

MUSIC IS RHYTHM, RHYTHM IS LIFE: THE LIVING MOMENT

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ABSTRACT

“Music is Rhythm, Rhythm is Life.” This maxim, uttered by former Motown drummer Bill “Sticks” Nicks to my class and me a few years back, opens a portal to what being human involves. Most accounts of what it means to be human make cognitive capacities, language and reflective thinking, the be-all and end-all of human distinction. But think about it: how many animals do you know who beat rhythm for aesthetic enjoyment and social communion?

In this essay I reflect upon moments from musical experiences, primarily from blues music, to illustrate the place of the spontaneous gesture and ensemble improvisation in interaction, in and out of the music.

Keywords: Musical experiences; gesture; improvisation

INTRODUCTION

Here is a moment from the “reality is stranger than fiction” file. While playing at Rosa’s Blues Lounge grand reopening in Chicago in the fall of

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1996, the singer in my band, Lorenzo Thompson, leaned over to our guest drummer, and asked him if he knew the song, “Caldonia.” Our regular drummer was out of town, and we were playing that night with Billy “Sticks” Nicks, who used to play with Jr. Walker and the All Stars throughout the 1960s, and had, in fact formed the band as Bill “Sticks” Nicks and His Rhythm Rockets in the 1950s, before doing a stint in the army. It was Bill who once told my Notre Dame students, who I had taken to his drum studio for a special class meeting, that, “music is rhythm, rhythm is life,” words which etched themselves into my soul forever. Bill is one of the most spiritual persons I have ever been lucky enough to meet and get to know, a beaming presence.

So back to the song, “Caldonia.” I leaned over between Lorenzo and Bill’s drums and joked, “Yeah, he knew her personally.” To which Bill replied, “Yes, I toured with her in 1960, did about 15 gigs with her.” What the ...? I wondered.

But it was time to start the song, and as I was playing the intro on the harmonica, I was realizing that, yes, of course, a lot of tunes with personal name titles are about real people. Yet though I started performing this tune a few years earlier when I did some gigs and touring with Pinetop Perkins, I never considered that Caldonia had been flesh and blood. But oh, what flesh and blood she was.

After we finished the song and went on break, Billy told us, “Yes, Caldonia was 65 years old in 1960. She was a contortionist as well as a singer, and she could still get her foot behind her head! She could sing at the mike on one leg with the other leg wrapped behind her head! The guy that wrote the song had broken up with her and was still angry about it.”

That guy who wrote it and first performed it was Louis Jordan, who recorded Caldonia in 1945 as “Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five.” It hit the top of the Billboard “race record” chart.¹ Erskine Hawkins also released a version in 1945. Billboard magazine record reviewer Maurie Orodener described Caldonia as “rock and roll,” one of the first print uses of the term (Birnbaum, 2013).

Estelle Young was a singer and contortionist who performed with Louis Jordan, who took to calling her Caldonia on stage. So she became known as Estelle “Caldonia” Young. She also had her own touring revue, and in the early 1940s, took in a young Jimmy Scott as a singer. As noted in Scott’s *Bluenote Jazz Club* (2010) biography:

Jimmy met Estelle ‘Caldonia’ Young in the early 1940’s; she took Jimmy on her road show as the featured singer. Caldonia became almost a surrogate mother to Jimmy,

having lost his own mother at age 13. 'Caldonia's Revue' traveled the southern circuit to the east, they put up their own stages in the rural areas. There were featured male and female vocalists, tap dancers, comedians, an M.C. and Caldonia herself, she was an exotic shake dancer and contortionist. It was essentially like a touring vaudevillian tent show. Some of the others who worked with Caldonia at one time or another were Ruth Brown, Big Maybelle, Elie Adams, and Jack McDuff. Caldonia took Jimmy along with her to do a special performance at Gamby's in Baltimore in 1945, where he met up with his friend Redd Foxx who was appearing at Gamby's also. They went over to the Royal Theater to see Joe Louis. Redd and Joe told Jimmy he should be in New York performing instead of traveling around to those small towns.

So here was a heap of history pouring out from a little joke between tunes. I had played that tune many many times over the years, but had never bothered to look up its sources. Now, here I was playing music with a guy who played music with Caldonia herself. It was enough to make me want to wrap a leg around my head.

