early influences, the current state of the music industry, and the challenges artists face in today’s world. He also took questions from Princeton students in the audience.

When asked about his earliest musical influences he noted the doo wop groups of the 1950s, Elvis Presley, and particularly the Everly Brothers, saying he was in awe of Phil and Don Everly as a teen, calling them the best-sounding duo he had ever heard. He recalled a 2003 concert in which he and Art Garfunkel, reunited for a world tour, invited the Everly Brothers to come out of retirement to be guest performers.

Who does he listen to now? Clap! Clap!, the project of Italian music producer C. Crisci, focused on research and sampling of tribes, bands and singers originating from the African continent; Charles Ives; Lou Harrison; a range of classical music; Philip Glass; Frank Sinatra; and music from the 1950s, especially the period 1954-56. “But I mostly listen to me,” he quipped, noting that he is constantly working on new material.

In talking about his most recent musical endeavors, Simon described his current interest in the work of 20th-century composer Harry Partch, who composed microtonally, closely looking at the range within each note. Partch contended the western scale of 12 notes in an octave was actually 36 notes and did not fully represent the range of notes. Partch invented instruments to play microtonal intervals. Simon had an opportunity to play and record with these instruments for the new songs he is working on. He played a recording of one of these new songs, “The Insomniac’s Lullaby.”

When asked about the prospects for a young songwriter starting out today, Simon noted the challenges of the current economics of the music business. “We are living in an anti-art age,” he explained. “The world is now a brutal place and obsessed with speed and wealth.” He noted the biggest problem with the music industry today is that it is more about the packaging of the artist controlled by a small number of large corporations. There are a few huge stars but many talented, struggling artists. However, he believes this will change, predicting the industry will see a shift similar to the one that occurred in the 1960s, ushered in by the young people studying music today. His best advice to budding songwriters: work hard; there are no shortcuts.

Simon also expressed concern about the growing financial resources spent on presidential campaigns in the U.S., with those processes being heavily influenced by a very small group of extremely wealthy individuals. He observed that artists have valuable perspectives on life, but politicians don’t ask artists for their opinions on important issues. He recalled that when he was working on the album *Graceland* in South Africa, the artists and musicians with whom he collaborated had the best understanding of South African politics. When asked what it was like working on *Graceland* with Ladysmith Black Mambazo, he said, “It was one of the great learning experiences of my life.”

During the question and answer session, sophomore Aaron Schwartz of Melville, Long Island, asked Simon, who grew up in Flushing, Queens, how his identity as a native New Yorker has shaped his songwriting. "Everybody's hometown has a big effect on their writing — the first things that you see and hear and love," Simon said, adding that when he creates a character in a song who is not from New York, he finds it more challenging to sing.

Schwartz, who is majoring in civil and environmental engineering and is also pursuing a certificate in urban studies, said that he came to the event because he grew up on Simon's music. "My parents always played Paul Simon and Simon and Garfunkel CDs in the car," said Schwartz, who plays the saxophone in the Princeton University Wind Ensemble. "When I found out he was coming here, I called them up and said, 'Guess who I'm seeing?'"

Sophomore Keith Gladstone of Bridgewater, New Jersey, who is concentrating in operations research and financial engineering, called the event "the opportunity of a lifetime" and said a highlight for him was Simon's discussion of new musical technologies.

"He was talking about the variation within a single note, that as computers get better and software gets better, you can find optimal tones, the optimal ways to produce music," Gladstone said. "But as a student who's taking a lot of technology-oriented classes, what I gather from this whole experience is that even the most intelligently thought out algorithm or program or advancement in some sort of machine technology can never really replicate the human element in any way."

Gladstone also attended because of a personal connection to Simon's music. "I just learned that Paul Simon went to high school with my grandmother — so I'm going to call her and tell her how great the experience was," he said.

After being asked by a student in the audience if the microphone and stool on the stage meant Simon might perform a song, the songwriter responded to encouraging applause and was handed a guitar by Muldoon. Simon performed a rendition of *The Sound of Silence*, the 1964 hit song from Simon and Garfunkel’s first album. He had noted earlier that he chose this song when asked to perform at an event marking the tenth anniversary of 9/11, rather than the initially requested *Bridge Over Troubled Water*.

Princeton’s oldest a cappella group, The Nassoons, opened the event with a performance of a medley of songs from Simon’s album, *Graceland*.

Prior to the public talk, Simon visited a creative writing/music course taught by Muldoon, “How to Write a Song.” In this popular course, Muldoon leads students with varied backgrounds in music and creative writing in the creation of new songs. Working in small teams, the students are asked to compose music and write lyrics each week that respond to such emotionally charged themes as contempt, gratitude, revenge, desire, disgust, joyousness, remorse, loneliness, despair and defiance. Simon is the most recent in a series of guest artists who have joined Muldoon and the 26 enrolled students throughout the semester. He spent three hours with the students earlier that afternoon, listening to and critiquing the songs the songwriting teams had created that week.

“It was inspiring for the obvious reasons,” noted senior Pam Soffer, a member of the class and a psychology major from Los Angeles. “But I appreciated that he gave us very specific comments and suggested questions we can always ask ourselves when writing to help us focus on places in our work that need tweaking and revisiting.”

“A good question he told us to ask ourselves,” added sophomore Charlie Baker, another songwriting student, “was whether we could see ourselves continuing to work on the song for six months, whether we were that committed to it.” Baker, from New York City, intends to major in German while pursuing a certificate in theater.

The students will perform songs from the course in a public concert at the end of the semester.

During his distinguished career, Simon has been the recipient of many honors and awards including 12 Grammy Awards, three of which (*Bridge Over Troubled* *Water*, *Still Crazy After All These Years*, and *Graceland*) were Albums of the Year. In 2003 he was given a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award for his work as half of the duo Simon and Garfunkel. He is a member of The Songwriters Hall of Fame, a recipient of the Hall of Fame’s Johnny Mercer Award, and is in the Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame as a member of Simon and Garfunkel and as a solo artist. His song "Mrs. Robinson" from the motion picture *The Graduate* was named in the top ten of The American Film Institute's “100 Years 100 Songs.”

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