

Notes and Opinions

Steps Against Forgetfulness (Six of Them)¹

Alain Derbez

1. To generate a chronological table can be a demanding work. Facts and certainty may become suspicious. Why should we include these dates? Why not these others? What events started on this particular day that are today part of an ephemeris? What was not included? Why do we commemorate and why does someone need us to forget, or simply not to register, not to inform? Why does anyone want us to contribute daily with our Nothingness tasks, to build the visible monument to forgetfulness that from the Central Plaza, from the highest altar and mall, ejects replicas directly to our home niches in front of which we are kneeling without even noticing when we bent our knees?

(Staring at a monitor, René Descartes could have said, yawning nowadays: "I think . . . not . . . thank you.")

2. No, I don't yet want to produce a chronological table. I don't want to choose those facts, those dates. Right now what I want to do is to write a sonnet in my language and I'll name it "Suave es el Jazz."

Yo que siempre toque sin partitura
Desnudo improvisando en cualquier foro
Alzo hoy la voz a la mitad de un coro
Y narro con detalle la aventura

Suave es el jazz desde esta tierra dura
Fuerte también como ha de serlo el oro
Indio, negro, español, latino, moro
De mestiza raíz, esto es muy pura

El tiempo de mi patria es sincopado
Lo que se mira se oye en sus matices
Arcoiris, volcán, sonido alado

Ya celestial festín de meretrices
O diabólico solo consagrado
Que cuenta al saxofón sus cicatrices

3. Or maybe, yes. Let us name dates: The day in which the then Mexican President arrived—he thought—at his transcendental moment, crossing the line separating simple power from immortality; the crucial date in which his mere name would inscribe the Old México, survivor of colonial days when that endless territory was known as the New Spain, anticipating the 21st Century by setting in motion the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) together with powers such as Canada and the US (because, ladies and gentlemen, Mexico—he could have said with a good Harvard pronunciation—Mexico is North America); that same day, that very same morning in January, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, (indigenous guerrillas, as indigenous as were the Tlaxcalteca Xicoténcatl, battling Hernán Cortés' odd, white, bearded hordes, that is, not gods), shot against the military garrison in Chiapas (of all places, Chiapas). This that happened in 1519 also happened in the first dawn of 1994. Five centuries had elapsed and circumstances were basically the same: surviving natives enduring the miserable conditions imposed by whites and their governments and economical systems. Seven years before, April 14 of 1987, the Mexican jazz pianist Olivia Revueltas, daughter of the militant writer José, niece of the composer Silvestre, started a hunger strike in solidarity.

There was, she tells me from her self-imposed exile in the US:

an indigenous man who had already been on a hunger strike for more than 35 days, and was in a terrible condition. Nobody paid attention to these peasants camping on the Plaza Mayor, facing the cathedral and the National Government Palace. It was inhuman to witness these people with no media reporting on their condition. The night I started my hunger strike I called my sister Andrea from the Zócalo. Considering my life in danger, she connected with the press in the hopes of raising awareness and promptly resolving the situation. The next morning the media were there. It may sound presumptuous, but my participation

prompted the public's attention and eventually the peasants were received by the then President Miguel de la Madrid. Was there—somebody could now ask—a solution? (Revueltas, Personal)

Olivia Revueltas, jazz pianist, female presence in Mexican jazz, left Mexico a year later on a significant date: October 2, 1988. Twenty years since the students' massacre in Tlatelolco, when Gustavo Díaz Ordaz was the acting President. "I deliberately chose this date as a protestation," says Olivia, "I abandoned the country in face of the constant, continuous injustice" (Revueltas, Personal).

As a result of another fraud in the elections, Carlos Salinas de Gortari had won the Presidency. This was in 1988, almost six years before the Zapatista rebellion, almost six years before the NAFTA dream awakened into reality, Mexican reality.

4. Of other dates I can write, while I play one of the two CDs that Olivia Revueltas recorded in the US with the trio where the late Billy Higgins played the drums (the first two recordings in Olivia's career, by the way).

