KIRPAL GORDON

X Country: Touring the Nation with Jazz & Poetry
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OTHER OP TITLES BY KIRPAL GORDON

Jazz Tales from the Ghost Realms
Round Earth: Open Sky
Traces of Love
Swingin': More Jazz Tales from the Ghost Realms
Against the Grain: Music, Memory & the 'Merican Way
X Country: Touring the Nation with Jazz & Poetry, Election Season '04

Kirpal Gordon

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Evening was descending gently in shades of darkening blue on Seventh Avenue. I stood on the curb outside the club Sweet Rhythm enjoying the breeze of Indian summer blowing south from Sheridan Square.

This was downtown's twilit, deserted hour. Workers had returned home, but the nightlife of the neighborhood had not yet spread her many charms. The rain had let up & the cobblestone streets smelled clean. Memory stirred & I got what the song calls “that old feeling,” nostalgic for the world below 14th Street.

In a Gotham of skyscraper hierarchy, village & tribe are intersecting circles here. These circuitous lanes & narrow thoroughfares that defy the rectangular grid of Manhattan had served as my haaj in high school (Fillmore East), my second home in college (67 Thompson), my neighborhood after grad school (403 East 6th) & my later loft headquarters (60 Pearl). Here I'd lost my virginity---political & intellectual as well as sexual---& found my life changed. Like a century of “art immigrants” before me, I had fallen under the influence of the dreamers & drifters, musicians & poets, dancers & film makers, book lovers & performers who teem out along these avenues & storefronts. Wander from the Hudson River across Greenwich Village to Washington Square Park, past Broadway via St. Mark’s Place to Tompkins Square Park & the Lower East Side, ending at the East River, & you’ll see what I mean. So much of America’s culture has been made here. Whether you arrive from an outer borough or from Outer Mongolia, it’s a
pioneer’s cautionary story about booming rents & unlikely glory, a dialectic between art as process & art as consumer product. A good deal of the scene has always gotten fattened for midtown’s Great-White-Way-RCA-&-the-Brill-Building, dumbed down/marked up for Peoria Main-Street-‘n’-Stream via Holly Would & carpe corpo publishing congloms, but some of it remains raw & urgent, courageous & original. That’s what reached me, warts-‘n’-all, coming up: Woody & Ledbelly, Lady Day & Prez, Dylan & Baez, Bird & Diz, Whitman & Pound, Hendricks Jon & Jimi, Keruoc & Ginsberg, Isadora Duncan & Martha Graham, Monks Thelonious & Meredith, Cassavetes & Scorcese, the Fugs & the Wooster Group, Amiri Baraka & Miguel Algarin.

I looked across Seventh Avenue as folks were heading into The Garage. Eighteen months earlier I had walked in there & introduced myself to Claire Daly while she took a break from her Sunday jazz brunch gig. Tomorrow we were leaving to cross the country during the presidential election & play the material we’d been writing & rehearsing, recording & performing in the Big Apple over all that time. I felt lucky to be alive, lucky to be in love, lucky to be carrying a bundle of What We Got Against Tyranny, a poetry booklet I had picked up that morning, thanks to the inventive Jordan Jones at Leaping Dog Press.

I went inside & looked the joint over: bar on the right, about forty tables of four chairs each, then an elevated stage with a big black piano. For a reader on a microphone the most important human in the house is the sound man. When the line-up features a baritone sax & vibes, the mix is even more crucial. I could see that Claire was relieved that the guy really knew what he was doing. She already had plenty on her plate. Although she & vibraphonist Warren Smith have been playing together for years, he had been on tour when Claire first started to rehearse the material for her CD three months ago. He did make the recording date, but he had never played a gig with Solar, a trio of swinging madmen, or with Napoleon Maddox, human beat box. So we plugged in, took a sound check on “Evil Ways” (“Call up the ghost of Chano Pozo,
baby, let’s go oijua board boatin’ in an ocean where/when all time’s simultaneously unfoldin’”) & everyone rang out & blended beautifully.
I had a feeling this would be a memorable night of music.
The house was quickly filling up.
Perhaps because she’s been a sideman a trillion times, Claire’s a musician-friendly bandleader. Her idea of an evening of jazz is (less like Wynton, more like Rahsaan) anything can happen. So, although the music is serious & takes no prisoners, the mood is merry. Yes, she knows people are there to hear her play & she took magnificent solos. But she paced the show & everyone on the bandstand got to stretch out a bit. Once the rhythm section locked in, she added flavors. She joked in between songs about getting the vote out across the country. She’s got chutzpah to spare, timing like a Borscht Belt comic. She quizzed them on jazz history & rewarded one winner with her CD, the other with a tee shirt from her web site.
She carried a set list but changed the order, featured the numbers band members had written before singing a tune herself. When she wanted to end the set with a bang, she called up spoken word & beat box. When it needed to breathe, she invited up special guest Jimmy McBride, a gifted swing-meister on the drum kit (even though he’s only thirteen). She noticed “Heavenly” composer Art Lillard had dropped in & asked him up to accompany his own tune on conga.
The show was a love fest. I noticed elders came out. Even if some are the #1 call in NYC on their particular ax, pardon me if I don’t elaborate. What I’m getting at is the opposite of name-dropping; it felt like they were there as members of a jazz family rather than as conspicuous celebrities. It was big fun.
Two sets & four hours later, we packed up. The door was good, & Claire made sure all the performers got well. The club owner invited her back to play in early ‘05. That said a lot. We managed to sell CDs & a few books. We slept soundly that night. The next day we were on the road for the West Coast.
I-80/Outta the Apple & into the Heart of the Heart of the Matter

Coming out of the Holland Tunnel & into the sunny funk of Hoboken, I considered the difference (a year &) a day makes. The last time we were on the Pulaski Skyway together we were headed for Cincinnati to play a poetry night at the Greenwich Tavern, a nightclub on the edge of town & a hip hop festival with a TV spot & a motel room right by the highway.

The itinerary had been arranged by Napoleon Maddox of the jazz/hip hop trio Iswhat?! How we met this amazing culture maker Napoleon is why this music will never die. Forget the word jazz for a minute. Admit the whole idea of live, syncopated, improvisational music reflects a distinctly, uniquely African-rooted, USA-diverse celebration: the blues, pop, bop, hip hop, hot, cool, rag, rock, stride, boogie woogie, big band, Latin, r & b, Dixieland, third stream, funk, country swing, soul. It’s one verb, ripe for mating with difference, which certainly says something about what it is to be American.

