

JOE McPHEE
INTERVIEWED
BY
JOHN CORBETT

SOUND AMERICAN



EARLY YEARS

JOHN CORBETT: We're not going to do a long chronological thing, but maybe talk a little bit about your dad and your dad's trumpet.

JOE McPHEE: My dad was a trumpet player. I knew he was a trumpet player, because he was always playing around the house. Well, it was probably around 1948, 'cause I would have been eight years old. I was out in the street with some friends playing stick ball, and my dad came to the front door and said, "Come here, I want to show you something." I went into the house, and he had set up his music stand and his trumpet, and he played a few things for me, and then wanted me to try to play the trumpet.

I really wasn't all interested in that. I preferred to be out in the street playing with my friends. But, we played around for a bit, and slowly, day-by-day, he would invite me to play more and more, just to try things. One day there was an exhibition at a public library—like the "Music Man" came and brought all kinds of instruments and put them on a stage. There were clarinets and saxophones and a trombone and a trumpet, and so on, and we were invited to try the instruments, because the city was in the process of starting an elementary-school band. By that time I had been playing for a little bit, I think I might have been about nine or ten years old, and I picked up the trumpet and started playing right straight away because I had been playing with my dad. Of course the teacher thought, "Oh, isn't he great! He's a genius!" It had nothing to do with that! But anyway, they organized an elementary school band, and I have been playing ever since.

JC: And you still have your dad's trumpet.

JM: I do. The first trumpet he bought for me was from a company called Olds. It was a very nice trumpet, but he thought I needed a better one than that and should have a Holton as well. He had a beautiful silver Holton, so he eventually got a beautiful silver Holton for me when I was 16 years old.

JC: What kind of music did he play?

JM: Well, my dad was from the Bahamas. And he learned music at a very early age. In fact, he started on violin—he would tell me about Paganini studies and all of that—but then he was introduced to the trumpet. He wasn't really a jazz player, but he was absolutely enamored of Louis Armstrong. In fact, he looked like Louis Armstrong. When he was teaching me how to play the trumpet, he would sometimes put a handkerchief over the valves, so I couldn't see exactly what was going on, because that's what the jazz guys were doing.

On my mother's side of the family her uncle, my great-uncle, was Alphonso (Al) Cooper, who was a clarinetist, an altoist, and also the leader of the Savoy Sultans.¹ Much later, in the '70s, I wanted to do an oral biography on my Uncle Al for *Cadence* magazine. So, I happened to be in Miami, and I got in touch with him. We started to talk. The Savoy Sultans were like the house band of the Savoy Ballroom. Everybody came through there: Duke Ellington's band, Count Basie's band, everybody had to pass through this eight-piece, it's called like a jump band or whatever. And my great uncle Alfonso played clarinet and alto saxophone.

They only made one recording, because there was a musician's strike. I always thought that, you know, one day I would like to make a version of that band. Panama Francis started a second version of the Savoy Sultans, and I'd like to do a third one I thought. Not to play the music, or try to replicate the music that they played, but do it my own way. I want to do that in tribute to them.

So, when I went to interview my great-uncle, he told me stories about what it was like to be on the road after leaving the Savoy Ballroom in New York. You didn't have to go very far—over to New Jersey or Delaware—and life changed drastically. They'd have to play for segregated audiences, he told me. And in some places after a performance, their meal was given to them like you would feed a dog, by putting the food outside of a door at somebody's back porch or something. That was what it was like to play in the Chitlin' Circuit at that time in the United States. You could be in New York, and be king of the hill; cross the river, and shit happened. Wasn't nice. I was so caught up in the stories that he was telling that I forgot to turn on my tape recorder. Yeah. It was amazing. That was life in America at that time. And I think "Make America Great Again" would be an attempt to take us back to those times, if that's what is meant by that.

Anyway, so, my father was around all that music, but he really didn't play so much jazz. He introduced me to a lot of classical music, which he played around the house, and calypso music, Caribbean music.

JC: Can you tell me what your mother's favorite song was?

JM: My mom's favorite song was "Lift Every Voice and Sing". I play it often. I've recorded it with Trio X. I've recorded it recently with DKV—solo—every kind of way. It was very important to her. And, her sister played organ in Miami at a church there, and also in Poughkeepsie, New York.

Actually, I should tell you something about how I got to Poughkeepsie, New York, 'cause I was born in Miami, Florida. One day our house was hit by lightning

in a thunderstorm. I don't know what the grounding was, but in any event, it caught fire. I was about maybe three years old, and I was in the house. I remember the panic because my parents—not my parents, my dad wasn't there—were trying to rescue things, save whatever they could, and get us out of the house.

I went the next day with my grandfather to see this burned-out hulk of a house. One never forgets the smell of a burned building. It's just with you forever. I remember the music that I heard that day. The next day was sunny and I remember walking through the mud and all of that, but the specific song that I heard was something like [sings]...I remember the melody. I don't remember the words so clearly, but I remember that. And I also remember, and this may be a memory from another time, the sound of a radio show about the Green Hornet—the sound of the Green Hornet's high-powered sedan. It was [makes siren-like sound] that kind of thing. It was a bit scary. I think those are probably my first memories of any kind of sound like that, or music.

I was three years old, and after that, we had to move. My dad never really wanted to raise children in the South anyway. Thank god he moved. There was a man who was the editor of a Poughkeepsie newspaper called the *Poughkeepsie Journal or Poughkeepsie Eagle?* Whatever. He found my dad a job in Poughkeepsie, and so we moved.