MUSIC IS RHYTHM, RHYTHM IS LIFE

The Living Moment and the One-Chord Hypnotic ...

I recorded a CD that I haven't gotten around to releasing yet, though it is mixed and mastered. It was recorded live with all the smoke and energies of blues clubs we found ourselves in. Let me share with you some of its moments. A live gig always brings forth unpredictable moments of every description, moments in which life suddenly appears incandescent, musically and otherwise.

Take the fierce thunderstorm and broken windshield wiper which delayed my band's arrival for one gig, which became the moment for our guest singer, legendary blues man The Tail Dragger to voice a new song on the spot, which I titled, *We Sorry*. As he tells the drummer, Rob Lorenz, who wanted "to keep on drivin' in the rain," "You ain't gonna kill me this a way."

Or take a tune of mine, titled, "Feelin' Lucky Boogie." The title comes from the realization in the middle of the instrumental, as I was about to tell the audience to put their hands together for guitarists Minoru and Rockin' Johnny, that we were in the midst of *a full moon*, on *Friday the 13th*, during *the millennium*. Oh yeah, feelin' lucky indeed! Then I look over to see Rob Lorenz, a drummer's drummer if there ever was one, standing at his kit, smoking a cigar, completely in the groove. And all that poured into the song.

The living moment is not simply the music, but the mojo that suddenly manifests on any given gig. Like the time we were playing outside, under a kind of pagoda, when John Baker suddenly holds his bass out to me in the middle of a song. Clueless, I grab the bass; he grabs a beam of the ceiling, suddenly hoists himself and hangs by his knees, all his keys and change flying out of his pants pockets willy-nilly. Then John holds his hands out for the bass. Now clued in, I give him back the bass and go back to playing, while John begins to swing.

No, no, peoples. I mean John literally begins to swing while playing upside down, bat-like, and we and the audience have now been entirely transported to *The Church of the Living Swing*. And then when we notice that the very roof is also beginning to swing in time with the music, and may just collapse on us any second, that is no less the living moment, that too is simply testimony to the fact that improvisation, like life itself, is precarious, and to swing to the moment is to be alive, to be wondrously, most vividly, alive.

Pinetop and Dave Myers

Pinetop was one of the last of the Chicago blues originals. He played piano for Muddy Waters, earlier played with Sonny Boy Williamson in 1930s, and also taught Ike Turner how to play piano. When he was 90 years old Pinetop was performing on a Rhythm and Blues Cruise in the Caribbean, and was interviewed by a reporter from St. Louis. He was quoted as saying (and which I would like as my motto if I live to be 90), “I hope the Lord forgives me for the stuff I’m doing down here!” (Uhlenbrock, 2003).

A few years earlier at Pinetop’s 88th birthday party celebration there was a piano shaped cake with 88 keys. I found myself playing with Pinetop, Hubert Sumlin on guitar (Howling Wolf’s guitar player from the 1950s through Howlin’ Wolf’s death in 1976, who plays on the classic recordings), and a couple of rows into the audience was Honeyboy Edwards, then 86. Honeyboy was Robert Johnson’s buddy, with him the night Johnson was poisoned to death in 1938 near Greenwood, Mississippi. He told me about that night on another occasion, backstage at the Chicago Blues Festival, about how, “I told Robert not to drink no open bottles of liquor.” It seems that Robert and the bartender’s wife had something going. The murder was unsolved for decades. But if you knew how to read between the lines, as you had to if you were black in the deep South in 1938 and later, you would know to connect the dots from open bottle of liquor to the one who opened it, the bartender.

I found myself performing another time with Pinetop and fellow former Muddy Waters band drummer Willie “Big Eyes” Smith. When you hear some of the stories of these guys offstage and on the road between gigs – Pinetop stopped playing guitar in early 1940s when a woman knifed his left-arm bicep – the personal stories, the racism stories, the migration stories, the just plain good old stories, you realize how a tradition like the blues is a chronicle not only of the abysses, but of all the vicissitudes of life’s passions, made fresh as theme and variations of the improvised moment: sociality as story.