So Joe Fonda, a mid-career bassist with a recording résumé that goes around the block & back, had met Napoleon, a talented mover & shaker in the rap world he wanted to jam with, & he called Claire to see if she would join them. She invited the guys over to her Chelsea loft & asked me if I’d like to sit in for a couple of tunes. What a session. Joe’s as consummate a pro as Claire, & the three of us were in drop-jaw-awe-'n'-sonic-astonishment over Napoleon. He didn’t just keep impeccable time “drumming” with his voice; he worked the microphone, adding weird & wonderful sounds, shifts of emphasis, ranges of nuance.

A week later Claire called. We had a gig. She was leaving for Cincinnati & did I want to join her. I said yeah, & we got in the Silver Bullet, her twenty-year-old Chrysler E Class sedan. So what if some of the doors & windows no longer opened; it ran, & so did we, down the road. Talk about running it down & opening doors: our first show’s first number was a medley (“Goodbye Porkpie Hat,” “Eulipions” & “The World is a Ghetto”). Claire alternated
between flute & saxes (bari & alto) while Napoleon beat-boxed & I slung lyrics. The audience responded with whoops & a standing ovation. We'd found something that worked & returned home eager to develop it.

People can get the wrong idea about poetry. I, too, dislike it. Marianne: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle. Hearing it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine. Claire's music gave my lyrics a place for the genuine. She's got a gorgeous tone & no one's more melodic on that ungainly horn. She "walks with the ancestors" when she plays. Her mid-tempo, slaughterhouse fervor-of-joy style helped me burn the butter off my lyrics, trimmed my sheets-of-sound yak-a-thons into tighter, tastier choruses that bored less & swung more. That's what I had been after, a seaming of lyric & music, which as ol' Ez said, is one thing, not two. Moreso, her soulful solos from her first two CDs gave me ears to hear the old AABA Tin Pan Alley song form less like a cliché & more like a vehicle, baby, a launch pad for ideas & surprises, a chance to send up & signify, to swirl in Greek & Sanskrit, to distill a little corn in the original lyrics into more amusing moonshine.

"I've got the world on a string, a labyrinth's within me." Although I was having fun shaping verse to our nation's greatest (only?) contribution to world culture & which continues to mate with styles in South America, the Caribbean, Africa, Europe & Asia, it's tough getting gigs, even when the folks you're playing with are highly regarded. Claire had just won Downbeat's listener/critics' poll as Baritone Saxophonist of the Year (category: deserving wider recognition). It had been her third time as winner, & though she joked about it (three strikes, you're out), she knew from experience the only opportunities she would see would be ones that she would create herself. So she got on the blower, made calls. She culled her magazine articles, news clips & reviews & created her own press kit. She went online & let everyone she knew know she was coming through with her horn & did they want to play
someplace. She put pins on the map, showed me her plan & asked me if I would join her, maybe sit in for a couple of tunes with a little spoken word, wherever that seemed like a good idea. I said yeah.

Singlehandedly, without the help of a wreck-it label or a personal manager (though publicist Jay Martini signed on after the tour), she had created a two month itinerary in which we were to play jazz festivals, nightclubs, auditoriums, loft parties, colleges, radio stations, churches & art galleries. In addition, she had gotten good at working her new video camera & had set up interviews with old timers in the music from here to California & back. She had also just bought a new car, her first one ever, & it was a Toyota Prius, a gas/electric hybrid that got monster mileage & made a statement, similar to the button she wore on stage, about blood for oil.

Moreover, she had just released *Heaven Help Us All*, a new CD on her own label, Daly Bread Records. As the title implies, it spoke jazz as a healing counter-wheel to the administration’s dual invasions of foreign lands & domestic freedoms. Driven by that old Chinese proverb, “May you live in interesting times,” every tune has good-evil &/or heaven-hell in its theme. It opens with Coltrane’s “Dear Lord,” a personal favorite, & it closes with the band joining her on the chorus of Stevie Wonder’s classic: “Keep hatred from the mighty & the mighty from the small / Heaven help us all.” She was making it new.

Now as I tooled west over the swampy wastelands of New Jersey, she plugged in her new iPod, turned on her new cell phone, checked her email on her new laptop & adjusted the climate control on her new ride. This was a journey of 10,000 miles we were embarking on, & Ms. Road Chops was ready for anything. Two questions remained in my mind as we rolled down the road: whose nation is this anyway? Can jazz & poetry speak truth to power?
Getting to the Windy City was all the wake-up call I needed about the state of the dis-United States of (un)Consciousness. Our first stop had been outside of Pittsburgh, in the home of Patrick Arena, a jazz/cabaret singer & former neighbor of Claire’s in Chelsea. He had helped rebuild the local theatre, was looking after his aging dad, teaching voice & playing venues. A mensch, no?, but he was taking some creepy heat in his old hometown because of his sexual orientation.

That’s when it hit me: the USA is divided into circus people & town people. Blue & red got nuttin to do with it. Circus folks develop their receptors & rely on information to make decisions; they know a hustle when they see one. Folks in town have more of a herd mentality. If Darwin’s right (no wonder creationism is on the rise) & adaptation is survival in a world of change, then the herd’s response is devolution & death. Better to call it prejudice, a capitulating to f-e-a-r (false evidence appearing real?), a rejection ahead of time regarding how things are so no one has to pay attention.

Not paying attention can, & will, kill us.