I reminisce of that Sunday in May 1989 and the Mexican sax player Henry West, who introduced Mexico to free-jazz in the 1970s, who traveled all over the country playing with Don Cherry, (yes, the same Don Cherry we opened our ears and eyes to with Ornette Coleman with Gato, with Abdullah Ibrahim, with Old and New Dreams), Henry West. And with Cherry and West, the pianist Ana Ruiz and the percussionist Robert Mann played free jazz in prisons, hospitals, schools, and the huge National Auditorium. A few hours after a Mexican singer on local TV interpreted one more version of Gershwin's "Summertime" on a Saturday night West left the country, tired of the constant hurdles. He was so sick of the environment that he left his instrument behind after decades of active involvement playing, recording, teaching and educating the public, creating the audiences, on free and collective improvisation. As a resident in the US he devoted his time not to the music he had been trained to play in Berklee, Massachusetts, not to the acting career he had pursued in England, nor even to playing again with Terry Riley, as he did when an in-ocean experiment was conducted by John Lilly to communicate with dolphins using music, but to computing! He exchanged the Indian harmonium that he took before blowing the sax with his amazing circular breathing, his stage domain, his chants and assorted harmonies, for a personal computer keyboard somewhere in an office in Arizona.

Allow me to introduce a few more facts in order to find a possible ephemeris. In the middle of the 19th Century, a black-Creole family from New Orleans, led by Thomas Louis Marcos Tio, tried its colonizing fortune south of the border in the state of Veracruz. However the Tios only made it to Tamaulipas. Years later, a couple of Mexican youngsters, born in Tampico, went to Louisiana where they actively participated in the music scene as clarinet players; they were Lorenzo and Luis Tio. Their participation in the scene was acknowledged by the Excelsior Brand Band playing in the Cotton Fair in the 1880s, where they alternated with the military band representing Mexico, and the Currier Band from Cincinnati, Ohio.

Tom Bethell, in his book *George Lewis, jazzista de Nueva Orleans* writes about the Mexican clarinet player, Lorenzo, who participated in the Cotton Fair, whose classical style was so influential that he is considered as the person who introduced the clarinet to jazz ensembles, and who by the end of the 19th century abandoned the city never to return. W.C. Handy writes in his autobiography that Lorenzo Tio was the "first of the top-notch clarinetists of our race" (68). On June 10, 1908 Lorenzo Tio died in New Orleans wanting to return to Mexico. Almost a century later, in 2003, Pat Metheny's group, including the Mexican percussionist Antonio Sánchez, won a Grammy award and a group of jazz players from the country south of the Rio Bravo would play that Fall in the brand new jazz-dedicated building in Lincoln Center in New York City. Four years later the painter and musician Jazzamoart, plastic improviser with the Sonora Onosón, and illustrator/designer of the cover of the book *El jazz en Mexico, datos para una historia*, lent a painting for the 2007 Guelph Jazz Festival, and Antonio Sánchez presented his first CD in New York as a band leader, *Migration*. Not a better name could have been chosen for it now that a wall is constructed on the Mexico-U.S border and the NAFTA leaders meet in Canada for the sake of meeting.

In the 1920s, a group of classical musicians getting ready to celebrate Beethoven's birthday anniversary, sent a request to Mexico City's mayor asking him "to ban, at least for a week, blowing car horns and public jazz performances." Around that time, the minister of Public Education, according to his memoirs, prohibited bull fights as well as playing jazz since he considered both activities utterly uncivil: savage. Four years later, a Catholic fanatic murdered Alvaro Obregón, the then presidential candidate, while the band played a waltz. The band's conductor had declared to the press "jazz is an infamous music written with the feet for the feet." This, however, didn't prevent him a few months later from performing jazz since "that is—he explained—the people's preference."

That was during the twenties of the twentieth century. Today, in the 21st century, eleven years have elapsed since a group of indigenous people were murdered in Acteal (once again, Chiapas!) and ten years have passed since the

Mexican clarinetist Marcos Miranda registered this tragedy recording, after “Little Boy visits Hiroshima,” “Acteal” on his disc *Dueto* with the bassist Fernando Zapata. “Acteal” as a struggle against desmemory.

What needs to happen for all these events, dates, and possible commemorations not to become simple anecdotes?