Imagine, Pinetop got his first Grammy in 2005 at the age of 91, a life-time achievement award, and his last in 2011, at the age 97, about a month before he died. He was the oldest recipient of a Grammy ever. He had 20 gigs booked when he died. In 2004 he was living in Laporte, Indiana, and while driving one night, got hit by a freight train. His car was totaled, but he only had a fractured wrist. I saw him at a gig two weeks later, when he came up to sing with us, not play piano, since he still had his forearm in a cast. During the break I asked him about the accident, he said, “Damned conductor didn’t blow the whistle.” Seems Pinetop got caught after one train went by, not seeing another coming from the opposite direction. He said, “Police want to take me to the hospital, but I said no, I’m on my way to McDonald’s!” He was still alive and in it right up to the end.

We were touring up in Grand Rapids in the mid-1990s. Pinetop was in his 80s, and yet he and bassist Dave Myers, another great creator of the blues, who was then about 70, were the first ones up early in the morning to hit the road, while the rest of the band lagged. Backstage before the gig, a reporter asked Dave why Pinetop, in his 80s, was still playing and touring. Myers simply looked the reporter in the eye and said, “Are you kidding? Why keep living when you can die? Answer me that.” Now that is blues philosophy at its best.

Earlier in Chicago, when we picked Pinetop and his piano up on the South Side, loaded in the van, and began rounding the southern part of Lake Michigan enroute to Grand Rapids, Dave waxed philosophical and asked Pinetop, “Pinetop, the scientists say that life began in the oceans, but the bible said God created man from the dust of the ground before the plants and animals. What do you think?” Pinetop smiled and said, “I don’t know about no damn oceans!” We cracked up laughing, and spent the next hour or so debating the question.

Dave Myers had some great stories, and was an amazing talent too. He had been a near professional level pool player and boxer, and also tap-danced professionally with a group called the Tip-Tap-Toes. Early on he

had done a tap dance gig with Sammy Davis Jr. Like Sammy Davis Jr., Dave claimed to be Jewish. But where Sammy Davis Jr. had converted to Judaism, Dave claimed that his family had been Jewish for many generations, from far back before the “Black Jews” movement of the 1920s. Dave also met Fidel Castro at the Apollo Theater in early 1960s. He might have been playing there with Little Walter, though I’m not sure. Sadly, Dave passed on in the beginning of September, 2001.

But before Dave Myers died, he was fortunate to have a group of young guitarists eager to learn from him, such as Rockin’ Johnny and Little Frank Krakowski. They are performing some great blues in Chicago now.

I brought Dave to Notre Dame one time for a class on the sociology of the blues. We held it at a dorm social area. We actually spent the first half of that class around the pool table, where Dave was trading some blues and pool playing philosophy. As the innocent white suburban kid Dave was playing with was about to make a shot, uncertain, Dave looked him in the eyes and said, “Now what shot do you want to make, what shot do *you* want to make?” The kid was startled as the intensity settled in on him. This was far more than the game of pool, this was life itself, decisive, here and now, in the living moment.

Serbian Summerfest Blues ... and Bluegrass?

Some years back I was on a gig at the Saint Sava Serbian Summerfest in Hobart, IN, near the steel mill complexes, just south from the Gary, Indiana smokestacks. I had been put on the gig by Jojo, a singer-harmonica player, which was a great act of generosity on his part, given that he also played harmonica, and would be paying me for playing. The band featured guest guitarist Jimmy Johnson, a leading Chicago blues man of that original generation born in Mississippi, which included Howlin’ Wolf and Honeyboy, Muddy Waters and Pinetop, and many others.

Jimmy was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi in 1928, and moved with his family to Chicago in 1950, where he became a welder, an appropriate day job for the generation that created the industrial electric blues out of the Delta country blues. Electrified instruments replaced acoustic ones, and the country learned the city ways: from the country juke joint to the city bar, from the cotton fields to the industrial complexes and factory jobs of that post-war American prosperity. This was The Promised Land, the release from the American Apartheid of the cotton pickin’ racist south, to what, it was hoped, was the land of freedom, the land of Lincoln. Chicago

proved otherwise; deeply racist, though still less so than Dixieland. A man could join a union and get a fair paycheck, unlike the sharecropper system down south, which permanently indebted the poor black sharecropper to the landlord. A man could sing “I’m a Man,” as Bo Diddley did, and not be hung for those words, as could happen in a place like Mississippi, where “boy” or “uncle” were the rule. Bill Nicks told me of traveling with his family in the early 1950s back to Mississippi for family reunions, to an area not far from where murdered Emmett Till’s body would be discovered a couple of years later. The train departing from Chicago would be segregated, not because of Illinois laws, but because of the rigid Apartheid system once they crossed the Mason–Dixon Line.