I remember the day we moved. I remember it being very hot, and being on a bus. I remember being in the back of the bus. I didn't know why we were in the back of the bus, except it was very hot there. Sitting on that seat that was just over the engine, and I remember getting out of the back door and walking around the back of the bus—the flap on the back of the bus was up because men were looking at the motor—because we had to walk to the train station with all of our luggage and stuff. We get there, and I remember the terrifying sound of a steam engine coming into that train station. Scared the hell out of me: the smoke and the noise and all of that. I remember arriving in New York City, and the first ride on a New York City subway. At that time, there were these funny turnstiles that looked like a cross. I don't know what the fare was, but I remember riding on that train. It was hot and noisy, screeching.

I remember the texture of the seats. It was some kind of woven, not woven, but interlaced kind of thing. I remember the noise and the heat in that subway and the smell of the electric stuff in there. I remember that quite clearly. The sound. I've always been fascinated by that sound. I like the sound of trains, the rhythmic sound of the wheels, the noise.

JC: Did you go straight up to Poughkeepsie from there?

JM: No we stayed in New York. I lived with my grandmother for a very short time on 128th Street near Lenox Avenue. I remember going to Mount Morris Park, which is now called Marcus Garvey Park, just off of 125th Street. There was a pool there, and a market. There was a large West Indian community, so you could get things like conch and red snapper, and all kinds of things like that from the Caribbean. I remember the smell of the food, and stuff there. It was very colorful.

JC: So this would be sort of '42-ish.

JM: I was three years old. So '43. Yeah, around that time. I remember I showed you a photograph of me running across the lawn in what was Liberty City. I remember an experience there. I remember my mother grabbing my sister and me, and rushing us into a building, while this thing was screaming. It was an air raid. I remember seeing, I would imagine it was a man, but I don't know that specifically, with some kind of a helmet and a light rushing us into a building. I learned later what it was, but I remember the sound. Yeah. Sound has always been very, very important to me. I'm absolutely interested in every kind of sound possible. I love the sound of a jet engine, as much as I love an aria in a great opera. It's not dissimilar to me.

JC: Maybe you can tell the story about Castro.

JM: Oooh. Yeah. Well, haaah. Just prior to the Castro incident, I was with a friend from high school, and we had a double date. There's a place in Poughkeepsie called College Hill where you'd take dates, and so we had these two girlfriends, and we went up there. Everything was going swimmingly until two guys from the football team came—these big guys—and they saw us with these girls. And they took our girlfriends away, and went off and laughed at us. So my friend Ronnie and I, we had to walk back down to the community center. It was called Catherine Street Community Center. Everybody's playing basketball and having a great time, and eventually I just went home.

But something happened to Ronnie. I don't know if it was that incident that triggered it or whatever, but the next morning I got a phone call. "Ronnie's dead." He was a collector of jazz recordings. He was very careful with them but, on this particular evening I guess, he put them all on a turntable with one of those things that drops the records, he drank a bottle of gin, took a shotgun, and killed himself. I never really found out why. A few days later, my friends and I were on our way to Albany to meet some other girls, and, as I remember, we were driving across the Mid-Hudson Bridge. We took an oath, and we said if anybody ever finds us dead, it's not suicide. See who killed us. Find out who killed us.

On that trip, we met these other girls, and they said, "Listen, we're gonna have a cotillion in New York, and we need dates. Why don't you guys come?" So, why not? We went to New York, and stayed at the Theresa Hotel on 125th Street and Seventh Avenue. My dad had worked in the hotel business, so he knew some people there, and we got a discount. The next morning, we hear all this commotion in the street, which is not unusual because on Seventh Avenue and 125th Street, there's soapboxes, and people are always carrying on about something. But, this was different. We go into the hallway and see these—what

eventually I learned were maybe—Secret Service people. We found out later, the commotion was because [Fidel] Castro was there! He had been kicked out of his hotel for bringing chickens or something there.

THE EXPERIENCE OF MUSIC

JC: What's the first memory you have of seeing live jazz?

JM: The first? Hmmm. That came probably much later. I probably heard classical music because we had a philharmonic orchestra in Poughkeepsie. Hearing the strings live made a big impression on me, because it wasn't at all like what you'd hear on a recording. It was alive and exciting.

I listened to a lot of jazz on recordings, though. I think it would have been about 1959 when I heard [Miles Davis's] *Kind of Blue*, which totally destroyed me. I bought a copy and played it until there were no more grooves left. Then I began listening to jazz really seriously, being introduced to it through some friends. One friend in particular—his name was Gary Mendez—his father had a big jazz collection. So we'd go over to his house, and his dad would play recordings for us, and we'd have kind of blindfold tests, and really got very seriously into it. Then, of course I heard John Coltrane and eventually Ornette Coleman. That was my evolution in jazz listening.

But, one of my earliest experiences with live jazz was hearing Thelonious Monk at the Apollo. Steve Lacy was in the band at that time. I didn't know what this instrument was that he was playing. I thought it was a clarinet. And much later I heard a recording of the music that was played at the Apollo. It was quite amazing.

JC: So you were, you were 18, 19, 20, and that music was becoming important to you, but you started playing trumpet considerably earlier...

JM: Yes. But never jazz. The music I was listening to was the music everybody else was listening to. It was the pop music of the time.

High school was kind of a drag. It wasn't a really interesting time for me. My taste in music was not what all the other kids were listening to, so I remember we started a kind of club. We called ourselves the "Youth Socialites." And we would have listening sessions, and we'd sit around and listen to jazz, and, you know. We were above that fray. So we thought. [laughs] We even had sweaters and, you know. We were elite little snobs.

JC: I'm thinking it might be nice for you to talk about any particularly sublime musical situations across the years where there was something particular about a musical context that was uplifting, or special, or particularly unpleasant, or whatever.

