

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University
Thom Cobb Interview
February 17, 2009
Morrow Field House, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
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TD: Today is February 17, and I am Teresa Debacco for the Rock Voices Oral History program. I am here today with Thom Cobb. How are you today?

TC: I'm very well, thank you.

TD: Well, we're going to start off with a little biographical information: your full name, your date of birth, where you're from, just to get to know you little better.

TC: Okay, my name is Thom Cobb. I am originally from Illinois and moved out here in 1978. And I prefer to go by "T.C."

TD: Wonderful. Do you want to tell us about the name "T.C."?

TC: Sure. When I first started teaching at Illinois Wesleyan University, I was the ripe old age of twenty-two years old, right out of grad school. I was teaching at a university in the school of drama and John Wilson, who is now a Tony-winning scene designer in New York, came to me one afternoon after two or three weeks at school. [He] said, "I'm speaking on behalf of the senior class; we have a bit of a concern." I said, "What's that?" He said, "We can't call you 'Mr. Cobb' because we're older than you." And I said, "Fine." He said, "What do you want? We can't call you 'Thom', that's just not right, but would you mind 'T.C.'?" And I said, "Whatever works for you all." And that has been it for what, thirty-five years, and it's comfortable for me.

TD: Can you talk a little bit about your affiliation with SRU?

TC: I came here in 1978; was hired by the Physical Education Department to teach dance within the PE curriculum. Robert Aebersold, as in Aebersold Recreation Center, was department chair of Physical Education at the time. I interviewed here, met a lot of people. One of the last questions he asked me was, "Do you think we can have a dance department?" And I said it would probably take ten years and a lot of work and [pause] so I was offered the job.

I took the job. When I came here Bob had become the vice president for Academic Affairs. Anne Griffiths had become department chair of Physical Education and . . . the dream came true, ten

years later. [In] 1987 we opened the doors to the first and only Bachelor of Arts degree in dance in the State System of Higher Education. In '89 we became our own department, and [in] 2001 merged with the College of Fine Arts. So that's sort of a summation of [Dance]. I've also worked in the Theatre Department where I've taught a class called Movement for the Actor, and then I'm currently choreographing *Cabaret* with the Theatre Department. I've done some work with the Music Department; so it's been a wonderful, wonderful job.

TD: Can you talk a little bit about how the department has changed since you've come here?

TC: [Laughs] Well there was no department, and it was just a dream with Lucy Sack and I. We finally got a third person in 1984 by the name of Rebecca Rice Flannigan. She stayed a year and left. We picked up Della Cowell; she was here three years, helped in the initiation of the program and we opened the doors with three faculty members and about five dance majors.

So that's 1970 . . . 1987, so that's twenty-two years later we have six full-time faculty, a guest artist position, a visiting professor position, a full time accompanist, over one-hundred majors and forty minors. So, I'd say the program's changed a bit [laughs].

TD: What buildings did you work in?

TC: Oh goodness. This I love to talk about because when I first came here I played basketball on Saturday afternoons—or Friday afternoons—with the men's basketball team: the faculty men's basketball team, in what was known as the McKay gymnasium, [pause] which was the old elementary school gym. It had hoops in it, all the stripes and stuff on a basketball floor, had no heat no air conditioning, but we would play there. And I thought, "Wow, as we were growing, that would make a nice rehearsal space."

So we could have this studio up here, in the [Morrow] Field House. And we started just rehearsing there. One thing led to another and I started teaching tap there because it had a wood floor. So with Lucy and I and either Della or whomever, we had this studio in the Field House and we started using it. And then one summer when they were paving the driveway behind McKay [Education Building], they paved over a drain or something and it ruined the floor of the gym. So Lucy and I just happened to have the specs for a new dance floor and they put a dance floor in. Well you can't play basketball on a dance floor, so eventually that became a wonderful studio.