What are we but hairy bags of water? The very thing that makes our species (more) human is an empathetic heart, an intuitive mind & a responsive engagement. That’s what all the great teachers of humanity have been saying over the sleep of centuries. Their root message has much more in common than the grand inquisitors, church leaders & thought police who rule over town people would have them believe. It’s a story whose historical precedent goes back to the sixth century B.C. The world’s great civilizations (China, India, Persia, Israel), unbeknownst to one another, re-interpreted the traditional sacrifices which had sustained their external world, turning inward toward a deeper rapport with the spirit. It’s this natural human process (hero’s journey) of internalizing authority & developing personal autonomy, the
building blocks of democracy, that these town-think fascists cannot countenance.
So instead of facing real issues, using our brains to elevate the race, we're fed encoded, Pavlovian brouhaha that exploits our differences & compels our xenophobia. In marketing psychology this is known as a hot button. Why do we care so much how other people get their nut? Karl Rove has found that fears of gays can turn apathetic non-voters into excitable folks who will go to the polls to save America from Sodom & Gomorrah. Just stick a gay marriage ban at the end of the ballot. Hello?
Americans are not participating in self-government when (evil & sick?) same sex marriage rites/wrongs are page one & the trail of our tax dollars spent occupying Iraq with (good & healthy?) death machines (purchased from companies whose board rooms include the president’s own daddy) remains in shadow. How many of us know that his great-granddaddy sold weapons to the Nazis? That sad, vicious, homophobic little burg in western Pennsylvania indicated to me that the mood of the nation was fear. John Q. Public, shaken down at the airport, pulled over on the highway & downsized at the job, was tongue-tied in double-speak.
“Imagination denied / War governed the nations,” wrote William Blake. The trio of estates that birthed our nation’s civil rights & got our ass out of Vietnam---the reporters, the ecclesiastics & the academics---were silent, way down on the down low. I was thinking on all this as Patrick’s CD played across Ohio & Indiana. We pulled into Chicago, feeling ‘bout half-past optimistic. We had a great paying gig, two nights of three sets & a hotel in Lincoln Park.
That’s when the real trouble hit.
It didn’t have anything to do with jazz or poetry. It had to do with a car key. The rest of the country no doubt knows that customer service is officially dead in the water. I had to find out. No wonder we’re borrowing money from the Chinese to keep us from sinking in debt. We can’t park a car without a problem. As for telling the truth, the nation’s come a long way since George Dubya chopped
down a cherry tree because it may have concealed weapons of mass conception.

A teenage kid, maybe a week on the job, parked the Prius & then spaced out the key. All he had to do was put the key on the key rack, but no: Holmes held the key so that when Room 320 called down for the car, only he could fetch it & thereby pick up a tip. Instead of telling us the new jack lost the key, which contains an electronic sensor, the front desk woke us up & demanded to know if Claire had a spare. She didn’t. Taking their cue on accountability from Anderson/Enron, the hotel immediately denied any relation to the fully out-sourced valet parking service.

We admitted that we’re circus people, that we’d sooner have the truth & not the hustle. Only when Toyota called to tell us the car had been towed over to their dealership did we find out where it had been! For the next 96 hours the valet service kept stalling & promising. Essentially, they hijacked the car. They knew we were on a schedule; every day they avoided us meant more leverage for them. Finally, after our appeals to reason were rejected, we threatened lawsuit, thanks to the mad dog lawyer on a short leash we met at the show. Woof woof: the room got comped, the cab costs got comped, the meals got comped & a key that does all the things the original key can do finally appeared. When they told us how badly they punished the poor schnook who fucked up & how the $900 locksmith charge was on him, we asked how could he think “customer first” like an owner would when the owner wouldn’t take any responsibility for the service they (won’t) provide?

But here’s the good part. The Green Mill, Al Capone’s old speakeasy (complete with big neon, a side exit & tunnels in the basement), is in a tough part of town. Ten minutes after an all-day marathon of mendacity from Daze Inn-Dazed Out, we were on the bandstand. Even in the sound check, Claire was blazing. I ain’t saying ya gotta suffer to sing the blues, but she played three killer sets two evenings in a row. Brad Williams on piano & Dan DeLorenzo on bass are old friends & it really came through in their
playing. The drummer, Ted Sirota, was new & twenty years their junior, but he had such a sensitive feel for Claire’s low notes (both with brushes & sticks) & for the spoken word that he became my standard for excellence.

When verse has a lot of internal rime & alliteration, especially when it enjamb the predictable end-stop rimes by playing, like jazz, around the note & against expectation, a really good percussionist can intuitively hit the right accents & keep it rolling polyrhythmically. When it comes together, it’s spinal cracker, it’s rolling thunder, it’s a duet effect; it kicks enough ass that the lead instruments can take off & fly on it. That’s how I envision jazz poetry; to swell a progress or two. A little ought to go a long way. It should vary as well. Anyone can sling lyrics over a repeated vamp; it’s when the words become inextricable from the song that the really interesting shit happens---& it did.

I was pleased. Perhaps it helped that the old-timey-looking joint was jumping, standing-room-only. Claire, thanks to jazz journalist Neal Tesser’s insightful write-up, had been featured in Chicago’s version of The Village Voice. Perhaps it helped that folks came out because they remembered her last show here at the big jazz festival the year before. Perhaps it helped that we played for six hours & tried some brand new material & it swung pretty hard. Perhaps it helped that we were sleeping in the hotel from hell, but I hoped not.

21 Sep/Autumnal Equinox: Longing to Belong in Indiana

Krishnamurti used to remind his listeners to be attentive to what they wished for, & his remark bit me long before we hit Ojai, where the man who refused to be Theosophy’s “sat guru” used to live. We were in Valpariso at a well-endowed Lutheran university. Claire was guest lecturing, & though the kids were great, glad she was there & soaking up her feedback, I couldn’t get over the fact that I was staring at over a million dollars worth of musical instruments in a huge sound lab engineered for state-of-the-art
acoustics. Where would these graduates go to find an environment like this in the world? Was the university the future of jazz? It hadn’t done that well for poetry. Lord, son, could this be what we wanted: a regular paycheck, a health plan, a retirement package? The road was tough; being a freelancer was tough; representing the most pluralistic impulses (jazz) in a country historically ripped apart by (the absence of) race relations & getting bupkis back was tough.

Claire was making more dough in a lecture-dem (& at the evening’s faculty concert as special guest performer) than she makes leading her own band in the Big Apple. Was doom playing black-boxed rooms of hole-in-the-wall gloom where the gin mill’s cash register rang out louder than the sound system? We were fortunate. Angels had watched over our jazz po’ experiments during the last year & a half. Composer/pianist Joel Forrester has a great band, People Like Us. They had a six-month brunch gig at the Bowery Poetry Club every Sunday, & whenever he was in Paris, he asked his band member Claire to cover with her krewe. I sat in with so many fine players that the poetry solos became simultaneously more jazz-driven & easier for musicians to join. The community spirit knocked me out. In between gigs, we rehearsed in Claire’s loft. The band would hear something in the rhythm of the lyrics, write a little music down, & before I knew it, they would have a tune that fit. Magic, straight up, no chaser. We’d go into the studio & record & I’d play it back at home with Claire. Could any of this have happened at the university? I didn’t know, but something about that clean & uniform campus full of clean & uniform students gave me pause.