JM: I can think of something that happened in oh, what would be the year, 1981. At New Music America in San Francisco, I had been invited to play solo. Walking through the airport, the strap on my saxophone case broke and my tenor saxophone fell. It was in a hard case, but it fell to the floor. So now I go to sound check and the horn doesn't play. I can't figure that out. I don't see anything wrong, but obviously one of the rods had been bent. The technical people didn't want to hear anything. "You've got 25 minutes for this sound check, and that's it. Your horn doesn't work, that's your problem." I'm thinking "how am I gonna do this?" Someone came and said, "Don't worry. We'll take care of that." This person was Pauline Oliveros. She took me to a music shop and got my saxophone repaired. I was able to make that concert, and also make a great friendship, which lasted until she passed away about a year or so ago. She had a profound influence on me—her music, her lifestyle, her fierce independence really marked something very important in my life.

JC: Let's do the converse of what I suggested before about sublime musical situations that you were playing in, and hear you talk about musical epiphanies where you were sitting and listening.

JM: Oh yes. Again, in 1962, I had heard, what was to be called, John Coltrane's Classic Quartet with Elvin Jones, and McCoy Tyner, and Jimmy Garrison would be playing at the Village Gate. I was not prepared for what happened to me. You know the feeling when you get in an airplane, and it taxis out, and heads towards the takeoff position? You hear the engines rev up, and then you feel the kicking as the plane races down, ready for takeoff? And then you feel the lift? That's what it was like for me sitting there, listening to this quartet. McCoy, Elvin, and Jimmy Garrison started and it began to build and build, and by the time John Coltrane came on stage, it was liftoff.

I thought I was going to die. I couldn't get any more air in. I couldn't breathe. My heart was racing. It was glorious. Driving home to Poughkeepsie that night—I had to go to work the next day—I sort of nodded at the wheel, and the car went off the road and went into the gravel. It shook me, woke me up. I took a little nap on the side of the road, but I still couldn't breathe from the experience of hearing that quartet. I don't know anything else like that.



THE ARMY

JC: I want to move us into talking, for a second, about the Army.

JM: '63. I was drafted in 1962, actually, and I went to my physical and all of that, and they sent me home to gain weight! Which was good, because that was in November of '62 and by the time the Army took me it was June of '63 and I was at Fort Dix in New Jersey. It was a better time to be in basic training: June and July, rather than November, December.

JC: And then you were in until '65.

JM: Yes. The Army made me the ultimate weapon. That was what they called us at Fort Dix. *The Ultimate Weapon*. And, in basic training, we learned how—now, I don't know how you would ever do this—to kill somebody with a bayonet stuck on a rifle that was being used back in World War II, or maybe even earlier. It was kind of really ridiculous. And skinny me! I didn't weigh anything, so I could run like the wind, and I could crawl underneath barbed wired, and do all that John Wayne kind of crazy stuff.

In fact, the only trophy I ever got in my life was being a trainee of The Cycle, which meant that I did everything that I guess you were supposed to to be like John Wayne—jumping off of things and swinging on stuff, and wearing a gas mask, and all that. And I did it so well, they, they gave me this trophy. So that's it. That was my part of the experience.

One night in particular I remember, while I was on KP duty, peeling potatoes or washing grease off of a floor, they had map-reading things going on. And so, when I finished my KP, they sent me out into the woods with a map and a flashlight, and I didn't know what was going on. I just know there was a swamp, and I don't like things in the swamp. You were supposed to follow all the instructions on the map and at a certain time you'd come out of the place, and be checked in, and they'd say that you did your course. Well, it was dark. I saw a light. I went to the light, and there was a guy in this tent, and he said, "What are you doing you here? You can't be here now." I said, "Well I'm here, so check me in." That was my map-reading course! [laughs]

When I went into the Army, they asked me if I played a musical instrument. I said, "Yeah. Trumpet." I had qualified for electronics technology work, but there was no place in the school—but they needed trumpet players. I said, "No, I don't want to do that. I did that in grade school. I don't want to do that marching," and someone said, "Well, you can do that or you might end up in the infantry, marching behind a tank. Which would you rather do?" So my military occupational service number was MOS, I think it was 101 or something like that, which meant *trumpet player*.

I was introduced to my first piece of written jazz music while I was in the Army. It was a piece called "Four" by Miles Davis. I didn't know how to improvise properly and, in fact, I remember being at the enlisted men's club and there were guys playing, and I asked if I could sit in. I was so nervous I almost fell off the stage. I started to black out, because it was that intense, but I kept doing it, and there were guys in the band who had played jazz. They introduced me to what was happening at the moment.

JC: You had a band, against the wishes of your superiors that competed in Heidelberg, right?

JM: Yes. That was in May of '65. The Army kind of frowned on the kind of jazz that we were playing, but this contest came up at a jazz festival in Heidelberg. Some of the guys in the band said we should go and play, because if you won you would get transportation coming back to the United States on leave.

There were some really great players in that band. One in particular was a bass player by the name of James Long. After the Army experience, he continued playing and ended up playing for quite some time with Johnny Griffin and Sarah Vaughan, and people like that. And the baritone player, Leroy Flemings, he played with Otis Redding and missed that flight in which Otis was killed. He took a bus or something on that trip.

JC: Clifford was in the band, right?

JM: Yes. One of the people I did meet while I was in the Army was Clifford Thornton, who was studying bass at the conservatory there [in Würzburg], and also playing valve trombone.

I was with him one time when he went to a music shop and bought a valve trombone. I knew that trombone quite well. It was inscribed on the bell: "Würzburg, Germany." That was back in 1965. Now in 1971, Clifford had gotten out of the Army and gone to Wesleyan University, where he taught for some time. When I returned to the U.S., I invited him to a concert at WBAI radio station, and Clifford showed up, but he didn't have the trombone. He had a baritone horn. I asked him what happened to his horn, and he said somebody stole it out of the Volkswagen that he was driving.

