

CD-Booklet Text “Maurice de Martin – Radical Cultural Approximation”

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"I'm only interested in what's not mine."

Oswald de Andrade /Manifesto Antropófago

The following story is about a young white, European musician, who wanted to play jazz in New York City and was taught humility and resilience.

In the first few days after I had moved to the city at the start of the 1990s in order to take lessons with the masters, and moreover prepare myself for the life of a professional musician, I asked around where the “cats” would meet for a *jam*. I was steered towards a club on Dean Street in Brooklyn, where I turned up for the very next session. I was more or less the only white person in a space packed with *PoCs*. The house band was already playing. A line of roughly ten emerging alto and tenor saxophone players had formed up at the bar. Everybody waited their turn patiently, a turn being approximately five minutes each solo. After two pieces I walked to the stage and asked the house drummer if I could sit in.

The house drummer was an older guy with a goatee, a white turban and a haji outfit. Patronizingly, he asked back whether I could *swing* at all and, resentfully, I replied: “Yes, of course, man!” The bass player next to me muttered what the next piece was going to be, which I failed to catch even on the second attempt. Then the piano player counted in at break neck speed and off we went, uptime, as it were. I had never heard, let alone played, such a thing. After about a minute my ride hand cramped up and I could not keep the tempo. Of course, that is an absolute *no-go!* Panic and anger were welling up in me at the same time: *They are doing this on purpose!!!*

Suddenly the aforementioned drummer stepped onto the stage and removed the ride cymbal – while I was playing. So, I had to switch to the crash cymbal. Then he went on and removed the crash so I had to switch to the Hi-hat. Then he removed the Hi-hat and I had to stop. The entire session came to a halt and the whole room (not only the musicians on or next to the stage) looked daggers at me. I wanted to crawl under a rock and withdrew to the far end of the bar.

After that incident, the session carried on as usual. I was paralyzed, watching the scene while fantasies of a violent nature were playing inside my head. A break ensued and the house band came

to the bar. I plucked up the courage to go up to the drummer and tapped him on the shoulder. When he turned, I asked him: “Why did you do that to me?” In response he grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, pulling my nose close to his, looked me deep in the eye and said:

“You little white motherfucker, next time you come here to play OUR music, you better know how to do it! Otherwise, I’m gonna KILL YOU!!!”

At that point a lady, who had been standing close and watching the situation, intervened. She took the house drummer aside and said: “You can kill the white kid now, brother, or you can give him to me, so I can teach him how to play our music and then he can come back and have his second try!” Then she gave me a card with her number and took her leave saying “Call me tomorrow!”

The lady turned out to be Evelyn Blakey, the youngest daughter of the famous Bebop drummer Art Blakey. She was part of a project started by the *NYC Transit Authority* called “Music under New York.” In that context she led a band of young musicians with whom she played at a different subway station every day. I called her the following day. She told me of her father and invited me to her apartment on Tompkins Square Park. She asked if I really wanted to learn how that whole “jazz thing” works. I replied: “That’s why I’m here!” She invited me to join her project, explaining that this would be the best way to learn what being a drummer was all about: *uptime, medium, slow, waltz, Latin!* For the next two years, four or five times a week, I would take a miniature drum kit on a handcart up and down countless stairs and endless tunnels of the New York subway, going to or coming from a gig with Evelyn and her crew.

So, that was my personal street jazz university. Pigmentation or anything of the kind did not play a huge role there. While I remained “the white kid,” that was not a problem for me. I sensed the respect. And ultimately, the outsider has been a “role” I was to play in many variations as an artist. The people passing us by loved our music and at the end of a subway day the saxophone case was full of dollars, which Evelyn always split equally among the musicians.

Years later, I went to the club on Dean Street again, taking my place behind the drum set. Everything went smoothly that day, but it happened to be a waltz – and as a Bavarian that happens to be in my blood. It took Elvin Jones’ performance in the film *Zachariah* (1972) for me to understand that I was extremely lucky at the jam session – shootouts are not unheard of in such a situation!