

Budd Mishkin and the Art of the “One on 1”

Interviewing the interviewer

BY DONNY LEVIT



AJ Calloway, Zach Braff, and Budd Mishkin at SOPAC. (Courtesy of SOPAC)

He’s sampled soul food with Sylvia Woods of Harlem fame. He’s talked horror movies with Colson Whitehead. He’s mused over *The Sopranos* with Steven Van Zandt. Budd Mishkin has made a career of asking questions to extraordinary people. And he’s received some enthralling answers.

On a quiet weekday afternoon, Mishkin is tucked into a corner table at the Able Baker. His unassuming demeanor does not betray the thousands of interviews he has done on television, radio and the live stage. However, his crisp suit and tie indicate the look of a seasoned broadcast journalist who has been

at it for nearly four decades.

While New York City has served as his professional environs for most of his career, he’s been a resident of South Orange for almost 15 years. He is married to Peri Smilow, a nationally-recognized contemporary Jewish musician. Their daughter, Alie Mishkin, is currently a ninth-grader at Columbia High School.

Today, the interview table has been turned. And he has hundreds of stories to tell.

“I’ve had the privilege of interviewing a musician one week, a writer the next week, and an architect the next week, and an actor, and an ex-politician, a nonprofit executive – all across the board,” says Mishkin. “It was like a weekly class in New York

City.”

For those who have tuned into NY1, New York City’s local news flagship, Mishkin’s face is instantly recognizable. He’s served as an anchor, reporter and host since the channel went on the air.

During that time, he covered sports stories and anchored the nightly show “Sports on 1: The Last Word.” He would later create a weekly series entitled “One on 1 with Budd Mishkin,” where he profiled almost 400 influential New Yorkers between 2003 and 2017.

In the aftermath of a merger between Time Warner Cable and Charter Communications, Mishkin was among employees of NY1 who were laid off. “I will always be grateful for my 25 years at NY1,” he

says. "I will also always be proud that I was there at the beginning on September 8, 1992 and was part of the team that helped make the station an integral part of life in New York City. Now I am excited about the next chapter."

Mishkin, who grew up about 50 miles north of New York City, recalls his childhood trips to Madison Square Garden. "Coming down for my one Rangers game a year, one Knicks game a year, walking into the Garden...it was magic," he says. "You could smell it. It's winter time, the pretzels outside the Garden. The guys yelling, 'Who's got tickets? Who's got tickets?...' It always felt special, and part of that is a connection to growing up with my father - a big sports fan."

Years later, Mishkin reported from the locker room at Madison Square Garden, witnessing the Rangers winning the Stanley Cup in 1994 and memorable playoff basketball during the Knicks run in the 90s. "I am sitting about two rows behind Pat Riley in deafening Chicago Stadium watching the Knicks and the Bulls - these amazing games," describes Mishkin. "You can't even hear yourself think when they announce Michael Jordan's name. Great theater. There are certain moments of clarity in our careers. I remember thinking: 'I think I made the right choice.'"

While he's witnessed many victories, Mishkin speaks about his fascination covering the losing team's locker room. "More often than not, the emotions in a losing locker room are more raw, more unvarnished," he says.

Mishkin's variety of interests certainly have given him insight into the luminaries he has interviewed.

"I play the guitar, I play the piano, so musicians always fascinated me because on some level I knew how to do it," he says. "Not to the level that they could do it, but I marvel at their discipline."

And while he's knowledgeable on many topics, Mishkin's curiosity of the unknown is of immense benefit. "When you interview a writer, if you indicate that you've read a book or two of theirs, they'll spend the whole weekend with you," he says. "You've got to do the work so that you then have the confidence to sit back and have a conversation."

