

Transcript

Thoughts About, and Selections from "Melodic Faces"

We're doing something a little differently for this episode of the Jazz Legacy Radio Podcast. If you're familiar with the program you know we do interviews and primarily orate about jazz. But I want to share some music with you. Each song here, has a particular story and is kind of connected in some ways to memories and elders and the folklore of the African diaspora that I grew up with.

These are compositions of mine and they're part of a bunch of songs that I've had in my repertoire for a while; the oldest ones having been written about twenty five years ago. And last year I selected - well, earlier than last year- I selected about eleven of these songs, intending to put them out on an album. And that was supposed to be released in 2020, but of course we had COVID so things ground to a halt and in 2023 the album was *finally* released and it's called *Melodic Faces*. And there's music you're hearing from it right now.

So, here are echoes of predecessors, reflections of memories by way of song and music inspired by folklore that I grew up with. So the Jazz Legacy Radio Podcast presents music from the album *Melodic Faces*.

Ancestor's View

My Mother, who was Jamaican, was a master at the Island's version of dreaming up worlds in the air, constructing their intricacies with words; concocting all manner of circumstances, leading all manner of protagonist into either merriment or mayhem - you know, storytelling.

Quite often the seemingly hapless, almost-a-complete-foil of narration, was Anansi, the timeless, generation less, fictional arachnid, simply trying to catch a break, or get to someplace and back, un-bossed, untroubled, unscathed, unharmed and uneaten.

As per tradition, the escapades, mishaps and nick-of-time adventures of our heroic, eight-legged 'everyperson', often began with the storyteller saying, "Crick-Crack." Hearing these stories in this way was how I grew up. And I was always interested in how the African diaspora makes such particulars of my background not solely specific to me. Neither are such things confined to geography. So I was pleasantly surprised years ago, learning that Haitians have a tradition in storytelling, where the orator shouts "Krick" and is answered by

listeners who say, "Krack". This isn't completely shocking; after all, the transatlantic slave trade's history means we find similarities which illustrate how cultural elements were often divided and wound up separated, with subtle or overt differences along the way.

Through the years growing up, the more I examined varying differences in the diaspora's collective traditions, foods, dances and musics, the more I saw ancestral voices speaking at once; the variations being seemingly endless, but hailing from common main arteries and traveling into an array of tributaries. To me, that's the basis of my culture: the kaleidoscope that makes up the African diaspora, most effectively seen with an eye thinking *across* time, rather than in the midst of it. You might call it an *ancestor's view*.

SONG: *ANCESTOR'S VIEW*

It's You

Once somebody asked me, who would write their stories, finally listening; finally giving truth its sunbathing time? Who would, at long last, celebrate what battles we had won? Who would breathe air and color into the anonymous translucent faceless, fading inklings of identities who fought and won, or lost- or were lost, never having a melody played for them?

Who would acknowledge? Who would return faces and names to those forms? *Who?* Who would re-route the roadways of narratives, so they lead to what *really* happened? Who would talk about those who led, and those who helped? And who would wonder out loud, why sometimes, it's more comfortable for some, to tell the story twisted up, with those positions reversed?

That same somebody wondered aloud, when are those who are still with us, gonna get *their* flowers? Who will give them their due, before "if only" becomes a door no locksmith can master? *Who? Who? Who?*

Tired of the same question repeated over and over, echoed ad nauseam, I finally blurted out, "it's you!" We both stood there, staring in silence, me and my reflection.

SONG: *IT'S YOU*

It's Love

I've said it before but it reverberates in my head. Harriet Tubman and Robert Johnson - I think they were kindred souls; a continuum of a demonstration of a type of love in carnal and the unwavering act of grabbing life on their own terms.

Tubman, virtually claiming her life and grabbing it by the collar, through action but then taking us all with her. Giving more people their freedom; reentering a hell she had already fled at risk of death, to give possible horizons to countless pairs of eyes; eyes that because of her, would witness their children develop a different association with the word, *freedom*.

Robert Johnson, whose own eyes saw things light years ahead of Tubman's own dreams and other things that would have sat in an all too familiar lump in the stomach. Be it Johnson, Bessie Smith, Son House, or any member of the diaspora whose escape was from the confinement of presumption and anything less than self expression, these blues musicians were in fact, living through those songs on their own terms, grabbing their own freedom by the collar. They took us with them to share what that freedom felt like. That? *It's love*.

