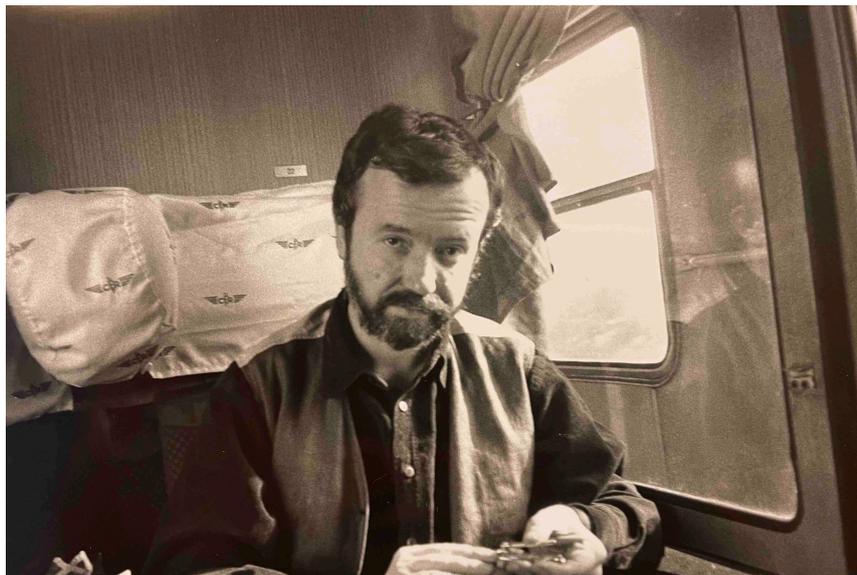


## Maurice de Martin - Swingin' Against All Odds

*Epilogue for My Friend Mircea Tiberian (1955–2025)*



I decided to write in English because that was our preferred language of communication. I love speaking Romanian, and when I became overly confident that I was quite good at it, you replied, “Please don't speak Romanian to me. It sounds like a 5-year-old's Swahili and is an insult to my intelligence!”

The Romanian short version of this epilogue is published in *Revista Cultura*

### On the Road

“Marta Hristea – Vilacross Passage” (1998), “Interzone” (1999), “Interzone plays with Adam Pieronczyk” (2000), “Interzone – Crossing Atlas 45°” (2001), “Interzone Jazz Orchestra – Transylvanian Grace” (2002), “Mircea Tiberian/Maurice de Martin Quintet – Eleven” (2002), “Mircea Tiberian – Viața Lumii” (2003), “Interzone – Shining of the Abyss” (2004), “Maurice de Martin – Transylvaniana” (2004), “Tiberian/Dahlgren/de Martin – Intelligence Is All Around” (2010), “Mircea Tiberian – La Margine de București” (2010), “Tiberian/Dahlgren/de Martin – Raphael” (2016), “Mircea Tiberian / Maurice de Martin – Dance Around the Dragon Tree” (2019)—these are the 13 albums you and I recorded and released over the course of our more than 25 years of friendship and musical adventures.

Not every one of those albums do I love; some I even found dreadful in retrospect. Yet, as Mircea Tiberian once wrote me a few weeks earlier on WhatsApp, some of the best musical moments of our lives had been shared together. And isn't it true, as that the 85% of deliberately produced trash served as the humus from which the 15% of unintentionally emerging wonders grew?

Far more significant, however, were the memories of our seemingly endless and, at the same time, spellbinding conversations during countless journeys on dilapidated regional trains somewhere in Eastern Europe. Perhaps our musical collaboration had ultimately been just the framework for these

conversations in nowhere land—on a much deeper level. The artistic output certainly retained meaning, yet without the intersubjective and intellectual exchange between them, this work could never have come about in the first place.

Mircea once remarked that we were fortunate—because it was so rare—to tour with a colleague one didn't grow bored to death with after thirty minutes in a train compartment. Over many years, the two meticulously ensured that those often endless train rides in Romanian, Bulgarian, or Polish “chug-alongs” were theirs alone. We would seek out the least-frequented compartment in the entire train, and sometimes even bribed the conductor, drawing the curtains to the aisle once the last passenger left.