Claire sold a slew of CDs, our comped hotel room had a hot tub & a pool, & we found a great place to eat in the little town. It would take two months on the road before we would admit how incongruent it felt: all that wealth of equipment & performance space in which folks seemed to have so little to say musically. Had they paved paradise to put up a parking lot?
23 Sep/Pilgrimage to Paul’s: Crossroads at Black River Falls, WI

We had six days off in between shows & a thousand miles to cover. Paul Rosheim had made us dinner, & all we had to do was find the legendary address marked on the OP booklets. Remember the motto—“Watch Out for Obscure Publications”—but beware the sharp turn on to River Street!

We got out of the car in the rain & were met warmly by Paul who escorted us down circuitous halls until we reached his comfortable apartment overlooking the river. This was most certainly a literary household. Books were everywhere, & so were the OP booklets in varying stages of completion. It was good to kick back. Paul had visited Claire’s web site & had pulled out albums he figured she’d like (Serge Chaloff, Howard Johnson), which she did. Then he reached deep into his archives & found lit zines & journals from the 80s & 90s & showed her how his press had started simply by his contacting authors he liked. Everything about our visit—the ease of the convos, the vibe of his home, the Mexican meal we returned to for seconds & thirds, his mutual love of jazz & lit—made the harshness of the road disappear. Moreover, we were at the crossroads of I-90 & I-94; Paul advised us on the better route & the places to stop & explore. In the morning we hit the highway ready & refreshed.

24-28 Sep/Across the Great Plains & into the Rockies

I could see why Paul had said the Badlands & Yellowstone were considered sacred ground to the Indians. They inspired wonder. They dwarfed the human-centric, homo faber world. For long stretches in South Dakota & Wyoming the interstate was little more than a ribbon of asphalt surrounded by a landscape that hadn’t changed much in a thousand years. The few motels, fast food franchises & truck stops that clustered around the exits had never seemed more impermanent, as if four strong winds could
obliterate the tiny outposts of civilization as well as the road itself, leaving nothing for posterity but a memory.

It was also a most propitious time of year. Wherever we went locals told us that we were catching peak autumn color. Yellowstone River especially blew us away. We followed it north into Montana, and after awhile we pulled into a hot springs off the side of the road. We had a look around—the place was deserted—and liked it, so we found someone in charge & paid her the $5.00 fee. “You’re Claire Daly,” she said & pointed to the poster behind Claire. We laughed. An hour later we were in the town of Basin & met the rest of the people whose names were on the poster. MJ Williams, trombonist & singer, & her partner Nancy Owens invited us into their home. We had just enough time to get acquainted over a cup of tea, unpack & jam on a couple of tunes before the potluck dinner began.

The whole feel of the evening, with a mix of locals & guests from The Refuge, an arts colony they help administrate, reminded me of downtown days in the 70s. These people were making art happen without a lot of fuss. There was no federal, state, municipal or big donor dough; they weren’t waiting for a grant, struggling on a stipend, expecting a rescue. They lived what they loved & loved what they did & it showed through in the quality of their work & the level of their engagement. Our only problem, & we would find it was MJ’s too, was that Montana simply didn’t have enough jazz musicians.

29Sep-3Oct/Moonlight in Montana

Next morning saw us in Bozeman at the public high school where Claire spent the day in the music room with rotating classes in marching band, big band, orchestra & jazz combo. Their teacher was a former student who was continuing their award-winning marching band tradition. But the kids lacked an in-road to improvisation, & the most moving educational moment of our entire trip happened late that day. It was pure Eureka, & I only
wished I had filmed it to show to the people who want to do away with teaching arts in the schools. Each kid in the jazz class had taken a short, perfunctory & predictable solo. Claire listened closely, then showed them a greater range of notes & possibilities. One by one they caught on, often because their fellow band members literally translated on their horns what Claire was saying & playing. Before the bell rang, even the shyest kid in class had gotten the message. They were discovering, inventing, listening, swinging.

The next night we played Montana Technical College in Butte. Granted the auditorium’s acoustics were a challenge. But even though we had had a rehearsal, I felt no lock with the rhythm section. It was wavy gravy, & though the friendly audience didn’t seem to notice, I realized how spoiled by New York musicians I had become.

It got a little better the next night in Helena at the Montana Club, a basement rathskeller out of the Twenties warmly lit & packed with jazz lovers, but I realized how important it was for the music to be played in the style of the guest performer. This would be driven home to me even more in Portland a week later, but right now we bolted out of the state capitol into the moonlit night, making as many mountainous miles west as we could before sleep could claim us.

4 Oct/Sound Battle in Seattle

Twenty-four hours later, we were playing the Triple Door, a hip new club in downtown Seattle, on a Monday night. The evening featured alto sax phenom Cynthia Mullis & Claire, former charter members of Diva, an all-female big band. They were among the first gals in the group to make it on their own as soloists & not even a terrible sound system could diminish the camaraderie of these two horn players reunited. The rhythm section---vibes, bass & drums---was strong, but the acoustics weren’t. Long, low ceilings & a noisy bar-&-eatery with big glass windows didn’t
help. It turned out that the actual club was further inside; we were
an experiment for the evening, sort of in the hallway.
Steve Voliva, an old friend from Mexico days, pulled me aside &
said he couldn’t hear nada. I sat with him during part of the second
set, watching the (mostly invisible) band tucked in front of a huge
aquarium & it was true: the mix sucked. It wasn’t just the poetry
mike; the bari’s low notes didn’t come through, Claire’s singing
was muffled & Cynthia’s soaring alto drifted in & out of hearing
range. We still had a good time musically, the free meal was
superb Asian seafood & the hang was killer. I was glad that Steve,
a guy who had turned me to so much music over the last twenty
years, finally got to meet Claire & that I got to meet Claire’s wild,
rüns-with-the-wolves aunt, who brought along her daughter & son-
in-law.
Cynthia & her partner Carolyn, a trombonist with a day job & the
musical director of the town’s big band, made their home ours. The
next day we played a radio station, & later that evening we
watched the Seattle Storm win the Women’s NBA finals.