I used to teach in West Gym when it was a gymnasium, with hoops and lines, and that has slowly become a third space. So I've taught in the Field House, McKay and West Gym. Lecture classes I've taught in Spotts [World Culture Building], McKay and ECB [Eisenberg Classroom Building]. I've worked in the theater, in Swope [Music Hall]. There are very few buildings I

haven't actually—BSB [Strain Behavioral Sciences Building] I still teach in. So I've gotten around over the few years [laughs].

TD: What were your first impressions of the campus when you came here?

TC: Fell in love with the place. [Pause] The reason I took the job was because I fell in love with the people. I'm from a rural area so the rural area didn't bother me. I'm an hour from Pittsburgh, two hours from Cleveland, six and a half hours from New York City, so that's an ideal location. And I think I saw that there was a great amount of potential here, a great amount of support for growth and it was a perfect time: the late '70s into the early '80s.

I love the rolling hills of western Pennsylvania, when you grow up in Illinois and its flat this is kind of nice. I remember when I was picked up from the airport and I was brought up here for the first night of my interview, I stayed in—this is a great story—I stayed in Harner Hall, in the guest room, and no one told me that Harner Hall was an all-girls dorm. So two o'clock in the morning I couldn't sleep; I was wired for my interview. I went to the study lounge to see if somebody had a catalog or something like that, because I was used to all co-ed dorms, and here's all these girls running around in robes and sweats and things and I asked this one girl, I said, "Do you have a catalog?" and she goes "Yeah." So she got it, and I talked with all these people for a couple of hours and then someone told me that it was an all-girls dorm. [Laughs] So even the students that I met were great, and the faculty I met; so that's really the main reason.

TD: Can you talk about your campus activities, maybe union affiliations?

TC: Well when I first came here—I am a member of the union; I'm not a strong union activist. [Pause] I believe in our union and I think they've done great things for us.

I think probably one of the most proud things was when I came here there was a student group called Orchesis. It was a student-run dance group that put on a show I guess every January. So I met with the officers and I said that, you know, I'm coming in and I'm new here, as part of the job I'd like to get involved. And so the first night I met with them: there were about sixty students in the Field House studio, and I said, "Here's what I think: I think you ought to change the name from 'Orchesis' to 'Dance Theater' so people know what we do. I think you need faculty direction of it, instead of just a student group. You should meet—start to meet every week like a company class. Do auditions early and then lead to the show." And I said, "By your constitution and at student government, you have to elect a faculty advisor. So here's what I want you to do, I want you to go away and think about all these things, talk with each other, come back next week and then we'll decide—you'll decide if that's what you want to do."

So that's the second week here; we changed the name to Slippery Rock Dance Theater, now Slippery Rock University Dance Theater and it started to take shape at that moment. We did

company classes; we had a group called “Tour Group” that did a lot of shows in schools and traveled. And so that was really one of the most enjoyable . . . and I can still see some of my impact on that group.

I choreographed musicals for the Theatre Department, did some work for the operas. When President Reinhard was here in the early ‘80s we did a “Dollars for Scholars” faculty/staff talent show fundraiser that I emceed for three years.

I worked with the marching band under Blase Scarnati’s direction. In fact we did the 1988 Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, which I was a choreographer for. I sang with the band at homecoming in 1978 on the field. Ursula [Payne] happened to be one of the dancers in the Rocklettes at that time. [Pause] So [a] variety of different groups and campus organizations.

TD: What have your accomplishments been here?

TC: Oh I don’t know [laughs]; I really don’t. [Pause] Helping build the dance major, I think is the most important. I mean we really, we all had a dream and we worked very hard at it and when that came true that was—and you’re one of the legacies of that. I mean there was nothing here, and we worked very, very hard at it. And it wasn’t easy by any means.

So I think that’s a big accomplishment: to be a part of [that]. I can’t say I did it; it was more of a “we” than “I”. [Pause] I think probably one of my most—I don’t know, one of my biggest contributions here has been: I’m a high profile person. Getting visibility out for our program and traveling all over the nation: that’s been a thrill too and as you know [after] thirty-one years, I’m still out there. You googled it: you saw it [laughs].