In 1979, I was in New York City, and I'd always wanted to play a valve trombone, so I found this used music shop, Silver and Horland it was called. I had bought a soprano there once before. I went in and I told the guy inside, "I'm looking for a valve trombone. What have you got?" And he said, "Well, I got this German model. There's the bell in the showcase." And I looked at it and thought, "That's Clifford's horn. I know it." I asked to look at it, and there it was, across the bell: "Würzburg, Germany." A friend of mine, Craig Johnson, was with me, and I said, "I don't have the money to buy this right now, but could you buy it and whatever it costs, I'll pay for it when it comes back."

That night I called Clifford, who was living in Geneva, Switzerland, at that time. I said, "Does the number 872 mean anything to you?" He said, "No, what is that?" "That's the number on the trombone you bought in Würzburg." He said, "How do you know?" I said, "Because I'm holding it." I told him that I had to come to Geneva, and I'd bring it. And he said, "Nah, I've got a King now." King and Conn were the two names that I was most familiar with and were why I was so curious when the guy in the music shop told me had a German horn. He said, "Why don't you just keep it and play it?" You know, I don't even know if Clifford could have identified that horn. It found me. I play it to this day.

NEW YORK

JC: I want to put us back in New York in the mid-'60s, after you've come back from the Army. You're at a record store in New York, and someone's looking over your shoulder.

JM: While I was in the Army, I had been reading about Albert Ayler in *Downbeat* and so forth, and I had all these questions about his music and what was it about. He was playing in Europe at the time, but we kept missing him. The band went to Copenhagen to play for some event there, and some of us went to a club called Montmartre. Booker Ervin was the saxophonist there, and he let us sit in. We asked about Ayler, and he said, "Oh yeah, Albert was here, but he went to Paris with Don Cherry".

When I got out of the Army, the very first thing I did was find a record shop in New York City and, there in a rack of LPs, I found an Albert Ayler recording: Bells. It only had one side. The second side was a silk screen kind of, I don't know, drawing, painting? I was looking at it when a voice over my right shoulder said, "What do you think of that recording?" I said, "I don't know, but I can't wait to hear it." And he said, "That's my brother. I'm a trumpet player." It was Donald Ayler! I said, "I'm a trumpet player, too. I just got out of the Army." We talked about music for a while, and he said, "We've got a rehearsal tonight. Why don't you come?" Well I didn't have my trumpet, and I don't live in New York City, and I had to catch a train to go back to Poughkeepsie, so I didn't go...I can't imagine what that would have been like. I did eventually get to hear Albert live, and hearing his music suddenly turned me around, and around, and around.

'I'M A HIPPIE.'

JC: You know, you mentioned to me a couple times about the period leading up to that. How did you put it, when you were a hippie.

JM: I was a hippie! I had all the right hippie stuff. I had the bellbottoms. I had the dashiki. I had the hair. I had the look. I was a hippie. Well, kind of a hippie. I had a 1963 Volkswagen bus outfitted with a bed and closets, and I had my wine bota. I had everything in there. It was called "Afro One." It couldn't get out of its own way with its 36 horsepower engine, but it was what you had to have. And I would have gone to Woodstock, except the muffler fell off my bus, and I couldn't get there. Thank, God! All that mud and stuff.

Around then, a friend of mine had a summer solstice party in his barn that lasted for days. He had a band, and [they] played almost continuously for two days. I was at the party, and it was on a highway. Cars were whizzing by and when I saw them, I thought, "Hmmm, I'll just take off all my clothes." I was a hippie, and we were all doing some stuff we probably shouldn't have. I got naked, hid in the bushes, and waited 'til I heard the sound of a car coming close, and then I'd jump into the middle of the highway with a big stick like a spear and just carried on...tires screeching all over the place! Then I'd jump back into the bushes. That's what hippies did at that time, you know. Whatever. Excited people.

One of my buddies was in that cornfield, though—doing acid—I had to take him home in my Volkswagen bus. He gets there with his head against this flat windshield, and he's telling me about the lights and the colors and all. I couldn't see any of that. I had to drop him off at his mother's house, and god knows what happened there, but that's what hippies did back then. We were in the middle of all of that stuff in the '60s. We survived. Some of us survived. Some of us didn't. One of the people who was in that cornfield dropping acid probably burned his brain out, and one day he decided to jump off of the Mid-Hudson Bridge there in Poughkeepsie. He survived. And, of course, he ended up in a state mental institution for a while. He got out and eventually hanged himself. Some people didn't survive.

JOHN COLTRANE & ORNETTE COLEMAN

JC: Let's talk about Coltrane's funeral.

JM: Wow. Well, my friend Clifford Thornton—who had introduced me to so much music and was really sort of a mentor to me in many respects—had an opportunity to make his first recording. It was called Freedom in Unity. I think it was July of 1967. He had a rehearsal studio on Barrow Street in New York. I went there, and was playing my trumpet—I didn't play saxophone at that time. [There was a] knock on the door, and standing there was Ornette Coleman with a trumpet, and he said, "I heard you practicing." He said, "Try this trumpet. I've got to go to Fort Worth to visit my family, but we're in the practice studio right across the hall. When you're finished with it, the door's open, just put it back inside." I thanked him and waited until he left. I heard the door close, and I wiggled the valves a little bit. I thought, "I can't do this. I don't know what just happened." I took the trumpet and put it back. I went in that room, and there was David Izenzon's bass, Charles Moffett's drums and vibes, and I thought, "Oh my God," and I just put it back.