Jimmy had played blues in Chicago in the 1950s, but gravitated to R&B and soul by the 1960s, only moving back to the blues later, recording his first solo material in 1978 and 1979 for Alligator Records and Delmark. In 1988 while returning to Chicago from a gig in Indiana, Jimmy’s van crashed while he was driving, killing his bassist and keyboardist, and injuring Jimmy, who was lucky to get out alive. He returned to playing a while later, and has remained active as of 2014, continuing to perform in Chicago.

So there I was, playing the blues with Jimmy Johnson and bandmates, to an audience whose majority were of Serbian descent. I think Jojo, who never went by his last name, might have been of Serbian descent and had gotten the gig. The crowd loved the music.

After we finished performing, a Balkan band rocked, with an accordion as the lead instrument, doing traditional music with that off-balance Balkan rhythm, which feels like an off-center spinning top going more and more wildly off-center with each verse. After listening to them for a while, I walked inside the church complex, through the hall where traditional food was being served and bingo being played, further through another hallway into another large room where a Serbian string band was playing. The band consisted of about 8 or 10 musicians, all playing variously sized string instruments. They played traditional tunes, many up-tempo, which reminded me of bluegrass music.

I remembered I had had a similar experience many years earlier while living in Chicago, attending another Serbian fest in East Chicago (which is in the northwest corner of Indiana, adjacent to Chicago and not that far from Hobart) with my friend Marc Edelsten, who played bass with The Special Consensus Bluegrass Band, a band I had played some with as it was forming. While musing on this memory, the Serbian string band suddenly went into “Orange Blossom Special,” a bluegrass classic, without missing a beat. Serbia meets Kentucky. Or is it the other way around?

Despite the name “bluegrass,” and the implication that the music originates in Kentucky, the history is more complicated. Bill Monroe is acknowledged to be the driving force in its creation. He grew up in Kentucky in a musical family. In 1929 he moved to join his brothers working at the Sinclair refinery in Whiting, Indiana, living at first in Whiting then moving nearby to East Chicago for the next few years. During the depression, in 1932, he and his brothers got their first musical jobs performing on the WLS radio show “The Barn Dance.” He and his brothers also played on WJKS in Gary, Indiana, earning 11 dollars a week.

It wasn’t until the late 1930s, having moved south to Atlanta, when he formed his first “Blue Grass Boys” band, and it wasn’t until 1945, when he added three-finger-picking style banjo player Earl Scruggs and guitarist/vocalist Lester Flatt, that the bluegrass sound really solidified. One of Monroe’s best known tunes, “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” was recorded at this time. The rest is history. Or is it?

My experiences in East Chicago and Hobart at the Saint Sava Serbian Summerfest had left me wondering if there is more to the history than the history books let on. Could Monroe have been influenced by the rich immigrant Serbian string music going on in East Chicago, perhaps at the very same church summerfest in East Chicago that I attended many decades later? I spoke with the fiddle player at Saint Sava’s about the music, and he told me, “These are not recent tunes; these are traditional tunes that go back hundreds of years.”

The fast tempos of a number of tunes in this string tradition are very different from the relaxed tempos of traditional Appalachian music, the music Bill Monroe and his brothers had grown up on. Could the “industrialization effect,” the being thrown in with other immigrants to Chicago and exposure to other ethnic traditions, specifically Serbian string music, have influenced Bill Monroe’s percolation of bluegrass and some of its fast-paced tempos? Or was it more the Scruggs style of banjo later that lent itself to fast-paced virtuosity?

The living moment in the music at this gig, not in the music I was playing but the one that sang out when I wandered into the string band playing, evoked the question, but not the answer.

