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## One Last Note

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Is the most ecstatic music the most needed music? Why not play, get lost, forget logic or the need to explain the pleasure that comes when we're carried away? Ah, but you tell me, you are a philosopher, and you love wisdom not because it makes you crazy but because you have been trained to ask the right questions, those best questions that can never have adequate answers. One question leads to another, and after just a few you are lost, perplexed, camouflaged by doubt. That's the moment to start singing, I tell you, let out a piercing wail like the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan might have done, pushing your hands against the air as if to clear the sky for the ultimate lament, the total song where joy and sadness are conflated into one. Or jazz's founder Buddy Bolden, gone crazy on a single long note held out forever in New Orleans ninety years ago. For the best music is neither giddy nor portentous, major or minor, pathetic or glib. It inhabits pure pleasure and forces oneness out of the opposites that attract this world into being out of empty, deflecting forces.

(These are my two personalities tossing and turning upon each other, the musician and philosopher, one wailing, the other analyzing, neither ever to make the other one happy or satiated. They quarrel. They resist each other's insights.) That ecstasy inside the art of sound is not so much pure pleasure as final escape from the meanderings of an individual into the an essential oneness with the unspeakable meaning of the world. No one will be able to tell you what is or why, in so many or so few words. The celebration in sound seems like a language but it is not a language. Why not? Because you can love and share in it even if you have no idea what is going on.

Gently turning dervishes lifting feet softly above the ground, quivering Balinese monkey chanters shaking their hands all toward the circle's pulsing center, Hasidic *nigunim* whose melodies can never resolve-ecstasy is not only found in spiritual musics, but it's there in all those that gather our usually diffuse energy and draw it all toward a single point. That point bursts forth with the shout or the song, the concentrated melody, the intensity in a tune that seems not merely pleasant but *necessary*, a song so present it is impossible to refute.

Sometimes there are elaborate reasons for the existence of such music, stories that explain why what we hear or perform can possibly matter so much. Take this one of Reb Nachman's original Hasidic tales. Here's how the world is:

At one end of the world there is a mountain, on the top of the mountain, there is a fountain. And the water springs forth without ceasing. At the other end of the world lies the heart of the world, and although all things have a heart, the heart of the world is more worthy than any human heart. So at one end of the world is the fountain that gushes from the summit crags, and at the other end is the heart of the earth.

Now the heart is stuck at one end, the fountain way at the other. But the heart is in love with the mountain spring, it is filled with an unutterable, endless longing for that distant geyser of water spraying straight from the faraway peak. The heart cannot move, it lies scorched by the sun, but it stares at the mountain so

far away, and, barely visible, it sees the gushing water. Since the waters roar only at the summit, they can always be seen, even from thousands of miles away. If the heart were to lose sight of the spring for even one instant, it would cease to live. If the heart would die, then all the world would die, for the life of the world is contained within the life of its heart.

Once the heart tried to get closer to the fountain, but when it moved just a bit closer the water fell out of view, so it could not proceed, as it needs to be able to see the water to remain alive.

So what happens at night? You ask, when night falls over the world. The heart becomes dark with grief, for as the sun falls the water stops glistening in the distant sun, and the earth's heart will die of longing, and when the heart is dead all the earth and all creatures on this earth will die.

As the day draws to a close, the heart begins to sing farewell to the mountain waters, singing its grief in a wild, astonishing melody, while the mountain spring sings farewell to the heart. Their songs are filled with endless love and longing.

So why does it continue? Why isn't the world long dead and gone if even one night brings with it such impossible sadness? That's why we are here. The true and attentive human being keeps watch over the situation. In that last moment before the day is done, and the spring is gone, and the heart dead, and the world over, a good person comes and gives a new day to the heart, and the heart gives the new day to the spring, and so they live again.

When the day returns, it too returns with melody, and with strange and beautiful words that contain all wisdom. And there are differences between each day and every other. And each day comes with its own song, a song that no one has ever seen or heard before. And as long as there are good people, true musicians, on this earth, this new day will not be the last.

The real musician must exude love and passion with every single note. The tones must appear necessary, such that no other sound could possibly do at that moment, in that place and at that time. Because music is the art that leaves as soon as it arrives, it always comes to us *suddenly*, and departs the same way. It only lays with us if its power is so pure and so strong that it binds artist and audience with a message deeper than any language. Music speaks nothing beyond itself, standing for no emotion, no story outside its ways of rhythm and timbre. It cannot be doubted, it can't be explained. Its passion can only be talked around, never represented or recounted.

And yet it concerns itself with everything as much as nothing. You don't need to understand it to know it or to love it. When it works it speaks to people of many worlds as much as animals, plants, the gods and even the earth. The best of all musics have this emphatic and spiritual side. The music must seem necessary, impossible not to play it or to hear. It answers to no one yet calls out to all. Seeking it brings you comfort as much as adventure.