Later, I was driving back home to Poughkeepsie, and I heard on the radio that John Coltrane had died, and I just thought, "You're kidding. This can't be. How could that happen? " They held the funeral on the following Friday, which I think was the 21st of July, and I was back in New York to rehearse for this recording session with Clifford, which was to be held the following day. Again, there was a knock on the door. I opened it, and it's Ornette. He said, "Are you going to go to the funeral?" I said, "I can't go. I didn't bring clothes to go to a funeral." He said, "You don't need clothes. You just have to go." So I went up to St. Peter's Church, and there I saw John Coltrane in the coffin wearing his dashiki. I heard Albert Ayler's quartet, and Ornette had a quartet, as well, playing up in the balcony of the church. After the service, which was very joyful—it wasn't sad at all—I came outside. I was standing right outside the entrance to the church and Ornette came again.

He said they were going to the cemetery, would you like to go? He was with Billy Higgins and a drummer named Harold Avent, who was to be the drummer for Clifford's recording. We get in the limousine, and off we went. But, we got stuck in traffic and, by the time we arrived, the service was over. All the people were gone—there was just Ornette and Coltrane's grave. No photographs, except what I'm telling you. This verbal photograph, if you will.

We eventually went back to Barrow Street. I was staying there overnight, before the recording session the next day. Another knock on the door. And it's Ornette. He said, "We're playing at the [Village] Vanguard tonight. Why don't you come on up?"

I went to the Vanguard, and I heard Ornette play. I heard him playing "Naima." I heard him play music that sounded straight out of Charlie Parker. I don't think there were all that many people at the Vanguard that night. After the program was over, we walked down Seventh Avenue, stopped in a little chicken joint, bought some sandwiches, and went back to Barrow Street. The next morning, I went to Brooklyn, got to the studio, and the bass player is Jimmy Garrison! How does that happen? I don't know. It was an amazing experience. Absolutely extraordinary.

JC: I forgot about Garrison, and the proximity of those events, too—the fact that it was basically over the course of a few days. You realize that was such a rich action-packed period of time.

JM: And you know, I'm thinking now and remembering that earlier that year, I went to hear Coltrane at the Vanguard. He had a really large ensemble with Rashied [Ali] and Alice Coltrane, and there must have been seven percussionists. It was just mind-boggling, the sound and the intensity.

Coltrane's band was playing opposite Coleman Hawkins's quartet. Coleman Hawkins looked like Moses with his big white beard, you know. Coltrane's band played, and then there was an interval. During that interval, down the stairs of the Vanguard came [Thelonious] Monk. And I turned and I looked. There was Monk looking in the room, and he just turned and walked backwards, up the stairs, and out the door. [laughs]

The interval was over. Now comes Coleman Hawkins's quartet. They ascend to the stage, and Coleman Hawkins started screaming and blowing like Coltrane, like really, and then all of a sudden, he stopped, and laughed like "anybody can do that." But then they played, of course, he can do that, and he didn't, it was like, they were having fun. Great fun. It was amazing.

BUFFALO

JC: Let’s go to Buffalo.

JM: A friend of mine got a scholarship to study art at Buffalo State. It’s now 1962. Three of the friends—actually the ones who had gone to New York to that cotillion—decided to travel to Buffalo with my friend. We took a Greyhound bus, not thinking much about it. At that time buses in the South were being burned with people inside—the Freedom Riders. We get on the bus, kind of joking in a way, stupidly drinking wine in the back of the bus, and so on, and go to Buffalo.

My friend goes to take care of whatever he had to at the university, while my other two friends and I went into a bar to have a beer. Then, we figured we’d go back down to the bus station and get our stuff and maybe find some place to stay. We come out and get on a city bus going downtown when somebody came out of the bar and says, “Hey, come here, stupid.” We got off the bus, thinking it was a joke, and these guys came pouring out of the bar with beer bottles, which they broke, and brass knuckle things. They called us everything but a child of God. We thought, “Uh-oh, this is not good. We better get out of here.” So we started walking down the street while they’re yelling all kinds of epithets at us, and then they started to run.

My friend said when we get down to the corner, we should take a right. He said if we go that way, we’ll get on across Main Street in Buffalo, which is a black area, and nobody would dare to follow us there. But, he was facing the wrong way. So I turn the wrong way and a guy’s fist hit me in the jaw. Dislocated my jaw, blood all over my shirt. I’m knocked down, and I got road tar in my hair. My white shirt is all covered with stuff, and people were trying to hit us with their cars because they thought we *had* to be doing something wrong, or those people wouldn’t be chasing us. Those guys were white. We were black, and so we must have done something wrong.

We finally outrun them, and try to get back to the bus station, so we could see what to do. Well, the Buffalo Greyhound station was patrolled by border people, so you had to buy a ticket. We bought a ticket and get on a bus to Niagara Falls at five o’clock in the morning. When we get there, we’re set upon by the state police: “What are you doing here at this time of the night? You must be up to something.” We get on another bus and go back to Buffalo. We spent the day at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, near a park. Dogs patrolled there at night, so we knew we couldn’t stay there. One of my friends had just met a young lady who invited us to stay in their basement for a couple of days until we could get enough money to get back home. But um, that wasn’t a really nice situation. 1962. It, it, it you know, as bad as it was for us there, as uncomfortable as it was, our bus wasn’t burned. It was a little different situation, but I thought to myself, “I’ll never let that happen again. I don’t care what happens.” It was so humiliating. Never, never, never again.

EUROPE

JC: Talk a little bit about Europe.

JM: Well, in 1973 I met John Snyder. He was living in the same building as a pianist I was playing with in a group called Trinity, named Mike Kull. One day Mike said to me, “You got to come and see this thing that John has in his room. He says it’s a synthesizer.” I had been following the work of Robert Moog at the time, and, I hadn’t really jumped into it, but I was interested in it.