6 Oct/An Olympian in Olympia: Bert in the Art House

We’d started out laughing about our learning curve, but since our
arrival on the West Coast, Murphy’s Law was busting us big time.
The pianist for one of our shows cancelled when he got another
gig; no biggie, but a replacement took two weeks & over twenty
phone calls. Every day contained at least one emergency: a
newspaper hadn’t received the photo she sent, the gigs in Austin
were up in the air, could we know what days might we be in New
Orleans, the radio dude in Monterey didn’t get back. The constant
details made me wanna holler & throw up both my hands. No
question, we needed a break.
The next morning we headed to Olympia to film Bert Wilson. With
the Puget Sound in the background, we tooled southwesterly out of
Seattle. If I haven’t stated it plainly enough, I was moved by &
grateful for the responses I got from musicians & audiences. I have
been writing for & performing with dancers, actors & musicians throughout the 70s (& 80s & 90s) before the term ‘spoken word’ ever got coined. I know all about the poetry police & the jazz police, those vigilant folks seeking to keep their art form pure & traditional.

I tend to be more with what Bob Bernotas wrote in Jazz Improv Magazine about Claire’s new CD. “For the past decade or more, those jazz artists who have been able to move the music forward have done so by drawing upon other musical sources---various types of world musics, New Music, even hip hop---& incorporating the best elements from these alternative currents into an ever-broadening jazz mainstream. In that vein, the CD’s most striking track fuses spoken word, hip hop & jazz, as Gordon recites a stream of consciousness-type of jazz manifesto accompanied first by Maddox’s human beat box & then by Daly’s interpolation of Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s haunting ‘Theme for the Eulipions.’”

Nice words if you can get it. However, other reviewers simply turned their backs on all of that & wondered why Claire “doesn’t just blow beautifully on standards” like on her first two CDs. I admired the chance(s) she was taking, but I felt bad that someone so innovative had to pay all these dues.

Enter Bert Wilson. In five minutes this music-mad, beard-&-beret-wearing, 60-something, multiphonic saxophone wizard delivered me from angst. Name a likely topic for discussion: stealing one’s ideas & dealing it down so sycophants could claim your talent; no dough from the impresario after two weeks of doing the show; souped-up come-ons & atrocious rip-offs from rekkid producers; people who knew nothing about your skills, lineage or style deciding your future for you. Claire & I had traded eights on “You know how hard it can be,” but Bert was there way before the Beatles & way way before us. I hadn’t even written the school play that starred my fellow eighth graders (& rock band) when Bert was sitting in with Patchen & Ferlinghetti on those jazz/poetry collaborations.

He knew & had played with everyone. He’s also been in a
wheelchair since polio struck him at five. Although he mentioned some recent setbacks, he looked right into the camera, scoffed at the numbing medicine the doctors prescribed & said, “I’d rather go out playin’.” Even as he told tales of travail, mixing in anecdotes about the scene in LA or punching up a Monk or Bird tune on the CD player, he wore a knowing smile. During the shoptalk about mouthpieces & reeds, when he was showing Claire alternate fingerings on the bari so she could play any note in any key, I found out why. Abu Yazid Al-Bistami wrote, “All this talk & turmoil & noise is outside the veil; inside the veil is silence & calm & peace.” Bert lives inside the veil. Simple as that. He welcomed us from there. We stepped inside.

After the interview, his loving partner & a great flutist Nancy Curtis said, “Let’s eat Thai food.” We toolled over to their favorite joint & feasted. Bert insisted on getting the check. Then we drove over to The Art House, a spacious & inconspicuous cinderblock art gallery downtown where we set up to play. I like to help lug the equipment & introduce myself to the band before we start. Well, these folks introduced themselves to me! They knew my work from the CD & quoted the lines back to me. They didn’t need to adjust to the spoken word; they were pleased to have the chance to swing with it. Although there may have been more folks on the stand than in the audience, we were paid well, thanks again to Bert, & was the most fun show so far on the tour. So much feeling, sympathy, rapport & such incredible musicianship. I felt like I knew why I had been born.

7 & 8 Oct/Tula’s, Seattle & the Blue Monk, Portland

The next night we were back in Seattle for two sets at Tula’s, a smart looking club off the main drag with big picture windows that featured a bar in the back, a stage in the middle with a piano & about sixty tables. The (it took twenty calls to find) pianist arrived & it was Bill Anschell, a literary guy Paul Rosheim had pulled my coat to the year before & someone whose emails Claire had been
receiving for a decade. Bill’s short stories & sardonic anecdotes of the jazz life circulate widely among musicians, usually forwarded or downloaded so his identity is a bit of a mystery, especially on the East Coast. In person what a warm human, funny & wry, & his piano playing, spare & supportive, hit the spot. Cynthia sat in on a couple of tunes & it was a fine evening of music, two sets in three hours. Steve came up later, so pleased he could hear the poetry, Claire’s vocals & every note everyone played.

However, the next night we were in Portland at the Blue Monk, a basement dive of low ceilings with 30 tables squeezed between the bar & the tiny stage. Maybe it was the fact that this gig was our eighth in nine days. Maybe it was the lack of any write-up, announcement or help from the club (forget the papers; you could walk by & not even know we were there). Maybe it was that the trio backing us preferred to play in more of a fusion style, which is cool, just not so hip to the tunes (& tempos) in our book. Maybe it was because it cost more to pay them than what we made at the door. The music drew plenty of applause, but it didn’t come together like we knew that it could. Ironically, we returned the next night to interview a band of older r & b pros. We got great footage. In the last set, they asked Claire to sit in. The house full, she took a solo & the place went wild. I saw how affection & a warm introduction can, like money, Ms. Lauper, change everything.

On the Lost Highway to the Mendocino Jazz Fest

During a few days of r & r in the Portland home of music lover & horticulturist Nancy Parent, we got the chance to roam the local Japanese Zen gardens & a Chinese scholar’s garden as well as the countryside around the Columbia River where Nancy is building a home. By now we had quite a collection of lichen-speckled rocks & mossy stones for the garden I’m building in New York tucked in the trunk.

Nancy helped us map out a southerly route along the Oregon coast that proved to be more beautiful than we expected. After we
entered California, Claire made a call to Doug Moody, the festival director in Fort Bragg, and we managed to get on the Lost Highway, a road that few traveled and which afforded incredible & alternating views of the coast and the redwood forests with ample places to stop. We entered Mendocino County and pulled into the Gray Whale Inn where we would be staying for the next few days. We were escorted to our room as the Pacific Ocean, two blocks away, swallowed the sun.