Love is about the search, the longing, the striving for the pure sound you'll never quite reach. Yet ecstasy cannot be the same. It should be the deep pleasure that actually arrives, that is there for the taking. I find it is impossible to doubt music while playing it. Even as the rest of my life seems overpopulated with questions, uncertainties about why one thing should be done instead of another, in the midst of the playing, dancing around silence and space with the presence of notes, it always seems to matter.

Mattering in itself is not enough. I still want to reach for those notes that *must* be played, that are right because they are essential melodies, unavoidable tones, songs that cannot be defied. This music is silent even when it sings because it does not speak, it cannot be reduced by explanation. Musical mystics are often smiling, laughing, crying with joy into the world with songs that spread the human spirit not above the world but out into it, mingling with the arena of colors, species, and winds. You must make these notes matter almost too much, such that you can't imagine the sound ever stopping and an instant of it lasts an eternity of pleasure.

The best music is both certain and ambiguous at once. You don't know why it matters so, you don't know what it's for. It falls between cracks of genre and purpose, neither popular nor ascetic, earthy or mannered, raw or refined, but in between all categories and rules, transcending all categories critics wish to place it within. You need not know anything about it to love it, you will feel it grab hold of you and not want to turn it off or down, yet not feel it is manipulating you or stealing away your soul.

For perfection may be a dream but ecstasy is never beyond our reach. It's right there in the accessible realm of rough delight. Who are the true musicians when sound is now everywhere, in the soundtrack of our lives, seeping out of invisible speakers impossible to turn down? All I have is a few stories that point in the direction I mean:

After a year in Norway I'd had it with the lack of danger. The land takes care of its own and it was almost impossible to get into any kind of trouble at all. I'd heard there was a part of town scheduled for demolition, or at least gentrification, and that there one could find the few who really wanted to resist the system that took care of all of your needs. There was a club called *Den norsk guruformidling A/S*, which translates as "The Norwegian Guru Exchange, Inc." and this was the rebel café that stayed open all night, with music, drink available to all. Pay what you will, what you can.

Walking inside the rusted door I spied an old clarinet tacked up on the wall, purely for decoration. I summoned it down, the reed was still good. Unscrewed the ligature, moistened the cane, set it carefully back on the cool, crystal glass mouthpiece. The tool was still in order, music would be possible. In the next room a crazy bearded character was waving a huge sword around, suddenly he screamed and plunged it into a wooden table. He calmed down. The table had a lot of sword marks, this Viking probably did this quite often. "Don't worry," someone reassured me. "Jens is a complicated person, but he is not dangerous." A woman with long stringy red hair had picked up a guitar and was strumming completely unfamiliar chords, something like a mixture of the blues, ancient folk music, and Jimi Hendrix detuning his guitar. *This* really sounded like something new. Everyone was listening, dancing in the corner or gradually joining in. She started to sing and her voice also cried of another kind of blues, not the downhome bending of notes that went back to the *griots* of West Africa but something out of the arctic tundra, a wail like wind racing through the trees. This sound could be on no record, could not be taken down. The room was listening closely, everyone was huddled together to resist the system that seemed impossible to resist. That was the most beautiful voice I've ever heard and I know I'll never hear anyone sing like that again, and if that's not true I'll make it true because the experience will increase and grow and double itself as I repeat it inside, and wait years to write it down, and change enough details so that it will fade in precision enough for all of you to ask the question, "what is the most beautiful voice you've ever heard?" and you'll fill in the blank with your own memory. But here the voice was more than just a voice because the whole place was reverberating with the need for that voice and everyone needed each other and needed music so much that nothing else seemed to matter; it wasn't pushed upon itself into an amplified thunder, but quiet, impossible to hear without concentration, but that made it deeper, more beautiful, more

strange, so much more than anything you could hear in the corner of your ear from a speaker, a car radio, a disembodied sound. This music was alive, made together, forming a community as we played. And it was like nothing else on Earth.

Writing about music can never substitute for it. The story has to surround an amazement that is largely private. Like in Frank Conroy's meticulous novel *Body and Soul*, where a young composer discovers jazz and how to integrate it with the classical tradition. He's in an automat on 42nd Street and he sits down at a table and meets some jazz musicians, who can tell he's a musician. One old guy just writes some chord symbols on a napkin and the kid is amazed, he sees, he grasps the significance of those sketchy symbols and discovers there's a whole new world out there of changing tonality that he must somehow learn to get a hold of. But it's a dangerous world. Just at that moment the old guy collapses into his milkshake and keels over, dead. O.D.ed on a drug of some kind. The kid knows there's something deadly and destructive about the world of the music he has begun to discover. He was not meant to grasp it, and in time he will turn away. In that sense, he will end a failure. And there's nothing he could have done about it. The romance of the impossible sound once again.