I didn’t know how John’s synthesizer worked. It had a ribbon controller instead of a keyboard. I said, “Oh we have to do something with this,” so I organized a concert, thanks to my friend Craig Johnson, at Holy Cross Monastery. The monks there were very open. John played the synthesizer and my brother and some of his friends played all kinds of percussion instruments.

The next year, we decided to do a duo recording—it was called *Pieces of Light*—and we got an invitation to come to Europe. Nobody was playing an ARP 2600 [synthesizer] on the road at that time. Michael Carvin was supposed to be the drummer, but something went wrong in the negotiations for that, so we ended up, when we got to Basel, with a drummer named Makaya Ntshoko, who was a South African musician who had come to Europe with Dollar Brand. I borrowed a car in Paris, and off we go to play some concerts in Austria and Switzerland. At one point, we went to Willisau, which became a really wonderful recording called the *Willisau Concert*, but Makaya had a bit too much to drink, and got into some difficulty with the police. He got arrested, and John and I said, “That’s it. We’re out of here.” Off we went, back to Paris.

In Paris, my friend Tim Brunton, who hosted us, and whose car I had borrowed for this trip, organized a concert at the American Center. He made some posters, and went around putting them up. At one point, he passed a little café, and he heard a guitarist. It was Raymond Boni. Tim gave him a poster and he came to the show. At the American Center, there was a backdrop for some kind of stage production. It was all rags hanging off of the back wall. At the concert, I put this hooded garment on and came out of the rags playing [Albert Ayler’s] *Truth is Marching In*. Raymond Boni saw that and, as he told me much later, he said, “I decided that this is the musician I want to play with for the rest of my life.” We’ve been doing it ever since. That’s how that beautiful, long-term

friendship with Raymond happened, and curiously enough, just today, I found cassettes copies of that concert!

JC: There are these beautiful photographs we were looking at that made me think a little bit about the documentation of the *Graphics*² concert.

JM: Well, there were things that led up to that. A few days before those concerts, in Basel, I had a back-to-back solo concert with Steve Lacy. Well, I thought this is really fantastic. I’m going to be on the same program with Steve Lacy! I played first, and just let everything happen. I played trumpet. I played tenor. I played soprano, and I was fierce, and it was awesome! Then Steve Lacy said, “Would you like to play something together after I finish my piece?” And I said, “Ooh that would be great. Yeah.”

And then he played, and I thought, “What did I just do? What am I gonna play?” I can’t play the trumpet—it’s too shrill. I can’t play the tenor—it’s too loud. I don’t *dare* play the soprano after Steve Lacy, but I thought, well I guess I *have* to play the soprano, and from that day in June of 1977 until almost oh, just a few [years] ago actually, I couldn’t listen to it. I was afraid I embarrassed my family. I couldn’t up out into the sun ever again to play the soprano! Somebody said recently that there’s a recording of a Steve Lacy solo on Hat Hut Records, but it seems short, and I thought, it’s short because we played more later. So eventually it came out. I think it’s called *Capers*, if I’m not mistaken. And it was, I guess, it’s not so bad.

JC: Lo and behold.

JM: Steve was such a gracious guy. He didn’t kill me. He could have if he wanted to. What are you gonna do, you know? You know, shit or get off the pot, man.

JC: The Beatles and Scheherazade.

JM: 1964. I’m in Würzburg, Germany, in the Army. It’s summer time, and we have some leave. We can’t stay on the Army post. How ‘bout going to Amsterdam? Well, why not? We have a little bit of money. Not a lot, but enough to get a train ticket, so three of my Army buddies and I get on a train and head for Amsterdam. Somewhere between Amsterdam and Haarlem, an elderly couple—they seemed elderly, I’m only 24 at the time so anybody over 30’s elderly—get on the train. They ask us where we are going and do we have a place to stay? No. “Listen,” they said, “we have a car. We’ll take you.” They had a Chrysler convertible. They drove us around Amsterdam, and take us to their hotel. It’s one room, with some kind of mattress on the floor, overlooking a canal, facing a hotel called the Doelen, which is a very fancy, obviously exclusive, hotel.

We wake up the next morning to the sound of voices outside in the street, and there’s a crowd out there. At this hotel across the water, maybe three or four flights up, a number of people come out on the balcony. They’re looking up and down the hotel, and everybody’s yelling and screaming. Suddenly, these four figures appear. We don’t know who they are. They descend to a boat in the canal, and sail off. People are jumping in the canal, and so on. These four mop-headed guys were the Beatles. It was their first experience on the continent in Europe. I have photographs taken with my 35-millimeter camera that my cousin gave me as a gift coming to Europe in 1964.

Later on, we went to this jazz club called Scheherazade. In the center of the stage is an expatriate American tenor saxophonist, Don Byas. Eventually, we asked if we could sit in. He said, “Sure, what do you want to play?” We say, “how ‘bout ‘A Night in Tunisia’?” Somebody counts it off. [sings] And then we start to play. No sooner do we start than Don Byas said, “No, no, no, no, none of that. That’s not right. You don’t do it like that!” and he begins to show us how to do it. For the rest of the evening, no more music is played except ‘A Night in Tunisia’; that is all we played that night until we got it right.