Claire had played the Women’s Jazz Fest here last year, but she hadn’t said the town had adopted her. She was featured on the festival poster & the poster was everywhere. We came down that first morning and her CD, Movin’ On, was playing in the dining room. By chance I was listening closely, especially to her rendition of Billy Taylor’s “A Bientot.” The song was going through my head when she asked me later that morning to write some lyrics to it for the show. Turns out that the tune had been requested as an encore last year, but time ran out. So at the sound check that afternoon we gave it a shot & it felt really right. As did everything about being here. I wanted to film everything that happened because this festival was proof that one could bring jazz to a relatively small town & run in the black.

In a big circus tent one block off the town’s major artery we played the last set of the first night. The rhythm section was already burning down the house when we hit the stand. Drummer Jack Mouse literally turned my head around on stage. My word slinging & his time keeping weren’t in duet; they were one swinging thing. People started dancing in the aisles to “Evil Ways.” The encore of “A Bientot” was a lot of fun, just the right touch. Mary Ann McSweeney was a monster on bass; ditto Pete Malenvernny on piano. Afterwards I mentioned to Jack that I hadn’t had a drummer under me like that since Ted Sirotta set the standard in Chicago. Jack said, “Ted’s my old student.”

I’ve never heard Claire sound bad on a gig, but playing (with people who know her music) to an audience eager to hear more sent her solos into the stratosphere. Man, she cooked. Over & over
folks came up to us that week-end & said, “I didn’t think I liked jazz (or poetry), but I love what you do.” This is the utterly ridiculous condition performers face in today’s scene. If you call what you do jazz or poetry, you might as well say atonal avant-garde or Tennyson’s Top Ten. The labels don’t describe the event; they prevent the event from happening.

I found this true for the jazz vocalists as well. Forget categories. Jodi Sondhouse sang neither cabaret nor straight ahead jazz exactly, but every note was earned. It created its own context. The following night Janice Borla blasted out of the gate with “Equinox” & the tune took wings, shaped by her incredible vocal range. She sang it first, scatted a few choruses, then turned her voice into a musical instrument that knew no boundary. It felt like true religion. She was joined on the finale with Diane Witherspoon for a vocal jugalbandi that is still playing in my head. These women & their bands were in stark contrast to the held-in, forced smiles of the two male presidential candidates on TV debate yawn of recent memory. In fact, the whole festival spoke jazz’s truer grasp of democracy: self expression & collective improvisation among equals. If the mood of the nation was fear---of making a mistake, of trying out the unknown, of crossing Big Brother---then these women were voting against passivity to rock with jazz’s root truth: there are no bad notes, as Miles once said, only unresolved ones. When you got chops like these gals, improvisation is art. I hear America singing, too, father courage.

21 Oct/No Go in Palo Alto, California

After another breath-taking drive down the coast we rolled into the Bay area with just enough time to discover that the promised accommodations in Palo Alto weren’t really happening. Luckily, publisher & poet Jordan Jones was home. We invited him to the show at the art gallery, and he invited us to stay with him in San Jose. What a rescue.

We found the gallery, and right away we could see the situation
was mashugennah. It started with the sound system no one knew how to set up. Last time out we were in a huge circus tent, but you could hear every note clearly anywhere. Tonight we were in a rectangular room one tenth the size, but the words were little more than a gargle & the mix of piano, bass & bari more like a blob-o’-sound. Okay, so what the song says, but it still felt odd that the guy who published these poems could not hear them. Luckily, we would play nearby a few days later.

24 Oct/The Bird's Eye Loft Series: Oakland, California

We caught the last set of Cathi Walkup. She was singing with a swinging trio down her block at the local piano bar & beer garden in Oakland. We thoroughly enjoyed her sound---joyous, refreshing & understated---which melded the whimsy of a Blossom Dearie with the clarity of an Ella Fitzgerald in a style that was all her own. Then we followed her to her home.

The loft she shares with her partner Jim is one of those rare tales of architecture fitting the size of people’s needs. It’s less like an apartment building & more like a township inside. Everyone we passed knew about the show the next afternoon. Cathi is old school; she builds community with her loft series & that made a helluva lot of sense to me (she even went to our web sites & ordered books & CDs). She makes a habit of introducing new musicians to her audience & she brings back performers whose skills blend in well with others.

It was a beautiful autumn Sunday afternoon hang, & the spacious loft was filled with listeners. I noticed a nice spread of noshes & vino as we handed out charts to the rhythm section & mixed spoken word with instrumentals & everyone got to play. Cathi was more than generous with the door & it was great fun to go out & eat, especially because Jordan joined us & got an insider’s view on jazz in the Bay. Moreover, he loved the musical context Claire created for the spoken word now that he could actually hear it! The next day I knocked out a lit job on the ‘puter while Claire &
Cathi exchanged info on touring. Cathi’s also got road chops out to here & has been up & down the West Coast a million times. I would also have liked to film their conversations so jazz students could see how it really gets done. But it was time to go, and southern California called.

27 Oct/Black Like She: Roz Cron, Los Angeles, California

All right, so I have issues. Sue me or skip the paragraph, I’m only telling you what I saw on the tour. The exploitation of the nation’s fears of the other---blacks, browns, Jews, women, gays, artists, intellectuals & poets---was making a mockery of democracy everywhere we went. In his 1881 preface to Leaves of Grass, Walt wrote, “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” I would add, after Pops & Bix, Jelly Roll & Bessie, Duke & Count, Gerswhin & Porter, Tito & Mongo, the music forged by these associations, combinations & permutations of talent is the best expression of who we are in our hybrid vigor. Our composers & musicians have proven to be better ambassadors for the American way than AID missionaries, Coke & Pepsi, militant invasions of democracy after CIA assassinations of local leaders who are the voice of the people. Pardon the paraphrase, but it don’t mean diddly if it don’t get Uncle Wiggly to let his backbone slip in a jitterbug dip.