That music I heard there is now permanently silenced, the church having subsequently relocated. The former Saint Sava Serbian Orthodox Church property, including the hall where I heard the string band music, was sold in 2009 to The GEO Group, Inc., a Florida based for-profit company that is, irony of ironies, a builder and operator of correctional and immigrant detention facilities.

The Gimp

My band was playing a gig on Halloween. In the middle of a song a couple walked into the club, the woman pulling the guy by a chain. He was dressed in an S&M full body leather bondage suit, reminiscent of “the gimp” in Quentin Tarantino’s cult classic movie *Pulp Fiction*, including a face mask with a zipper across the mouth area. They began dancing as we continued playing in amazement. As the song was ending, Lorenzo, the singer, leaned over to me and said “What next?” Without a moment’s thought I replied with a song from our repertoire, “Unchain my Heart.” We went right into it, to the audience’s delight.

Unscripted moments like this feel like mana from heaven. But for them to happen you have to be alive to the moment and the nonlinear curves it may throw at you, meeting the invitation to spontaneity.

The Bachelorette Party

One time some friends were playing a gig in a downtown bar in South Bend, and I went there to hear some great music and hang out. It was a slow night, not a whole lot of people were there. At one point during the break the singer and harmonica player, a friend named Tom Moore, asked if I wanted to sit in for a few tunes at the start of the next set. Having packed a few harmonicas just in case of a moment like this, I thanked him and replied, “Sure.”

Just as we were gathering to start the next set, a bus pulled up filled with women having a bachelorette party. As they filed wild into the bar, one asked if the band could make an announcement at the end of the song we were about to play. We said, “Sure.” The tune ended, that same bachelorette came up to the band with a hat filled with pieces of paper, and asked the guitar player (they always ask the guitar player), if he could pull one from the hat, and that it would be something that the bride-to-be had to do on the spot. The guitar player said, “Sure.”

He pulled out a piece of paper, went to the microphone, and began reading it. It stated, “Flash your tits for 10 seconds to the band.” I kid you not. I quickly “calculated” the probabilities of how likely it would be that I would be on stage with the band for this about-to-happen 10 second moment versus the amount of time I would have been in the club over the course of the entire evening. I assure you, the chances were remote.

I realized something more like divine intervention had interceded, or perhaps, to use other terminology, the living moment.

The bride-to-be approached the stage area giggling, read the paper to herself to make sure she wasn't being tricked, and then flashed her uppers for an instant. The place went nuts, except for the harmonica player, now on his knees out of respect for the sacred moment, who raised his hand high with a question. The bride-to-be responded, "Yes?" The harmonica player said, "Excuse me, please correct me if I am wrong, but the assignment, as I understand it, ahem, is for you to flash for 10 whole seconds, yet your flash was but an instant." Her friends, now standing next to her, roared with laughter and said yes, she had to go for the full 10 seconds, and that one of them would time her.

The friend timed her as a countdown from 10 to 0. It was the difference between an instant and a moment. Mission now accomplished, the bride-to-be blended back into the crowd, and the band played another song, during which the merry band of buoyant bachelorettes exited bubbling back to the bus. And as the song ended, the harmonica player exited the stage, returning to the anonymity of the audience, graced by yet another manifestation of the living moment, truly believing in Saul Bellow's words that: "Unexpected intrusions of beauty. This is what life is."

The Low Down Blues

The West Side has been a home to the blues as much as the more well-known "South Side." In the fifties, the prime of Chicago electric blues, Muddy Waters was the virtual king of the South Side, and Howlin' Wolf the virtual king of the West Side. There were many more players of course, but the kinds of stylistic differences of these two great masters of the blues could be taken to qualify the somewhat different sound of West Side blues. Howlin' Wolf's guttural visceral vocals, and his guitar player, Hubert Sumlin's fluid and spacey runs exemplified West Side, as did the guitars of Magic Sam and Otis Rush, and early Buddy Guy. West Side blues and West Side life are every bit as tough as the South Side, if you didn't know.

A singer I have worked with a number of times, The Tail Dragger, learned to sing from the great Howlin' Wolf himself, who taught him phrasing. And, though he's a vocalist and I'm a harmonica player, I learned phrasing from his singing, how the call and response requires listening, spare eloquence, and sometimes silence.