Sitting at the bar was a guy who came over and asked us where we were staying. When we told him, he said, “No you can’t stay there. That’s a prostitute house!” So the couple that took us off the train was cruising for black GIs to populate their prostitute house. I didn’t know it was a prostitute house. I’m 24 years old. Never been to one before in my life. And he said, “No, no, I’ll get a place for you.” He took us three of us to his tiny little apartment on the Marnixstraat in Amsterdam, fed us, and found a hotel for us eventually. This man, his name is Hank Calais. He and his wife, Ann, have been friends of mine for over 54 years now. But, I found out later that Amsterdam wasn’t where we first saw each other. We almost met the year before, in 1963, in Birdland. I had a weekend pass from Fort Dix. I only had leave for a Saturday, so there was not enough time to go home, so I went to Birdland. There, on the bandstand when I walked in was Don Cherry playing a pocket trumpet. It was Sonny Rollins’s quartet; Billy Higgins on drums, and I would suspect, Henry Grimes on bass. I remember Sonny Rollins standing near a pillar with this kind of strange haircut, like a mohawk. The music was extraordinary. When I left, there was a guy there, who I didn’t meet at that time, but many years later, I found out was my friend Hank Calais! In a conversation I happened to mention being in Birdland and what I saw, and he said he was there that night, but we never met until a year later, quite by accident in the Scheherazade. And it’s been that kind of experience over and over again.



FRIENDS

JM: Craig Johnson was a very dear friend who unfortunately passed away this past May, 2017. I met him at a bar in my neighborhood, not long after I got out of the Army. I was smoking a pipe tobacco called Balkan Sobranie. And Balkan Sobranie pipe tobacco is very aromatic. It's difficult to find it now, but a friend in the Army had given me some and I rather liked it. A voice behind me, not unlike Donald Ayler in New York, said, "That's Balkan Sobranie." I said, "Yes it is. How do you know?" And the person said to me, "Well, because I smoke the same thing." That person happened to be Craig Johnson. Craig was a painter and he told me he had been in Paris in the mid-'50s to study painting. There he had become friends with James Baldwin and Alvin Ailey. He was friends with James Baldwin to the point where he'd call him Jimmy!

The conversation went on, and he told me how he had been at the Five Spot and saw Ornette there. He heard Monk there. He heard Coltrane there. And the conversation went on and I told him about how much I was enamored of Miles Davis, and it went on.

And then he left. A few weeks later, I was back at the same bar, again a Saturday night, and we picked up the conversation where we left off. I told him that I had just recently joined a band and that we were having a concert in Newburgh. I invited him to come. Shortly after that he asked me if I would be interested in making a solo recording. Craig had a friend named Chris Albertson, who was a station manager at WBAI Pacifica in New York City. He had worked on a reissue of Bessie Smith recordings for Columbia Records, for which he received a Grammy Award. Craig asked him if it could be possible? What would it cost to produce a recording?

They figured out whatever the budget would be, and Craig went out and bought a bunch of recording equipment, not knowing anything about recording. He would show up at places I played like a place called the Paddock, a small bar in Poughkeepsie, with his recording equipment. He'd show up everywhere. He jump-started my whole recording career. He worked in a publications department at Holy Cross Monastery an Episcopal monastery in West Park, New York, near where he lived, and he asked the monks there if they would be interested in having a jazz concert

and they said, yeah why not. It was free. People came and in fact, our first recording, called *Underground Railroad*, was recorded at Holy Cross Monastery in their refectory, their dining hall, between lunch and dinner.

Around that time, I was working at Vassar College in the Black Studies program and I had a course called Revolution in Sound. One of those concerts was recorded by Craig—not in Vassar's concert hall, which is called Skinner Hall, but rather in a library because my course was not really considered a part of the Vassar music program. I had my students there and of course I invited all the musicians who I played with in downtown New York to be part of this band. It was there that the recording *Nation Time* took place, and it's become kind of my signature piece. It was very important. He also recorded me with synthesizer player John Snyder—our first recording also included my brother playing percussion and occasionally flutes and soprano saxophone.

And that recording is called *To Be Continued*. That was 1973. In 1974, Craig recorded John Snyder and me in a session that became known as *Pieces of Light*. That was the fourth in a series of recordings that we made for Craig's label, which was called C. J. Records. CJR. And there we have it. He started me on my career. Shortly after that, we had a visit from Werner Uehlinger from Switzerland, who was a record collector—a fan of the music. He had been in New Jersey for some business for a pharmaceutical company that he worked for, and he asked if he could come up to West Park to Craig's place to meet him, and to meet me. We had dinner and played some recordings from Vassar College that we had not released. We didn't have the money to at the time. Werner said he wanted to release it as the first release on his label. The first recording didn't even have a number or letter. It's called "Black Magic Man." And from that, a very important label from Switzerland, Hathut Records was born. And that's the way it was.

JC: Well I'm gonna tell a story that's from around the time we met, which was in 1985, I think? In Boston, and there was a hurricane...

JM: I can tell that story! André Jaume, a saxophonist, Raymond Boni, guitarist, and bassist François Méchali and I had a quartet. We decided to try to bring that quartet to the States, but something went wrong that François couldn't get away. So, Geneviève, who was a dancer and a friend of Raymond's, decided to be our fourth member. We were invited to play in Boston at a little bar called Charlie's Tap. We watched the weather report, which was kind of ominous, saying a hurricane was coming up the coast. A hurricane named Gloria. I called the bar to see if we should still come. "Ah, don't worry," they said, "the hurricane's going to go out to sea." So, we get in the car, and were headed up the Massachusetts Turnpike when the rain started. Terrible rain. You couldn't see anything

We pulled into one of these gas station rest stop places, but the rain was so heavy that it was just pouring through the roof of the building. So, we get in the car and start heading towards Boston, not knowing that there's a state of emergency, and no cars are supposed to be on the road. All of a sudden, the rain stops. The sun is out. Birds are flying all around. And, it's like, "What is this"? We're in the eye of the hurricane. Still not knowing that we're [not] supposed to be on the road, we drove further. Of course, the wind came back. The rain came back. Trees are down all over the place. We get to Charlie's Tap. There's almost nobody there. Maybe five drunk guys at the bar, but in the room where we're supposed to have this little concert there is a guy named John Corbett, as well as Stu Vandermark, Ken Vandermark's father, who I didn't know at the time. We decided, yeah, let's play. Geneviève had this little French costume on, and she was marching up and down on top of the bar singing "bon bons, chocolats, cigarettes" so forth, and we played this very French kind of music. We did that for two nights, and it was a lot of fun! That's where I met John Corbett, and our friendship has gone on for all these years.