Skip this paragraph, too, or throw your drink across the lawn, but our music, born of that New Orleans’ swinging second line that follows the band back from the graveyard, is also witness to slavery, genocide & dispossession. Why would jazz play where the oldest profession in the world plies its trade? Because whatever impulses the Puritan rejects---dance, sex, death, romance---jazz faces squarely, as in hiply. Jazz is Emerson’s solo on Transcendentalism realized, where the high life meets the low life, where non-attachment to the fruits of one’s actions is the only game in town. It’s the taoist’s knowledge that the world song is the blues, something you stop having the minute you acknowledge
with enough soul how bad you got it. But some ‘melicans resent acknowledging anything, let alone the chitlins, cuchifritos, matzohs & pepperoni in the national music gumbo. Was I looking to tell anyone’s story? Not til I met Roz Cron! She greeted us at the entrance to her apartment complex & invited us into her home. There she was on the wall of photos: a nice Jewish girl with curly hair & a winning smile on lead alto sax from Newton, Mass (& a fellow student with Serge Chaloff in her high school music class), “passing” so she could tour with the all-black, all-female band, The International Sweethearts of Rhythm, during World War II.

You think that’s a biography that can compete with crash diets, surgical enlargements, the seven leavened steps to heaven, memoirs of the misguided in misery, lunacy, abuse & psychobabble that glut the Best Seller List? I do. I was riveted. What a life! Forget the election. This was real news. This petite, pretty & talented nineteen-year-old hadn’t slummed but crossed completely over---& twenty years before the Village saw mixed couples in the Sixties---she lived black, she thought black, she spoke black, she loved black, she traveled black in the Jim Crow South! She had the tales that challenge our entitlement, the accounts we’re too squeamish for but that are better told than silenced: of cracker jihad & police harassment, of being denied food & lodging, of leaving town in the middle of the night to avoid arrest in your own country for being yourself. She was thrilled to join the Sweethearts, to date Count Basie, to learn what a little moonlight/make-up can do. When the band was hired to go to Europe, she played for the Jewish GIs (who had helped liberate Hitler’s concentration camps) & the Jewish survivors at a camp Passover. Did she know she was making history? Most certainly. Did she know how important her story could be for women, for music & for race relations? We didn’t want to leave. We had spent the whole day with Roz, eating & yakking, filming & remembering. But we needed time we didn’t have. She fixed us snacks for the road & off into the Los
Angles night we embarked, heading east on I-10.

31 Oct: Halloween Gig, Jovita’s, Austin, TX

We bolted across the Southwest, missing San Diego, Phoenix, Tucson & Albuquerque. We called folks in those cities & explained how we were running out of time. We didn’t stop truckin’ until we entered the Edwards Plateau in central Texas, north of San Antonio, & pulled into the Hill Country. Friends had gathered at the Bocock Ranch for bar-b-que & a music jam. The next day was Halloween, & trick or treat, we ambled over to Austin to play a most humbling gig at a Mexican eatery. The pay was low, the audience attendance was low & we followed Pops Who Rock, four guitar strummers who played to their wives & children, all of whom left before we could take a sound check. The rhythm section didn’t even show up. Later that night, Claire got to sit in with Tomas Ramirez. Years before, I had been slinging lyrics with his band at the San Miguel de Allende Jazz Fest. That was how I first met Claire, who had been backing up Nora York at that show.

In any case, my toothache, which started in Mendocino, was getting worse. The next day we pulled into a tiny town in east Texas where my old friends, Chuck & Jo An, practice dentistry. While Claire played for the kids in kindergarten, including their son JC, who played drums, I spent Election Day in mouth repair. We were so knocked out by their generosity, but we couldn’t stay on.

I was still wheeling with pain the next day as we pulled into another old homeport of mine, New Orleans. Armando had arranged for us to stay in his apartment in the French Quarter around the corner from my old digs on Bourbon. While I rested & took medicine, he walked Claire over to Congo Square (a/k/a Louis Armstrong Park) where WWOZ, my favorite radio station in the world, has its headquarters. His friend was DJing & put Claire’s CD on the air just like that. Later that night more friends
arrived & she got a chance to see what a music-friendly city the Big Easy can be.
The next morning we were back on I-10, heading east, & then connecting to I-85.

7 Nov: The Church of Religious Science, Atlanta, GA

Pulling the rabbit out of this hat was gonna be tough. At this point, I had gotten sick from the oral medicine & was taking rectal suppositories of maximum dosage. The problem was that it was early in the morning, we were in sound check, my mouth was swollen, the pain was intense & the dope hadn’t come on yet. The musical director, who had emailed an outline of the reverend’s homily, felt my lyrics hadn’t reflected the theme closely enough; moreover, they were too political & might polarize the congregation.
Okay, I’m not much of a churchgoer, but I dug everything these folks were saying about the spirit. I had about twenty minutes to write a few stanzas that would speak directly to this group on this day. While the tunes played in my head I cut & pasted & the large auditorium filled. Now the reverend called up the band, & boom: we must have hit the right notes because there was much applause, laughter, warmth. Claire sounded great in this setting, & four songs over the next hour made a great addition to the theme of overcoming fear, which had been our whole trip in a nutshell. Afterwards, there was coffee & food; she sold a ton of CDs. So many people came up & spoke of the power of the music to us. I guess we did pull this one out by the skin of our (remaining) teeth.

By the afternoon we were in North Carolina. The next day we were in Newport News, VA, visiting Paul Probst, Basie’s old road manager. Our oldest interviewee, Paul told stories of traveling the world with that great Basie band. It was clear that the count ran things like a family & so did Paul. Like the other interviews, there was only one problem. We couldn’t stay. We had miles to go before reaching the nation’s capitol where Claire’s best friend from
the old neighborhood now lived. Meeting Mary Beth & her lovely family & hearing her tell tales of a wild & young Claire brought the trip full circle for me.

15 Nov: The Return Gig, Bowery Poetry Club, downtown Manahatta

Evening had already descended in ink blue on the Bowery. Autumn blew cool & spooky as we stood on the curb outside the club under a skinny, yellow-leafed ginko & joined the coterie already waiting to get in for the show: friends from as far back as kindergarten, high school, college & commune days. Some comic was hogging the stage, so we hung outside as directed. I was glad Solar could make the gig. We had emailed them progress reports about the tour & how their songs were received at each of our stops. With vibes & beat box out of town, the plan was to warm into each tune nice & easy. I would knock out a couple of choruses & take it to the bridge; Claire & Solar would take flight from there.