Then, undisturbed, we let the landscape drift by and indulged in their shared passion: deep reflection on life, people, music, philosophy, history, art, literature, theater, architecture, politics, food, and all the absurd, moving, funny, sad, and outrageous stories drawn from our current experiences. Whether the topic was Soviet space-engineering technology of the 1970s or Inca initiation rituals, Mircea had something to contribute to almost everything. And if he truly had no idea, he could conceal it perfectly as the experienced author he was—with a lot of imagination. Authorship, always means inventiveness, and back then, we had done it all without any assistance from Google or ChatGPT.

In summer, temperatures often exceeded forty degrees during these discourse trips, and in winter they were sometimes just above zero; we always had to keep ourselves warm or cold with vodka. The windows couldn't be opened in summer or closed in winter, but the booze and the talk was always there!

### **The Ritual of Bucharest Nights**

When not on tour and in Bucharest, we recorded in George Enescu's villa on Calea Victoriei, rehearsed in a very decent room in the back of “Preoteasa,” or celebrated together with his poet and painter friends “Petrecere la vorba și la bere” at “Terasa La Muzeu,” “Green Hours,” “Art Jazz,” Jazzclub Gutenberg—musicians had baptized it “Fututenberg”—or at the “Terasa La Motor” above the famous “Lăptăria lui Enache,” where I had first met him in autumn 1996. When it got even later, we ate a Ciorbă de Burtă at “La Radu” and then stumbled at dawn to a Meridian taxi that took us home across the empty boulevards of Bucharest, naturally with loud Manele music blaring on the radio.

Some years later, the redundancy of this routine began to bother me more and more; in the long run, it seemed not only tiresome but also very self-destructive, slowing down the processes of work, making them increasingly blurry and confused. Today I regret having shown him and his friends my dislike so clearly. It annoyed them that I not only left these celebrations early, but also began to ostentatiously

look down on the established brotherhood of schnapps, cigarettes, and endless, repetitive discussions about everything and nothing.

For years, we lived almost like a married couple. In an interview some weeks before your left, you described our relationship as “carmico-genetic. Where Mircea was, I wasn’t far, and vice versa. Later, I heard from a colleague that people mocked us when we again appeared together on stage in a slightly altered formula: “Mircea and Maurice again... ce plictisitor!” Only a few could comprehend how two such different people could sustain such an intense collaboration over so many years.

It was obvious that we constantly argued fiercely. Some colleagues refused to work with us, unable to tolerate the disputes during rehearsals, before and after concerts. I was always the hot-headed one, hurling insults at him, while he consistently maintained composure and remained conciliatory. We always forgave each other and simply carried on, because there was always this awareness of the value of friendship and a shared perspective on our joint work. During my work for the UN beginning of the 2010 years, I once met Michael Møller Director General at the Palais des Nations in Geneva. He told me that every functioning democracy requires one thing from its political combatants: the ability to argue, to fight, and then still want to continue working together afterwards. He called this ability “commitment” to the cause”. In this sense and despite of most Jazz-collaborations, our „thing“ was a true Jazz-democracy!

During a recording session that was never released due to a lack of commitment, two younger colleagues told me a few years ago that the people around them, especially musicians, had a serious problem with “commitment.” One had to be careful not to expect too much but shouldn’t take it personally. Folks were simply trying their best to adapt to an inevitably negligent environment in which the top priority was always to look for the next possible opportunity. I told this to Mircea and he had a simple word for it: “Careless.” Over the years, he complained about it over and over again, knowing very well but not wanting to admit that he was a protagonist of this game himself. Although the economic situation had improved significantly in the meantime, folks still internalized this old “restaurant musician mentality.” Without even realizing it, one would constantly be following a deeply ingrained impulse to undermine each other for the prospect of quick profit and/or recognition.

This dynamic is not unique to Romania, but in its highly developed form there, it repeatedly brought me to the brink of despair, and I don’t know how many times over the past three decades I swore never to return to Bucharest because of it. Despite it all, we always found our way back to each other, continuing to forge ahead with our plans, projects, and discussions after the fuzz had faded again.