JC: I was there both nights.

JM: Yep. What was wrong with you?

JC: Mr. Ken Vandermark.

JM: Well, there was a magazine out um, do you remember the name of that magazine?

JC: May have been *Option*.

JM: *Option*. Yes, and there was photograph of this guy with a buzz cut. I didn't know who he was. But as I'm reading this article, he spoke about how his father had introduced him to a recording of mine called "Tenor." I learned later that Ken was a film student at McGill University, and his dad told him that if he wanted to learn how to play the tenor, he should listen to this recording. In this interview, he said how much it had influenced him along the way, and I thought, "I don't remember anybody ever...how could I influence anybody? I never had a saxophone lesson in my life!"

Anyway, in 1992, I happen to be in Vancouver, British Columbia, for a concert with Lisle Ellis and Paul Plimley. We happen to be in the same hotel as Ken, and as we're getting on a bus to go to the concert, I went up to him and said, "Thank you so much for your kind remarks about my music," and so on. He was kind of shocked, and said, "Listen, we're playing a concert at a certain place. Why don't you come?" I went, and I got to hear one of my compositions played by another band for the first time. It was a composition called "Goodbye Tom B." I eventually learned that it had become one of Ken's favorite pieces.

JC: Do you have any stories about [Mats] Gustafsson that you want to tell?

JM: I met Mats Gustafsson in 1997 when I was invited to join Peter Brötzmann's Chicago Tentet. It had been an octet I believe, before that. But I was being added as a brass player to play my Clifford Thornton valve trombone, trumpet, and flugelhorn. Not saxophone. They already had four very loud saxophone players, and they didn't need another one! I met Mats, and he mentioned that he knew my music. Mats is an amazing player. We became fast friends. We are to this day, and our friendship is even stronger than ever.

TRAVEL & TIME PORTALS

JM: In 2004, I decided that I would like to take my brother, Charlie, to Europe. We get to JFK, and we're standing in the line to check in. There is an African-American man and his wife just across from us; we kind of nod to each other. It's just kind of a courtesy. We take the plane to Charles de Gaulle Airport. My brother and I are going up the escalator and the man from the line at JFK is there and turns around and says to me, "You know Clifford Thornton." And I said, "Excuse me. What did you say? Why did you say that to me?" And he said, "I have no idea. I don't know Clifford Thornton. Never met him in my life. I have no idea who he is, or what he did, or whatever." And his wife said, "Well, Clifford's wife was an ophthalmologist, and we know each other." I said, "Please give me your address or something. I do know Clifford. We played together, and so I'll send you some music."

My brother said, "What was that about?" I said, "Listen, I told you, when I travel, strange things happen. It's like I go through some kind of a portal, and things happen." I arrive in Chicago this afternoon—coming to see John Corbett—and all of a sudden there's a young man coming up the stairs who I had made a soundtrack for a short film of his. I've been invited to Ghent in March to play with this film, and here he is! How does that happen? I don't know. I don't know what these things mean. One too many salty swift and not goodbyes, Cecil.

I don't want to examine it too closely, but in 1994, I was in Europe with Paul Plimley and Lisle Ellis, and we were scheduled to make a recording, which eventually was called *Sweet Freedom – Now What?* for Hathut Records—the music of Max Roach without a drummer. Concept kind of a piece. We had to travel from the south of France to Austria by the night train. During the night, I had a dream, this sounds weird, about a street. On the left-hand side of the street, I saw a hospital with a sign like a red cross or something on it, and across from it was this other building. I was in that building, or going into that building [in

the dream], and a day or so later in Vienna, it turned out I saw the building from my dream!

On this same trip Lisle, Paul, and I played a concert in Nickelsdorf, Austria, where Lisle met a lady who invited him to stay at her place. We all went to the place that day and while Lisle and she went to a movie, they left me in their apartment. There was a collection of LPs, and there I found one by this drummer Rato Verber. Now Rato had come to Poughkeepsie, New York, with another musician friend, and they met my father. My father was always kidding around, trying to make up languages and so forth, and he would say something trying to make a kind of French, saying like, ooga booga mooga, parlez-vous français, ooga, mooga, booga. I don't know. He just made it up. He and Rato clicked, and they became good friends. Rato said to him, "You know what, Mr. McPhee, one day I'm going to write a piece dedicated to you called Parlez-Vous Français Ooga Booga Mooga." So I'm in this apartment alone and going through this and I find this recording, and there it is. A recording by Rato Verber, the title *Parlez Vous Français Ooga Mooga*, dedicated to my dad. And I'm thinking like, that thing on the train, this dream of the hospital and there across the street was actually a hospital, and now I'm in this apartment with that recording!

Well that was kind of weird. But I find that when I travel, there's kind of a like a time warp that happens, and I, from time to time, slip in and out of there. Now you might say this is an apocryphal story. Perhaps. I don't know. That's just what happens. But for me, this is kind of a common occurrence when I travel.

1 The Savoy Sultans had two iterations. The first, led by Al Cooper (who Joe refers to by his full first name), were in residency at the Savoy Ballroom from 1937 to 1946. They recorded a scant seven times for Decca between the years of 1938 and 1941, but had a profound effect on players that would come later, such as Dizzy Gillespie.

2 Recorded between June 11–12, 1977, at the Palais des Artes, Paris, and released as Graphics, Vol. I & II on Hat Hut Records in 1978.

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