They did. After two months on the road with local rhythm sections, it was clear how much Solar loved these songs & how much they added to them. It was a heartfelt show. Claire was in rare form. We never sounded better. I was the bandleader so, although the place was filled & half the door mine, I got to lose money on the gig paying the band & Claire, completing the role reversal, got to take me out to eat. At the hang-&-nosh afterwards, old friends asked about the state of the nation.

Nothing I saw up close & personal resembled anything on TV. After all, the jazz world is a mixed bag, to say the least. For the record, conservative Christians welcomed us into their home just like the lesbians, libertarians & librarians had. Republicans, entrepreneurs & the “leisure class” had us over for dinner, too, just like the democrats, working class & culture industry folks. Some had kids, grandkids, great-grandkids; some did not. The diversity of the people who reached out to us is what I am trying to
underline because diversity, that melting pot notion, now seems under attack in the post-election climate. The USA may have won two world wars & a cold one as well, but we are being misled. Share the wealth? Hey, it ain’t even tricklin’ down. We’ve always been lied to but there used to be a limit, a check & balance. I wouldn’t put it past this administration to do away with Medicare, Social Security & any remaining vestige of the New Deal. Yes, the scramble for fossil fuel can now get uglier. The petrol people own the patents on wind & solar energy. Al Qeda, bin Laden & Iraqi “insurgency” are the distracting plots, like gay marriage bans. The real hustle perped in the USA is the systematic elimination of the middle class. It’s just a hunch but I sense the money running the present regime will try & bankrupt our country & then lend the money back at inflated rates. Art, that mongrel melting pot, that collective context for personal discovery & articulation, needs to step up now. Look, this ain’t a dig at poetry, but I got that email, too, about the fancy poets boycotting the First Lady’s White House invitation. I submitted work, too, & found the web page pretty weak; it seemed less concerned with resisting war than with positioning famous poets who had weighed in on the subject. By contrast, jazz seems a much more vibrant subculture. For one thing, ya better have chops! Poets pontificate, but you can’t front on jazz. Musicians have always led two lives: playing the dance, wedding, bar mitzah or club date for cash & the after-hour jams for a more music-advancing cause. American poets have never attracted a popular following, so the (little) money that’s around is in the multi-verse-city. As many of us know, the proportions can get screwy: the smaller the amount, the bigger the power plays around it. The result is narcissism, an art form of in-fighting, out of step with people’s lives. There’s more depth & continuity & connection to folks in jazz. Hearing such well written songs like Harold Arlen’s “Between the Devil & the Deep Blue Sea,” Burton Lane’s “Ol’ Devil Moon,” Donaldson’s “My Blue Heaven,” Art’s “Heavenly” in waltz time,
Eli’s poignant “Jacquet’s Meditation” & Adam’s bop-wild “The Small But Evil Man” over & over for two months had imprinted their melodies on my eardrums. Lyrics kept popping out. What do you do when a line of verse hits your blood-stream/mind-breath but meet the muse who, as you too know, moves in mysterious ways. Stare at a single line for an afternoon or the whole shebang might tumble out in twenty minutes. Beyond “all of me, why not take all of me” the one thing I learned is not to force it; it’s already doing the shaping anyway. Jazz folks talk about “the curse” of playing the music. In Round Midnight, when Dexter Gordon’s character confesses to the admitting hospital’s shrink that he hears musical notes in his head all the time, I didn’t think Dexter was jiving but telling his own story. It’s the actual story of poets as well, whether they write of concupiscent curds in Connecticut or of pee stains on their underwear in a New Yawk tenement. That’s my cue.

Jazz: be what we got against tyranny, a hat of pork pie outlasting jive-ass lies, blasting out-casted notes into see-through overcoats to better expose operations covert-that-hurt & send votes to mend our democratic vista, Mister Kurtz, like when Lester Young is playin’ what he’s feelin’, wheelin’ & dealin’ as the president of a nation whose flag Gadsden wove 200 & 2 score years ago with a snake that said to King George, greed-gorged depravity Don’t tread on me, knucklehead, our emperor’s new clothes exposed by a jester’s gesture: the proper goose cooked to the propaganda hooked on unknowing hordes booked knee-deep in the bored pout of mediocre. Evil’s what’s got us thickening the hell-realmed plot while love beams the sweet shot to heaven’s jackpot, why jazz spills the wine, stumps harbingers of signs, clumps fun into puns’ wondrous rimes, bumps us up above a whisper pleading don’t jump, mister, but neither be denied. Jazz invests in delight, arrests the dead, protests the banal & as for makin’ little girls talk out of their heads,umba-clot pop-schlock sells the big lie while horns cry a burnin’ proof from dues’ sidelines, Maggie is alive on a hot tin roof!
Jazz: sharpen our axe from the amber waves of the betrayed, payday-delayed, outsourced-erased & downsized stray to join the neglected, the infected & the defiant who say amidst AIDS, racial profiles & Patriot Act: *you can’t sack free speech so get back, sneak attack!* Jazz: be a round mound of light, the muse who refused to be burned out, what never went gently into that good night, a Coney Island of the mind singin’ a body electric’s shout.

From outer space to chthonic place, the craw in the maw & the hallowed whole of it all, lyrics we can’t dismiss any more than we could our mothers or our inheritance. We don’t breathe in music, Mingus, winged music takes circular breath in us! We need horns, ‘bones & lyres to sing truth to powerfully complex military-industrial liars, why Rahsaan wrote *Theme for the Eulipions*---to bring minions of artists & troubadours together & say we are legion! Improvisation knows the reasons why a caged bird sings & a monkey signifies, ‘mericanest of exports in a world hypnotized in un-free. Jazz puts the lead sheets back in the fold, a circle unbroken, a feat complete, a love supreme’s song divine. To whom the bell tolls, deem that the mission I’m wishing for, musicians united in an uncommon re-birth of wonder.

Jazz: don’t go asunder---be a cry for nation time!
Born & raised in New York, leaving & returning ever since, Kirpal Gordon makes his living as a ghostwriter & literary consultant. His recent publications include Don't Tread on Me, Unicorn Press, & What We Got Against Tyranny, Leaping Dog Press, both 2004. Two of his spoken word performances are on Claire Daly's CD, Heaven Help Us All, Daly Bread Records, 2004, which is available at www.clairedalymusic.com & elsewhere. For more information about Kirpal, see www.kirpalg.com.
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