Fellow journalists are particularly appealing to him. "I've been privileged to interview Dan Rather on stage twice," he says. "I admire that he is still pursuing his passion when he could be kicking back and fishing full time. I'm a history buff and Rather is a veritable walking history book: JFK, Vietnam, Watergate, Afghanistan, 9/11 and so many other important stories. And



Mishkin interviews retired Mets pitcher Ron Darling at Words Bookstore (Courtesy of Words Bookstore).

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Mishkin has interviewed journalist and former news anchor Dan Rather on stage twice.

he's able to be self-deprecating, an absolutely admirable quality." He has also interviewed Jimmy Breslin and David Halberstam.

Mishkin wasn't always sitting opposite the Gloria Steinems and the Harry Belafontes of the world. He recalls a gig he had in the 1980s announcing ski reports on live radio – except he wasn't calling in from the snow-covered slopes.

"The phone rang at 5:30. I picked it up, I got my tray table with all my notes, my pencil and proceeded to walk into the bathroom....I did pretty well in school – a fine institution – and five years later I'm doing ski reports in my bathroom. It was not an optimistic time."



Budd Mishkin interviews actor David Duchovny at the 92nd Street Y. (Courtesy of 92nd Street Y)

He cut his teeth on a dizzying smorgasbord of call letters – radio, television, and newsroom jobs. He jokes that when working for WOBN in Toms River, he tried to convince the people running the station "that WOBN should stand for the 'World of Budd Mishkin.' Shockingly, they did not go for it."

Mishkin uses his interviewing acumen to benefit the local community. He's hosted *Project Runway's* Tim Gunn as well as Ira Glass and the staff of *This American Life* on two separate nights at Columbia High School to benefit the Outdoor Learning Center at Seth Boyden Demonstration School.

And he has interviewed locally at SOPAC, Words Bookstore, as well as the Maplewood-South Orange Book Festival. "I'm a curious

person in general, so I love talking to people, and I'm comfortable in that setting, whether it's on TV or at the 92nd Street Y in New York, or other venues in New York, or venues here in my hometown. I've done several at SOPAC and I love SOPAC," he says.

Mishkin's interviews there include the Klezmatics, Zach Braff, AJ Calloway, among others. "I'm a proud board member for Midtown Direct Rep," he adds.

"My father was the greatest storyteller ever," recalls Mishkin. "I learned from him. He was a master."

Mishkin will surely continue to coax great stories out of luminaries. His next chapter has only begun.

Donny Levit is a journalist, writer, and author of *Rock n' Roll Lies*, *10 Stories*. He is the editor of *newpulpacity.com*, an arts and culture website. Follow him on @donnyreports.

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Singer Oleta Adams will take the SOPAC stage May 11.

and to register contact rtlives1@gmail.com or visit artlives.net.

South Orange Performing Arts Center (SOPAC) offers something for everyone this season: Oleta Adams May 11 at 8 p.m.; An Evening with Fran Lebowitz May 18 at 8 p.m.; on May 19, The Gruffalo at 2 p.m. and Savion Glover & OUT'KNIGHTz at 8 p.m.; and Small Town Story – A New Musical from May 31 - June 10. For details and tickets call 973-313-2787 or visit sopacnow.org.

The Strollers Community Theater will close its 86th season with William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, performing over two weekends at the Burgdorff Center in



The Strollers will present A Midsummer Night's Dream on the weekends of May 11 and 19 at the Burgdorff Center in Maplewood.

Maplewood; at 8 p.m. on May 11, 12, 18 and 19 and on May 13 at 2 p.m. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be described as the story of love and the madcap consequences that ensue when it's injected with a bit of magic. For details and tickets call 973-761-8453 or visit thestrollers.org.



The South Orange-Maplewood Adult School presents Alice Neel: *Portraits, Politics and Power* May 17 at Columbia High School's Black Box Theater.

The South Orange-Maplewood Adult School American artist Alice Neel: *Portraits, Politics and Power* from 7-8:30 p.m. May 17 at Columbia High School's Black Box Theatre. For details call 973-378-7620 or visit somaltschool.org.

Middle and high school students