TD: Can you talk about some of your outside opportunities that the Dance Department has been able to present you?

TC: Oh yes, the university dance department has always been supportive of our travel—all of us. And so I’m teaching—I’m working with a public school right now, Bethel Park High School, with their curriculum. I’ve taught in [pause] over fifty or sixty public schools through the arts education program. I teach at festivals and conferences every year.

Probably my most rewarding now is teaching at Dance Teacher Magazine Summer Conference, which is where that’s from [referring to something on his desk]. That was really exciting. I got invited there seven years ago, and I’m now on permanent faculty in the summers, which is kind of exciting because it’s pretty much a New York City group, and I’m not a New York City person. So that’s exciting.

And then through the university I was able to write a grant for the duet that my wife and I do, and that was a real thrill. I mean to do this beautiful duet choreographed by Billy Siegenfeld, a

professional choreographer, and to present it and dance it with my wife was oh, way cool. Did you get a chance to see it?

TD: Yes.

TC: Faculty concert? It's even better now.

TD: I loved it then, so it wouldn't matter.

TC: Oh it's . . . I saw the videotape of it: we performed it in Pittsburgh in December. Made me cry. I was like, "Whoa," so . . .

TD: It's got a wonderful story line. And it reads so well.

TC: Thank you. Very good.

TD: Can you talk about your best and worst teaching moments?

TC: Yes. I was looking at the [sheet] that you gave me. I can't remember a worst moment, I really can't.

TD: That's a good thing.

TC: Well, I mean there've been some really embarrassing moments. I don't know if I really want to go there: this was years ago, in a jazz class. I went to say something like "strike" and "hit" at the same time and it didn't come out right. [Pause] and you know, you shout at the top of your lungs and then here's thirty people looking at you going, "Did you really just say that?" And I said, "No, I don't know." So that's embarrassing, but I don't think it's—I don't remember a bad teaching moment. Other than, you know, things don't work or technology falls apart, or those sorts of things.

But beyond teaching moments I think even . . . I had a student, I won't use her full name, but her first name was Kristy. She was in my Intro to Dance class several years ago, and she sat right in the middle with these two other young girls, all freshmen, and I knew from day one that these three were going to have difficulty; I could tell by their attitude, the baseball caps, the low-cut—and Kristy didn't, I didn't even know her. She just, there was something about her persona that said to me that she did not belong with those two others. And [pause] to this day I don't know why I sensed that, but at the end of the semester she failed my class, as did all three of them. And she called me up and said, "Can I come talk to you and can my father come?" And I said, "Sure bring dad and come in and sit."

Well she, because of her grades, she was going to be expelled. Her dad came in and he said, "She has just taken such an interest and liking in you and your style of teaching and how you deal with

people, but she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.” So I wrote a letter to the dean and the provost asking her if they would admit her for one semester, as a temporary thing, that I would take the responsibility for helping her do whatever. She had one semester. If she doesn’t cut it she’s gone. And I said, “Is that okay with you all?” They said, “Yeah.” Kristy is now a Director of Marketing in one of the major departments at UPMC. That’s a teaching moment: when you see something. [Pause] She invited me to her wedding. She emails me back and forth; so that’s very nice.

Another one was Larry Ferrario, who was a freshman phys ed major, who was my advisee and came in with a chip on his shoulder about as big as a log. And he dressed like a slob and his hair was always uncombed, and he’d come and he’d slouch in the chair and I’d say, “What do you want to take?” He’d say, “I don’t know.” So I started working with him; he met me every week. Something happened between his sophomore and junior summer. He came back in and sat down and he had his hair combed and his shirt was tucked in and he said, “T.C., I got something for you.” I go, “What?” and he said, “I’m gonna graduate with a 3.0 and have honors.” And I said, “Larry, you got a long way to go.” And the start of his last semester, before he was student teaching, he had a 3.10 and he said, “I got something else for you,” and I go, “What’s that?” He said, “I want to speak at graduation.” He said, “I think I’ve got something to say.” And so we applied for him to be the student speaker and he was selected as one of the three finalists but didn’t speak. But those are the great moments in teaching and there are thousands of them. Great people; I get emails all the time from former students and that’s what’s fun.

