Who was Martin Stumpf?

On August 18, 2005, Martin Mathis Stumpf died unexpectedly and tragically at the age of 42. He died midstream in life, so full of energy, ambition and vision, strong and healthy, poised to move into new chapters both professionally and personally, looking to make a greater contribution and determined to make a difference. It was not his time – and yet it was.

In the time he had, Martin lived a full life. He spread into many directions, accomplished many things, set an example on many fronts, and portrayed a tone and character that affected many people. This Foundation seeks to capture and promote his spirit in concrete ways. Who he was and what he embodied are more than a few words can convey, but this Foundation strives to continue some of what made Martin so special: community, communications and creativity.

Martin lived the essence of community: seeing the commonality, seeking the core and supporting the interconnectedness of all things. He was a natural networker, a man of connections – in his own life as he developed and maintained friendships across the world, in his world view as he promoted greater peace, harmony and equality among all peoples, and in his spirituality as he was moved by the profundity of nature, from the smallest creatures to the vast sea.

Martin made communications his medium, always introspective but still externally oriented towards others, listening and taking things in, seeking to learn and understand, promoting tolerance and sharing. He loved the word, the spoken word, the written word, the etymologically derived word, the created word. Above all, he was a man of sound – sounds in nature that he heard and others bypassed, sounds that fill our social space from conversations to debates, sounds that shape the community like community radio in Africa that he helped build, and sounds that permeate the spheres as primal chords in the universe. Martin chose sound engineering as his profession, but went far beyond recording to build on sound as a bridge to increased awareness and understanding.

Martin drew inspiration through creativity, not a demonstrative creativity, but a love of creativity in himself and others, tied to the essential expression of each person. He always reminded himself and others to find themselves and follow their own paths and believed that the challenges of a different way were worth it. His own path was unbeaten, sometimes bushwhacked, always sui generis step by step. In the spirit of community and communicating, Martin loved music, that universal medium – from his guitar, drums, didjeridoo and shakuhachi, as well as pipes, barrels and other street-fare; from ambient sound and group performances with friends; and from indigenous, traditional and world music that he loved, recorded and sought to preserve.

Why Omani-Zanzibari cultural ties?

Through his mother and the mothers before her, Martin Stumpf was descended from the Sultan of Oman, Said bin Sultan, the ruler of a great nation that under his reign spanned from the east corner of the Arabian peninsula down the eastern coast of Africa to Zanzibar, off the coast of Tanzania. His daughter, Sayyida Salme, born in 1844 of a slave purchased from the Caucasus into the royal harem, did the unthinkable by falling in love with a German merchant, eloping and escaping for her life. She married with the Christian name Emily Ruete and then lived together with her husband Heinrich in Hamburg until he, too, tragically died a young death. Thereafter she stayed in Germany to raise their three children, never able to reconcile with the Sultanate. In her story lies the multicultural tale of what we do for love. In her unbeaten path lie all the challenges of a single mother in a foreign land. From her gift of communication and creativity came a book in German depicting her childhood in the royal Zanzibari palace, which is still available today in several languages (see amazon.com for Memoirs of an Arabian Princess). Consistent with her pathbreaking role, this valuable historical record and precious personal account written for her children appears to be the first book ever published by an Arabic woman.

Martin was very drawn to his multicultural roots and Sayyida Salme’s compelling story. He repeatedly visited Zanzibar and Oman in his quest to understand, link and preserve, cherishing the traditional cultures and local music. On his desk when he died was his blueprint for a documentary film on Sayyida Salme, a project he had long envisioned, was finally pursuing and fully committed to realizing. Though this film and this larger quest will never experience his creative expression, the Foundation is inspired – as Martin was – by Sayyida Salme’s history. The Foundation seeks to reflect her personification of the links among Arab, African, Western and other elements derived from a trading nation that was a precursor to today’s globalization. It hopes to promote such links, as they both did, for greater caring and understanding.

Contributions in the form of checks can be made to "Martin M. Stumpf Foundation for the Promotion of Omani-Zanzibari Cultural Ties" and sent to P.O. Box 4441, Chapel Hill, NC 27515-4441.

Martin’s obituary can be found at www.newsobserver.com/cgi-bin/nao/obits/show_details.cgi?id=102602.