Over the years, this game exhausted Mircea, and he increasingly sought out other players with whom there was less stress to expect, as he once told me. The mutual annoyance left its mark, and our contact became increasingly sporadic. But despite everything, there was always this untouched feeling of a deep soul connection—and the certainty that there was someone out there who was simply there, without conditions, and to whom one could always return, and then everything was fine again.

I was so glad that we reconnected in the months before his death after almost two years of silence, and he wrote: “I knew that’s not the end!” We wrote longer WhatsApp messages to each other regularly again, and he often asked how my little son Oscar was doing. I noticed how much his birth in August 2024 and his presence in my life touched him and how strongly this resonated with him. He wrote: “He is smiling, as if he will become the next Buddha!” He could give very charming compliments when he wanted to. That made me even happier than I already was in my situation as an already quite “aged” father at fifty-five.

Another time he wrote: “I’m too old to envy someone’s happiness in his life! Never feel pity for me!” The last time he asked for Oscar was when he was on his way to his last gig in Galați. I sent him a video of Oscar roaring like a lion. He didn’t reply, and the next day at noon, my phone suddenly rang with a number from Romania that I didn’t know. Even before picking up, I already knew what had happened.

### **BUKFAKT again**

We both had an intense but ambivalent relationship with the Theater. On the one hand, we never took it seriously because we saw it as a “pretend space,” something that is always somehow “fake.” On the other hand, we appreciated it as a “space for staging absurdities.”

At longer intervals, we repeatedly used the theatrical moment for our work and, in 2016, together with the young singers from his jazz department at the university, we staged a kind of musical that we called “...unfortunately the show must go on!” and which poked fun at the “fake folklore” tradition from Ceaușescu's time. At the end of the play- accompanied on the piano by Mircea in good socialist fashion—I suddenly encountered the ghost of the dictator in his House of the People, this huge palace with over 8,000 rooms, which cast ever-lengthening shadows in the background of the performance hall under the roof of the music university in the evening light.

Mircea Tiberian lived in a society that still struggles to come to terms with this long shadow. This society tormented him his whole life and despite all efforts, he never could (as well never really wanted) fully leave it behind. How often he told me how much he hated Bucharest! And the people! We endured together the incredible absurdities of daily life there—normal like beer comes along

with mititei—developing a heroic–ironic code we’d winkingly signal whenever it struck again: “BUKFAKT!”—fucked again in Bucharest!

One of our favorite pastimes was to get together after a long time and laugh or cry about the most absurd BUKFAKT situations we had experienced together over the years. We even had a plan to write a book about it, which we wanted to call *Swingin’ Against All Odds*.

There were three situations that always brought back vivid memories.

Once, we played a concert in a beautifully dilapidated Belle Époque concert hall in the center of Bucharest. When we entered, he said it was one of the buildings that had been severely damaged in the last major earthquake on March 4, 1977, and would collapse in the next quake. The organizer, who perceived himself as particularly important and professional, had been preparing our concert with great fanfare for months.

The piano was out of tune, the foot pedal was missing from the drum kit, and only the left side of the oversized rock-festival speaker towers of the sound system worked. There were only a few people in the audience at the concert. Afterward, the organizer handed us mountains of 100,000 lei notes in a plastic bag, looking very displeased. The posters, as one of Mircea’s acquaintances from Romanian National Radio told us, were put up the day after the concert.

Our first album together was the 1998 debut CD of a then-young Romanian singer who was actively promoted by Mircea. We had our recording session in a wonderfully old, dusty, real-wood recording studio from the communist era, and the sound engineer was extremely relaxed at work. The recordings went well, and we were all—but especially the singer—looking forward to the upcoming CD.

Unfortunately, the 16-track tape machine ran too slowly, and they had forgotten to pay attention to the kilohertz rate when digitizing the master. As a result, the CD came out of the pressing factory with a recording that was one and a half whole tones lower and ten BPM slower than the original. It sounded slightly drunk, as if you were slowing down an LP on a turntable. The singer was deeply saddened and indignant when she was told that -due to lack of funding- the mistake could not be corrected and that she would have to live with it.

Just a few months ago, Mircea wrote me a message describing how he had listened to the album and found that the mistake actually made the music better: the bad piano sounded like a Bösendorfer grand, and the singer’s voice was as rich and dark as Cassandra Wilson’s. He knew how to sell flaws as benefits.

