

A Tribute to Judith Becker

Judith Becker, Glenn McGeoch Collegiate Professor of Music, retired this spring. Her scholarly life, it seems, unfolded in chapters.

CHAPTER 1: Becker received her bachelor's at SMTD in 1954, in piano, studying with John Kollen. With husband and linguist Alton Becker she traveled to Burma where he taught for three years on a Fulbright. There, she had her first exposure to nonwestern music. She took lessons on the Burmese harp and was soon caught up in the sounds that surrounded her.

CHAPTER 2: William Malm, an authority on Asian music, joined the School in 1964 as its first ethnomusicologist. He purchased a gamelan for the School and directed it for its first year, then asked Becker to take over. "I knew nothing about Indonesian music," Becker remembered, "so the university brought in Hardja Susilo ... I studied with him ten hours a day and after he left I taught what I had learned to other students."

CHAPTER 3: Becker enrolled in the doctoral program in Southeast Asian Studies. In 1972, she was asked to join the faculty and became director of the gamelan. In 1999, Becker co-founded the Center for World Performance Studies in an effort to bring together scholars and students interested in performances of music, theater, and dance from around the world.

Over those years, Becker has contributed hugely to the scholarship in her areas of interest, most recently the physiological similarities between religious ecstasies and those with deep emotional responses to music. Her book *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion and Trancing* won the prestigious Merriam Prize.

"Judith Becker and I began our ethnomusicological careers at the same moment: in a 1965 graduate seminar with our future advisor, Bill Malm," writes Mark Slobin (MA '66, Ph.D. '69),



Becker with 2003 Alumni 'Hall of Fame' Award with nominator and fellow graduate Mark Slobin

"so I have followed her pathway as it paralleled mine. She has consistently blazed new trails in scholarship, becoming a very visible and much-respected scholar in fascinating areas: the study of the Javanese gamelan tradition as it confronts modernity; the intricate relationship of tantric Buddhism to Indonesian music; and, most recently, groundbreaking research in today's hottest topic, music and the brain. This pioneering spirit has kept her work fresh and relevant, just as her great ability in mentoring has supplied ethnomusicology with a string of stellar students who have also become visible and successful scholars."

Those former students say it best:

"We came into Judith's ethnomusicology proseminar feeling like graduate students and left feeling like intellectuals. I remember never quite having enough time in the three hours

we met for us to say everything we wanted to say—we were making so many connections and discovering a whole new way of making music relevant to every aspect of our lives. She is part *éclairceuse*—someone who scouts ahead but also someone who illuminates—and part electrician—someone who sees what loose ends need to be connected to make everything come alive. And it was that kind of excitement and shared intellectual curiosity that made Judith the kind of professor you *wanted* to write a paper for." Marc Benamou

"Judith had that *something* that made students want to work with her, to extend themselves, to really learn. Her intellectual curiosity, her cross-disciplinary perspective, and her ability to guide, support, challenge, and encourage have motivated huge numbers of people like me over the years." Dane L. Harwood

"I will never forget my first contact with Judith Becker. I was still an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania and one night was wandering around the stacks of its amazing anthropology library. I saw a book spine—*Traditional Music in Modern Java*—and stopped in my tracks. I'd never seen the words 'traditional' and 'modern' side by side in that way. I opened it and eventually sat down on the floor right there in the stacks and read and read. I was literally mesmerized." Deborah Wong

"When brilliance is outshined only by kindness, the radiance of the life stretches past the borders of the field of expertise." Julie Spencer

"It's impossible to imagine Judith 'retiring' in the sense of retreating from the world of ideas or intellectual debate, or of creativity, art and music." Alan Feinstein 