TD: Who were the leaders when you first came to campus? The movers and the shakers, and what were your impressions of them?

TC: In 1980 or ‘79, we hired a new president, Herb Reinhard: Herb period, F period, Reinhard comma, Junior period [Herb. F. Reinhard, Jr.]. When he signed his signature it was always Herb period, F period Reinhard comma Junior, so everybody started calling him “Herb Period,” because Herb was short for Herbert. And you talk about a mover and shaker: Herb [pause] came in and just turned this place around. He brought it really into the 21st century twenty years earlier. It was Herb who got the university to become a university rather than a state college, ‘cause I was hired by Slippery Rock State College. In fact I don’t know . . . there’s a plaque with an award I got somewhere over there from Slippery Rock State College [pause] by Herb, the President’s Award for Outstanding Service.

But Herb was just great. I mean he had a vision, he had guts, he would wander the campus, he knew probably ninety-five percent of the students’ first names. And he would come in—when I would be at rehearsal, at ten o’clock at night Herb would walk in and sit down and just watch rehearsal and speak to the students and talk to me. Herb was always coming up with all kinds of wonderful things, and the scholarship programs he started . . . And I think one of the greatest

things about Herb was you knew where you stood. If he was really happy and proud of what you did he told you, and if he was really disappointed with you, or you screwed up, you got called on the carpet, and I was there. He was one of those who yelled at you and said, “You know, you’re wrong and you did something really stupid now don’t do it anymore.” and that was the end of it, it never went beyond that. So he was one.

Another person was the Dean of the College of HPER, Health Phys Ed and Recreation, which was where we were housed. Bill Meise, sweetest guy in the world, wonderful educator, administrator, who cared about people and about education.

Another one who I have to mention is Dr. Anne Griffiths. If it wasn’t for Anne Griffiths we wouldn’t have a department. And the college. And oh! She was the most brilliant administrator I’ve ever seen in my life, and I don’t say that very often to people. So those were three that when I first looked at that [question] I said, “Yeah Herb, Bill and Anne were just so important to the campus and specifically to me in my growth and development.”

TD: Were there any major events or activities while you were here: academic activities, cultural, maybe a building project?

TC: Well when I first came Swope was brand new [laughs]. So if you look around you can tell there’s been a few changes in buildings since I’ve been here.

I think during Herb’s tenure there was a lot of—we did a summer celebration where we hosted the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Peter Nero Trio. Hank Williams, Jr. performed outside in the tent before he was really, really famous and there were about four hundred people at the concert. I was head usher.

I remember vividly—I can’t remember the day right now—but the Challenger, when it blew up and exploded. Obviously 9/11, more recently. In fact September 11, 2001 was to be the first ever meeting of the College of Humanities, Fine & Performing Arts, and we went to—I’ll never forget it—we went over to Spotts or ECB for the college meeting, and when we got there we found out what had happened because a lot of us were here already and so we just watched television, ate pizza and hung out.

But that was probably the biggest in the early years: Swope being built. Everything at that end of campus is all brand new. There was nothing there but fields and flowers and the rec center [Aebersold Recreation Center] wasn’t there; that was just an open space. The baseball field wasn’t there; that was an open space. And obviously all the new dorms. The new science building which closes off the quad now, which is okay too; you used to drive in you saw this whole open space.

It's amazing when I think about what we had at that time, what we have now. The dorms—when they first told me they had high-rise dorms . . . my idea of a high rise is a high rise. At Illinois State University we had a—what was it, fifty-four story dorm? Was it fifty-four? Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty—no thirty story dorm, and that's a high rise. And I got here and they said, "Yeah we've got High Rise I and High Rise II," which I think was Founders and Sentinel or whatever. I don't remember now and they were ten stories high so [laughs] . . .

TD: Any other memorable events you'd like to share?