But one couldn't just become a BUKFAKT in Bucharest; since also other places were entitled to that honor, we extended the principle to our travels, too. Once, on a bitterly cold winter evening, we had a concert in a newly opened jazz club in the old town of Sibiu. The club was in a musty basement in an old house in the lower town. It was packed, totally smoky, and the temperature was around eight degrees above zero. Everyone was drinking mulled wine. There was an electric heater on stage running at full blast. It was the only heater in the club.

Before we went on stage, they turned off the heater. When we asked if they wanted us to freeze to death on stage, the answer was: either the heater runs or the sound system runs; if both run at the same time, the fuses blow. So we played wearing hats, gloves, and anoraks, and drank lots of mulled wine. The songs in the third set became longer and slower. The audience loved it.

Afterwards, I baptized the club *groapă de cartofi*—"potato cellar." On the night of the concert, the organizer put us up in a hotel on the outskirts of town where there was no hot water and the heating was set to lukewarm. After a freezing night, he came to breakfast with us and brought us our fee minus one million lei. He couldn't get any more money at the moment and would send us the remaining million to Bucharest. He still owes us that money to this day.

## **The Weight of Fate**

Nearly fifteen years ago, we had a concert in the Gothic mountain chapel in Michelsberg/Cisnădioara. During setup, Mircea told me it was one of his "power places" in Romania. That's why he wanted a photo of the chapel on the cover of our first CD. It was his dream to one day build a house there and return to his true home—Transylvania—to age and die in peace. He even planned to reserve a grave in the village cemetery.

Yet he remained in Bucharest and was buried on October 21, 2025, in a prominent cemetery in the vicinity of the great Romanian composer George Enescu, all quickly arranged by the Composers' Union. I don't know if he'd be thrilled about all of that—probably he'd simply respond to my skepticism with a laconic, "Come on, man, it's not so bad! *Merge și așa!*"

The main problem with being dead is that one can no longer resist what others do with you. That, too, can be a coda to what came before. Of course, this also applies to these lines. When I write, I always have to think about how he would react if he read what I write.

I often wondered why he stayed in that city despite everything. Was it because Bucharest and its people, in all their ambivalence, gave him so much after all—all things that would have been very difficult to achieve elsewhere? I am quite sure he instinctively knew that and that this was why he stayed.

At the same time, he was an extremely devoted family man, giving everything and more amid increasingly complex and tragic circumstances. Over the last eighteen years, he performed a Herculean feat to keep his family's fragile boat from capsizing and to navigate the recurring shoals and storms—far beyond what's humanly bearable. His autistic son Luca required continuous intensive care, and his therapy place could only be maintained if sufficient funds continued to be raised.

One could see his strength and resilience slowly fading, and he spoke of it too. It caused me deep emotional pain to witness my friend Mircea wearing himself down. Yet I knew—and that made me especially sad—that there was no escape for him, because everything is as it is. *Asta este!*

### **The owl flies at dusk**

A few weeks before his death, he wrote to me: “1998–1999–2000 were my most active years, besides 2006–2007. I was 45 and 50. Now I'm 70 and I can improvise an entire concert without faking a single fucking note, much more authentic and connected than 25 years ago, and I don't have a single concert or any other artistic opportunity, living in this strange and at the same time deadly banal country, Romania!”

Within a long discussion about our status quo on WhatsApp that followed on this statement, I replied with two quotes, the first one was from the great French author Michel Houellebecq: “To the degree you approach the truth, your solitude will increase...” and the second one came from the Italian art philosopher Mario Perniola: “As an artist today, you are faced with a choice: either be a monk or be minor talented.” I was well aware of the frustration that comes with the realization that artistic maturity gained through age and experience is no guarantee of lasting success. Often, it is exactly the opposite: the better one becomes, the less successful one is.

But when, like Mircea, one suddenly finds oneself standing before the Almighty, isn't it better to be certain that He knows that you may not have had any gigs lately, but that all the notes you played were always straight—rather than having to fear that He knows full well that you were signed to a renowned label, got a feature article in *Downbeat*, some awards, and the chatter of experts successfully led you to believe you were a VIP, while 99 percent of all the notes you ever played were still fake?