5. But no, it's not only a poem that is distracting me right now, it's a whole collection. Actually, it's the back cover of a book I published under the title *El jazz según Don Juan* a year ago. On the cover, a thousand birds can be seen in orderly flight, on the back cover I wonder: What's in birds' heaven that without a command, without the slightest sign, without an individual's ruling, but with a personal voice immersed in the collectivity, does not disturb, lives together, lives this moment, and the other? I observe what I see on the other side (cover-back cover), I think about it, and I ponder what would the secret of jazz be . . . Ah, yes, among other things, jazz is surprise and voices in the air, gusts that one can whistle during flight where random is navigation and will always be the best harbor . . . the flight continues.

When I played here in Guelph a couple of years ago my recital was entitled “El jazz os hará libres” (“Jazz will set you free”), where freedom is understood as anarchy and anarchy happens to be the highest order possible, where voices and breathing collectively fall in place, in concert, naturally. (Like Fourier's pebbles.)

Julio Cortázar already said it: “Jazz is surprise.” Jazz is here and now, celebrated in awareness, alive and invigorating. He (she) who has played it and listened to it, who has been touched by it, who has experimented it, can attest to it. There is the open door that the aforementioned Argentinean wrote about in the short story “El perseguidor” (“The Pursuer”). That is where you get in. It is oneself who sounds, who is being played, oneself who is listened and listens.

6. I collect and use as epigraphs different quotable phrases pronounced by some of my admired musicians. Among them one by Eric Dolphy that deals with music once played and never to be caught again; another one is a manifestation of Frank Zappa's intelligent sarcasm: “Jazz is not dead, it just smells funny.” Nowadays samples of music caught and caught again by different technical devices plugged to your ear could make someone declare: “this music does not even smell.” This, I'm not interested in: no inner life in it, nothing to say, nowhere to sail, everything on sale. But there is that other jazz, the other music, jazz, the music, the one that catches you and stays with you, the one that breaths and bleeds and stanches your wounds and heals the body and soul, the one that sweats, the one that you can touch and savor while listening, and feel and make you feel; the one that evolves and changes all the time, the one that seeks and becomes and develops inserted in tradition, in essence. “And this is tradition, essence?” you'll ask. Change, surprise, self definition, liberty, creation, progress, flux, consciousness. It is as it was as it is. And this in its richness and diversity exists annually here in Guelph's Jazz Festival and Colloquium—something, you can tell, is rooted in the community and increasingly attractive to outside attention as well. Guelph, big as small, great in its smallness, has developed to be, year after year, a place to gather, a place to do and to think about what's being done. A place—as my experience as witness and participant has taught me—where questions are made to travel with us back home, to ask when once again back home in search of answers, of practical answers. What is the place jazz has in my society, and not only in the possible global marketplace? Is there a tradition forged and being forged to be acknowledged? How does jazz, how do jazz musicians in the task of making a living playing jazz (if possible tonight) engage social reality, culture, politics, life in my society? What is my role as a musician, and not only a musician, but a musician playing this in my community, my communities? Is there an organization? How do jazz critics, journalists, broadcasters, writers, and historians survive dealing with the theme they decided to work with, to work for? What issues are being attended to at the same time as this particular form of art: ethnicity, globalization, justice, gender, exploitation, civil rights, culture, society, history, reality? Is there a memory? Is there a conscious need for it in the protagonists of this daily history? Is there a deep conviction to know the territory and not to deal and lose precious moments with fences to parcel it?

“Is jazz dead?” someone asked as a way of provoking discussion and giving the chance to remember Zappa 's proverbial irony. How can jazz be dead when it is being born again and again in, at least, the country I come from (and at this point don't forget to ask the cultural bureaucrats that hide the birth certificates to produce new documents to be forgotten in a jiffy)? How can I explain this birth and rebirth as a continuity (let us not talk about the phoenix bird here)? To start, let us mention different issues in order to answer. First of all, cultural memory, something that has been a public enemy, not only in Mexico but in all the so-called Third World countries. We, cultural workers, are fighting daily against the agents of forgetfulness (forget, forgive, forget), that is, those who have the power and the money, the money then the power, to decide that any form of art, any other language than the official (forgive, forget, forgive), is dispensable, especially any form of popular art (where popular art is the art of and from the people and not those articles to be consumed as quick fast food). So it is not difficult to understand that all artists and cultural workers have to carry with them their presentation card because they are always appearing—no matter the long