SONG: *IT'S LOVE*

And Mountains Bow

What bridges we stand on. What vast, infinite, ever expanding roads, rope bridges, tunnels, railways, dirt paths to be paved; fortresses to elude obstacles and regroup; and balconies from which we can survey both history, and the clues at present to assure an initial step forward is on well built ground. Or if the path is through the river, we'll make sure the calm, drowsy inanimate lump is an old log half submerged and not a crocodile, only half full.

And what instigators, agitators, ceiling smashers, architects and rabble-rousers, our predecessor bridge-building, path-paving, life engineers. They bent with storms and came back to try again. And only through their incessancy, with time, if not in their own time, did we see things change and mountains bow.

SONG: *AND MOUNTAINS BOW*

Sunlit

When we were children, the sun would shine through us and sweeten our breathing. We didn't have to have a reason. No appointment was necessary. Smiles were elicited just by the idea of your heart's Shangri-la, whatever that might be. Some days, you might see a cloud in the sky, begging to be enjoyed, as it played with your youthful absence of precedence and glorious abundance of curiosity.

I remember I was on an airplane, and when it landed, I got up to take my luggage from the overhead compartment, hearing a small child saying, 'hi...hi...hi...' just repeating, 'hi...' I realized the boy was calling to me. I turned around, smiled and said hi back.

For some reason it felt strange. I finally figured out, the reason why it felt strange, was because, I recalled, the times as an adult whenever I had greeted someone I didn't know, they were always facing me. If I didn't know them, unless we were to be confined in the same space like a waiting room or an elevator or at a bus stop, if there wasn't a chance we'd make eye contact, I wouldn't likely say hello.

And of course, I wouldn't have repeated hello until they saw me, unless I had reason to exchange words, Even if it was a joke or something trivial, unless we were in each other's general space and making eye contact, we wouldn't have a reason to speak. The difference of course is the child had a reason. He felt like it. Maybe its just because, when you're five, that's what you do on a sunlit day.
SONG: *SUNLIT*

Here We Are

I remember futile attempts at 11 years old, of trying to understand what 40 years is. It was the fortieth anniversary of D-Day - when the allied forces landed in Normandy. We were taught about it in school, and I remember wondering what that interval of time, forty years, could possibly feel like. And I came up *less than empty*, whenever I tried! I was grasping at the air, fruitlessly grabbing at clouds, whenever I tried to comprehend even eight years, let alone ten, let alone *forty?*

And now, long after the dust kicked up by hours, leading to days, leading to years, leading to countless questions, answers, dances, friendships, animosities, births, deaths, births and deaths, one day I woke up and I was fifty-one. And a forty year old...is young. And I think to myself, after all that time, here we are.

SONG: *HERE WE ARE*

Lake Pontchartrain Blues

During the transatlantic slave trade, running all the way along Jamaica's Blue Mountains, the spirit of Elegba, the trickster, in all innumerable incarnations, kept an eye out for all things that moved unnaturally. For those could lead to any perilous end.

But Elegba is Elegba and Elegba is always two steps ahead. And in the southern United States, Elegba's guise and chicanery could be manifested in musical form, particularly the blues, like in the Delta. And when you got down to New Orleans, Louisiana, Elegba had a whole different variation on how to do, well, everything. I remember sitting by Lake Pontchartrain, feeling like Elegba was right next to me, telling me anything was possible because I was in New Orleans where virtually anything is. Go sit by Lake Pontchartrain. You'll get what I mean.

SONG: *PONTCHARTRAIN BLUES*

Oshun

I've stood in front of Lake Pontchartrain, hearing the echoes of Oshun, calling out from the past. Oshun, the Yoruba call her. The Mother of All Sweet Things. The spirit who presides over the water; the deity that symbolizes life. She has seen and heard and felt everything and her heart knows many melodies including the dirge tempos for all those the Middle Passage fed to the sea. Still, in spite of this, Oshun knows the potential in future horizons. Oshun. Mother of all sweet things.

SONG: *OSHUN*

Train Whistle

Can train, as in the *noun*, be a verb? Well if it can, then we have "trained" and "trained" and "trained" our way across, around, inside and through our North American existence, be that as pullman porters, passengers of the Great Migration, or earlier than that, when Harriet grasped at the imagination and courage of each person brave enough to come along, and walked them toward and into a new day. That too, was a railroad of sorts. And if you kept your senses tuned, you could catch Harriet's silent version of a train whistle, letting you know the Express to Freedom was coming.

SONG: *TRAIN WHISTLE*

You've been listening to the Jazz Legacy Radio Podcast, episode 7: Melodic Faces, written by Mboya Nicholson- that's me. All music was composed by Mboya Nicholson and comes from the 2023 recording Melodic Faces, available at mboyanicholson.bandcamp.com and mboyanicholson.com