TC: Oh geez, all of them. Great event, dance-wise, was when Bob Aebersold initiated the President's Award for Outstanding Excellence in various fields—the President's Awards for Outstanding Service in Business, Outstanding Achievement in Sport. The first ever presentation, the one he gave for Outstanding Achievement of Sport was to Buck O'Neil, who was a pitcher. He just died a couple years ago, a pitcher in the Negro Baseball League. It was awesome. And then the same year he gave the first ever President's Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Arts to the Nicholas Brothers, and they were here on campus. In fact Fayard, who was the gregarious one of the bunch, at the convocation that night said, "My brother and I love being here and we're gonna hang around for another day and visit classes." It happened to be the semester I was teaching tap, and so I saw him and I said, "Are you really coming to my tap class tomorrow?" And he goes, "Yeah, that'd be great." It was like teaching in front of God. [Pause] He didn't get there 'til late, so I was doing something and we're rehearsing and I turn around [and] there's Fayard Nicholas in the front row. That was a great event, and he came to class and we set him on a chair and we gathered around and I have about a forty-five minute oral history of the early years which I need—which I need to transcribe and put on a disc and send to the Library of Congress. 'Cause it's pretty cool.

TD: What if anything do you miss about being at SRU or love about being at SRU, since you're still here?

TC: People; I mean that's the bottom line. That's why I came here, that's why I stay here. [Pause] People, the freedom—I don't feel I've ever, I shouldn't say ever, but rarely if ever, have I felt like someone wants me to do or be what I'm not, because this is who I am, it's what I do and the love of—I just love the students, you know that. That's why I teach.

TD: Any words of wisdom for current or future Rock community members?

TC: What did I write [refers to notes]? For young faculty members specifically, as well as students: Get to know other people. Go out of your way to know other people, specifically in other departments. I was fortunate my first—this also goes back to an event—when I first came here they had this faculty club called Gourmet Club. Once a month a bunch of us would get together, we have the committees, they would send it out and say, "Okay, this month we're doing

Poland, and your committee is in charge of making the entrée, your committee is in charge of the salad.” They would send you recipes; a group would be in charge of the wine or the beer or whatever. Then [pause] specifically for Poland, Chris and I were in charge—we performed a Polish folk dance that evening. And it was there at this Gourmet Club once a month that I got to meet Tony Pagano, who became my landlord, in Math; a dear, dear friend to this day, and his wife.

Blase Scarnati in Music who was—oh, that’s another mentor. Blase Scarnati, who was director of bands here, was instrumental in my early years here and mentor, until his death last year.

So I get to know all these people across campus, outside of my department, and that doesn’t happen anymore. We’re all so busy; we’re all so compartmentalized. There’s no social time. The young faculty I feel sorry for, even the students. There’s no social time. And I go to these meetings and I see these faculty and it’s embarrassing for me too, because I asked this one man at the beginning of the year I said, “Are you new here?” He goes “No, I’ve been here twelve years.” Now that . . . so that’s something I would highly recommend to all people who are here is to get to know other people, to be very visible both on campus and in the community. At times maybe I’m too visible because I’m a regular at places like Ginger Hill and everyone knows me there, and I’m over 21 so. . . .

And then my last . . . to young faculty and all faculty, and students: ignore the garbage; tolerate it. And we have to deal with a lot more than ever: the politics, the committee work—not that that’s garbage. But there’s a lot of stuff that we end up doing that is not part of teaching, which is what we’re hired to do. And you have to tolerate that and go forward with your life and teach to change the world. That’s—and you know when it says there [refers to questions]: how would I like to be remembered? I would like to be remembered that maybe I did change the world a little bit for some people, someplace and somehow.

TD: Anything else you’d like to add before we finish up?

TC: [Pause] No. I’m starting to think seriously about retirement though, in 2013. And the thing I’d miss most: being in my office [laughs]. I love this place.

TD: Okay, well that’s it for today we’re going wrap up and I want to thank you very much for participating in our interview today.

TC: My pleasure.