The Stoics say one should not flee one's fate but accept it and make something of it until it releases its grip. One of his compositions, titled *Born to Lose*, is a melancholic–self-ironical reflection on the existence of a jazz musician in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. His life was full of resistance and absurd obstacles, often self-generated, but also imbued with a deeply intertwined beauty that only someone with a free soul and incorruptible intellect could create and live.

Mircea was both extremely free and extremely trapped—more than most—and it was precisely these lived extremes that made him a unique, unforgettable person.

### **Rândunica (The Swallow)**

My life would have taken a completely different course without Mircea. I owe him so much. I learned so much from him and shared so much with him. Now it's all pure memory, and with his passing, an entire era has come to a long-foretold yet sudden end. I so wished we could have had a few more evenings of celebrating and debating, played one more concert, recorded in the studio one more album. Fate willed otherwise.

I've set up a small Mircea altar with the above photo, our last CD, and a candle. I sit before it and contemplate. Better days will come once I am able to give the absence of him a place. Perhaps I'll return to Bucharest then and visit him at the cemetery, but I fear I'll feel utterly lost in that city, which was briefly my chosen home.

Should someone ask me today which moment with him has etched itself most deeply into my memory, I would reply that it was the instance during our journey by train to the Varna Jazz Festival 1998 in Bulgaria. En route to the concert, I ventured to the train's lavatory—a space ravaged both visually and olfactorily—only to discover, upon concluding my visit, that the door would not yield from within, its locking mechanism having malfunctioned.

Thus, I found myself ensnared in that sweltering summer “shithole,” besieged by a thousand flies and a singularly pungent aroma. Despite my vigorous attempts to summon aid, no one came to my rescue. After approximately twenty minutes, Mircea—concerned, as he later recounted, about my prolonged absence—made his way to the lavatory at the end of the carriage. Upon discovering me and discerning the predicament, he returned to our compartment, retrieved his piano tuning key from his suitcase, and deftly unlocked the door with it.

With a mere glance, he had recognized that both the key and the screw were of matching quadrangular dimensions. He had insisted on bringing the tuning key to the concert, wary of the possibility of performing on an ill-tuned instrument. As so often, I couldn't discern whether his explanation stemmed from earnestness or irony when he attributed his mistrust to the Bulgarians' cultural leanings: a people of flutes and voices, he said, not of harmony, and thus utterly unversed in the art of piano tuning. For a pianist who valued a "well-tempered" sound, he concluded, venturing into Bulgaria without a tuning key was a perilous gamble.

Should someone ask me today which of his compositions I consider the most authentic musical embodiment of Mircea Tiberian, I would answer without hesitation: it is *The Swallow*, written for his ex-wife Cristina.

If someone asked me what my favorite album with him is, I would probably answer our duo album *Dance Around the Dragon Tree*. The cover features an adaptation of the drawing of the *Dragonnier de Orotava* by Aimé Bonpland, Alexander von Humboldt's companion. On the day of our last concert together, on 28 April 2018 in the concert hall of the Bucharest Music University—which was also the launch party for this album—the old, massive chestnut tree in the beer garden of our favorite jazz club, Green Hours, suddenly broke apart out of the blue and buried the (unoccupied) tables and chairs beneath its thick branches.

I passed by the scene on my way to the sound check and watched as the fire brigade arrived with heavy equipment to clear the site of the chaos. Mircea commented on my report of the incident as follows: "How fortunate that the beer garden was not yet open when the tree collapsed. If the poets' table had been full as usual, Romania would have lost its entire intelligentsia in one fell swoop!"

Should someone ask me today what I cherished most about Mircea, I would reply: his conciliatory nature and his profound, multi-layered humor, seasoned with a generous dash of absurdity and plenty of post-communist Southeastern European melancholy.

And should someone ask me today which of his statements made me laugh the most, I would answer without hesitation: "The motherfuckers never bring me a good piano to play on!"

When a soulmate dies, it feels as though a part of oneself goes with him. This results in a special responsibility for those left behind: we survive in the memory of others.

Rest in peace, Mircea!

Your friend Maurice