He is one of my most important teachers, even though he doesn't play an instrument. He listened to, giggered with, and learned much from the great Howlin' Wolf, who also gave him the name of Tail Dragger. It seems The Tail Dragger would sometimes show up late for gigs, and so The Wolf at some point said, "Man, you The Tail Dragger!"

Sometimes we play one-chord songs, no chord changes for the whole song. It's what musicians who think they know but don't call "simple," meaning simplistic. The notes and rhythm may be technically simple, but whoever said that music resides in the notes or mere rhythm? Rhythm is but the beat, but groove is how the beat feels, and the task is to get into the groove, not mere rhythm. To get into the groove and to deepen it, gyring downwards into deeper and deeper levels of the groove: to get into the soul of life itself. Many musicians, traditionally white musicians, but these days black as well, are melody-centric and groove deficient, as though notes and pounding rhythm can alone cut it; but they only cookie-cutter it. The groove is the deep immersion in the now of the living moment, for those who can feel it. We do some slow blues super slow, slowed down into the hypnotic. If you can't feel it, it would seem boringly slow, but if you feel it, you're in it.

The Tail Dragger's sense of phrasing, of call and response, of freely leaving space, and of the ritual hypnotic that is the source of music's entrancement, all deliver one to that zone wherein real music happens. As he once put it: "I just sing the low down blues and sometimes it's like I'm in a trance ... Something hits me and I'm overpowered."

If life were only the music that would be a groove, wouldn't it? But life sometimes erupts in other kinds of moments, like the one that began with a group of West Side musicians, including The Tail Dragger, who played Sundays at the Delta Fish Market on the West Side. At one point in the late 1990s they were invited to play at the Chicago Blues Fest, and did. The band's leader, Boston Blackie, was paid by the festival, but chose to keep the money for himself rather than divide up the pay meant for the whole band. The other musicians complained to the festival people, and eventually were paid the money due to them. Everything made right, right? No.

Boston Blackie apparently became enraged that they were paid, even though he had taken their money. He began threatening The Tail Dragger on the street, telling him he would get him. He was apparently known to have cut people.

You don't go to the police on the West Side when someone threatens you. Instead, The Tail Dragger packed his pistol. He had been threatened by Boston Blackie and had a gig that night. At the end of the gig, Boston Blackie came toward him menacingly "to get" him. The Tail Dragger

pulled his pistol and shot Boston Blackie dead, a tragic ending to the former musical colleagues. If Boston Blackie had had a knife on him that night it might have been self-defense, but instead, it was manslaughter. The Tail Dragger had been a steadily employed good citizen with a day job as a truck driver, and his sentence was not as long as it could have been.

I'm the Bass Player and You are the Drummer

A white bass player from Evanston was doing a gig at a black neighborhood club on the West Side of Chicago. He was a seasoned player and knew the rules of gigs in the ghetto: park as close as you can to the club, get your gear in quickly, and then everything is very friendly inside ... usually. He got in and the first set went great. It was a lively night, full house, and more people arriving.

During the first break, the bass player went out the back door to have a cigarette. He was there no more than a minute or two when someone put a pistol to his back and said, "Give me yo' money." Startled, he replied that his wallet was in his jacket pocket, and if he could slowly turn around he would reach for it to give to the guy. The thief said, "Sure."

The bass player slowly began to turn around, and when he finally did, he was startled again and blurted out without thinking, "Man, I'm the bass player and you are the drummer!" The drummer-cum-thief only replied, "Sheeeit," while putting his pistol away and turning to go back into the club. The next set and the rest of the evening were killer.