It is said that the streets of New Orleans are paved with music. This is the birthplace of jazz, voodoo, and cajun cuisine all in one. There is music streaming out of every door on Bourbon Street, and hecklers luring the visitor in to debauchery. A grinning demonic face flashes a sign from front to back: "Live Orgy" on the front, and on the back, "It's Wild." You want to peer in the door to see just what's going on, but it all seems like a trap. The place is far more troubling than I imagined, a caricature of the society of music, a French Quarter, Cartier Latin, devoted to the almighty dollar of the tourist; yes, that's right, I'm trying right here to discredit the place so that I won't have any fun. It's obvious I haven't paid the three bucks to sit on the benches in Preservation Hall and hear the real old-timers conjure up Buddy Bolden's ghost as they have for eighty years. Some of these guys are almost a hundred years old. They may have *played* with Buddy, heard him play that one last note that stopped him cold.

I didn't think I could find any surprises here, in a place that had become a caricature of itself. I didn't know whether to be taken in by the glitter and decaying haze, or run away down a side street. It was hot as hell.

I remembered a small cafe I had heard of that was "still cool," some kind of historic gathering place for anarchists, so my eco-anarchist friend John Clark had said, so I turned out of the fray and down a side street until I came upon the place, a little run down, a few too many mirrors on the walls, and the creaky ceiling fans spinning slowly, unevenly, around and around. It wasn't but a few seconds after I sat down that a wizened old fellow, shaking slightly, looking like an old prospector in from the Gold Rush, leaned toward my table and spoke firmly, looking me straight in the eye, "Excuse me. You don't look like you're from around here. I would guess you're from Europe. Am I right?"

Wondering how my face might reveal all those strange years in Iceland and Norway, I responded to him, "not exactly"

"Well then," he tried again, "you must be a musician."

"Right this time. You?"

"Well, I lived for years roaming around Eastern Europe, you know, before the change, playing on all the old church organs I could find. They have this incredible sound, just to touch them, make it come out.

"What kind of music were you playing? Jazz?" I asked, knowing I was in New Orleans, talking with an old-timer.

"Not exactly jazz. But improvised. From the soul. You know, back in the fifties, in New York, I was hanging out in the Cedar Bar with the expressionists, Jackson Pollock, I was his friend. They were the ones who understood the music. The artists could see what I heard, what I was playing. They were the people I connected with."

The story rang true. He was right. This strategy worked for Philip Glass, too. Chuck Close painted a giant portrait of Glass's face that hangs in MOMA. The artists are now accepted uptown figures. They're in the halls of culture. Glass's operas run at the Met, if only for a few nights. The jazz musicians are still struggling downtown, and only treated as serious figures in Europe.

"Back then in Eastern Europe, you know, before the changes, the artist was respected. Music was respected. People could help me do what I wanted to do. But then it all fell apart."

True again. This old half-crazy guy, nose red from too much drink or sun or something was making sense. In Bulgaria, the famous State Female Radio and Television Choir, *Le Mystere de Voix Bulgares*, they were the Communist ideal of national culture! Now they've got drum machines and managers in Manhattan.

Harold was in the West, though, too. "Yes, and then there was October 11, 1988, in Vienna. The grand cathedral. In the center of town. That was a fantastic event. Indescribable music."

Indescribable, yes. Ecstatic music is always indescribable. That's why it survives, binds people together, cannot be talked about or told in words. October 11, 1988. Vienna. Wait a minute! I remember as I walk down the street. I was there, staying in a pensione on the Graben after riding a barge from Bulgaria for a week up the river. I walked past the cathedral, and remember hearing the strange, out of place quality of the music. I almost went in, but decided to walk on.. And now this?

I wanted to run back and tell Harold this. Why? To say I was in Vienna and had *almost* gone to his concert, only to meet him seven years later to tell him this, in a place out of time, out of mind. No, better move on. I doubt I will see Harold Crawford again. But music brings meaning into the chance encounter, as we inhale the sounds that we can only imagine since they were never heard.

The record of musics heard and unheard, links between places and people real or imagined, is an unending din of convulsing memories. From here it just goes on late into the night, to other cities, to other ecstatic tensions and release, on to the forced international immediacy of New York. I think of the time I lived above the Ear Inn, a remote Manhattan hangout nearly at the edge of the Hudson River way downtown. Late at night legendary clarinet master Perry Robinson had a band that would start playing at midnight on a Monday night. Always one of my heroes, the only friend who would ever call me "Maestro!" he sometimes let me join in. The man on the squeezebox leans near the microphone and starts crooning the tale of Buddy Bolden that I keep hearing over and over again, inside my recollections and all over the world. What happened to him? What was he thinking about all those years? What did that one note do to him? He needed to play it, he needed to get lost, there was no other way.

Perry leans to me and calls me up, "now do it, your turn, *play like Buddy, like this is the last note you will ever let loose,*" and then I knew just where the history of jazz began and where

it went wrong, how that first note let loose the madness of our century's sudden music conjured up on the spot, and I'm up there, it's two am, privileged to stand by the master as he leads me along into a Russian folk tune he first recorded in the sixties. The impossible memories are the ultimate refrain. The sound and the stories, the memory and the moment, the master and the student, all sounds are Buddha's voice, all one, all none. Our cries are longing for a goal we can barely see that will never be attained although it is always right here. For an instant, question no more. Far away from this city lie the fountain and the heart, the mountain and the desert of the world. I taste the wet song with my dry, parched tongue.

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