The Dance of Life

The motto of Dubrovnik is *Libertas*. That motto is lived each and every night at Troubador Hard Jazz Caffee, a place of free music and warm conviviality founded by bass player Marko Breškovich, and named after his popular 1970s Croatian band, The Troubadors. With sons Toni on piano and vocals (and sometimes trombone), Niki on drums, and Vlaho on congas, the music has just poured out. I met Marko in April of 2002, when in Dubrovnik for a conference. I ended up three nights jamming after closing hour, playing congas until my fingers turned black and blue, and playing harmonica the last night to Charlie Parker's Night in Tunisia, a complex tune to which I had no idea of the chords, but somehow made a solo work. Leaving the club at about 3 am, I went with the guitar player, Frano Grce,

to his apartment to have some bread, cheese, wine, and continued conversation. He lived in an apartment in the old city. He pulled out some post-modern tarot cards made by his girlfriend and did a reading for each of us. I don't remember the reading for me, but during his reading for himself he suddenly exclaimed, "Oh shit, my girlfriend is pregnant!"

At about 4:30 am I left, after an almost 20 hour day. I had to walk through the old city and then almost a mile along the Adriatic to get to my hotel. This was a city which a decade earlier had been under siege and bombardment, a place where the surrounding hills still carried the threat of mines. I tried to thread my way through the tangle and maze and fog of winding medieval cobblestone streets, not really knowing my way or where exactly I was, and actually having the feeling of not knowing what century it might be. All was shrouded in mist and mystery.

Suddenly someone cried out to me. But how? Who could know me in this place at this hour? I saw two figures in shadow ahead. It was Marko and his girlfriend, leaving the club after closing it down. We all hugged and laughed, and he said to let him know if I ever returned to Dubrovnik. I walked along the coastal cliff road as dawn arose, finally reaching my hotel. It only took me a little more than a year to find an excuse to get back to Dubrovnik for another conference. And at the end of the first day there I made my way to the Troubador, where Marko greeted me and I sat in with the band, playing some congas, and then harmonica. Sadly, Marko passed away at age 69 in 2010.

The Troubador Hard Jazz Cafee was and is a place locals also come to relax, talk, and listen in the outdoor summer warmth. During my stay that first week of July, 2003 I spent my days at the conference and played music at the Troubador every night, never knowing quite what was coming up next nor caring, really. The carnival of life just poured out.

The first night I found myself accompanying a belly dancer, Susan Frankovich, on congas, as well as playing harmonica. The second night Marko introduced me to an opera diva from South Africa in the audience, who was on holiday with her husband and daughter, and we talked of her transition between performing opera and Broadway musicals, and of music more generally. At the end of the evening guitar player Frano Grce showed up from another gig he had been doing on the outskirts of town, to hang out over a beer. I asked him if, indeed, his girlfriend was pregnant, as the tarot cards indicated the previous year I was there. He replied, "Yes, but not by me!"

The third night Marko's 15-year-old niece belted out "I Will Survive" like a seasoned pro. Another night I sat at a table with a Croatian sailor, his wife, and Susan, the dancer, talking about the sailor's life at sea around

the world, of how his wife can now travel with him. Susan spoke of how she arrived in Dubrovnik from Arizona with 10 dollars and the desire to go to Spain, to dance her way to Spain. She was dancing on the edge, free. Through the touch of her finger bells and entrancing gestures, her rhythm rhapsody called out our improvising.

Hypnotizing hips shake the gaze of entrancement onto themselves. Unwary tourists walking through end up entranced and entrained, like Odysseus lashed to the mainsail with his ears unblocked as the alluring sirens called, end up turned into participants in the hypnotic dance of life underway, transfixed until the song is over and the spell is broken.

CONCLUSION: THE LIVING MOMENT

Sociality as entrainment and communion: No exit, only entrance, entrancing entrance. We musicians, entrancers entranced, pouring out the energy that the moment is pouring in, sacred vessels of the music which pours through us. This was heaven on earth, in the flesh, in the music, in the air, in the dancing, in the stones, in the people in the city in the moment: pouring music out of the not-yet into the now, the ambrosia of life, pouring out creation. Being the creation, fully immersed in it, in the dance of life.

Music and the evanescent living moments that pervade its occasions have taught me, and continue to teach me, that life flows as heaven on earth at each and every moment, if we open our hearts and our awareness and our love, and allow ourselves to feel it as it truly is: infinite creation. For as the medieval poet Rumi put it:

... We have fallen into the place
where everything is music.
Stop the words now.
Open the window in the center of your chest,
and let the spirits fly in and out.

NOTE

1. The "Race Records" chart was introduced by Billboard in 1945 to refer African American recordings.

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