personal history—for the first time. Jazz, as we have heard, has existed in Mexico almost since it began in the world. Let us remember those Mexican musicians that played in the 1920s, original music with their so called Danzonera-Jazz Band. Musicians then published these original music scores in magazines and papers, but they suffered, in the name of “nationalism,” in the name of “art,” in the name of the “people,” in the name of “class,” in the name of “decency,” the charge of forgetfulness and decided to go and play some other kind of “more accepted” music in order to survive. Jazz history in Mexico started to be a “curiosity,” until once again, in the thirties and forties, jazz got into the dancing parlors with big bands and in the popular patios with the Marimba Jazz Bands. And, once again, nobody recorded the facts of what happened until they became nostalgia and then oblivion and then ignorance. And so on, and so on.

In the 1950s and ‘60s there was an evolution: jazz musicians started to believe in themselves not only as reproducers of the music that was being played elsewhere—especially in New York—if they got to know it, but as composers and arrangers who—as had happened in the twenties—had their own popular music to mix, to fuse with what they knew were the jazz mainstreams and the jazz currents. So folk music forms from different regions—Veracruz, Chiapas, Oaxaca, San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas—started to nourish the jazzists’ imaginations. But something—the same old thing—happened once again, and this was the lack of consciousness of the role that jazz musicians play in their society.

How has jazz in Mexico colored the chroma of the Mexican social pulse? Has it been relevant? Which is now the situation? Is everybody convinced that something promising begins to progress now that documents (as my book presented in Guelph five years ago, and some other volumes dealing with the local jazz situation) have a place on some bookshelves? Convinced because a lot of new audio documents, unparalleled to any other period in jazz history in Mexico, are available? Convinced now that weekly articles in different newspapers and some radio shows and some T.V. programs can make somebody believe that something is, once again (finally), happening down there? “We have talked about the god,” said Suetonio speaking of Caligula, “now let us talk about the monster.” How do we open the door for new and younger audiences to join the existent ones and how do we make them be critical? How do we open a new Venus instead of allowing the bureaucrats to close the few existent ones? How do we prepare against the violent attacks of forgetfulness conducted by the ignorant group in power today (things—we have learnt in the new millennium—can get worse).

We can say now that we have schools of jazz in our country (and at the same time think about the opportunities that graduated students will have once they hold their degree in their hands); we have Mexican jazz players out of Mexico (in the U.S., in Europe, in Asia) that have been recognized without needing a sombrero, not only as curiosities; and we have jazz musicians in Mexico who are working to create jazz for themselves, for the audience, for the audiences, for the World (with an original sound, with their own style, breathing, conception—the ones developed by listening to whatever was audible in that Mexican context).

Popular music, such as “son jarocho” from Veracruz, “huapangos huastecos” from Tamaulipas, Veracruz, San Luis Potosí, Hidalgo, “chilenas” from Guerrero, Valonas from Michoacán, norteño accordion music, etc, etc. base their *quid* in improvisation; how do we deal with them as a possible unique fusion, how do we combine this tradition, knowledge and improvisation with the jazz tradition, knowledge and improvisation?

How can this work be an exploratory fact for an expansive result?

Mexican music—music created in that territory of diversities—has nourished jazz from the World (let us listen to Willem Breuker in the Netherlands playing Silvestre Revueltas, to Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond playing Manuel M. Ponce, to the Canadian Steve Koven’s trio recording Consuelito Velásquez’s “Bésame Mucho” as Art Pepper did before, or the Spaniard Perico Sambeat and the Nuyorican Jerry González dealing with some other of this Mexican composer’s boleros; let us enjoy Charlie Haden’s CDs with José Sabre Marroquín’s boleros, with Agustín Lara’s or Armando Manzanero’s music on his *Nocturne* CD with a Cuban sound. La Paloma was maybe an original Spanish or Cuban “contradanza” song but it was a Mexican paloma, the one that Carla Bley listened to, then arranged and recorded; all this, and with this some other different musics coming from Mexico, have fed the jazz players imaginario: When will Mexican jazz players and composers—once again Antonio Sánchez and Olivia Revueltas and Henry West come to my pen as I write—and with them Los Dorados releasing a CD with Cuong Vu, and the late Mexican guitar player Francisco Mondragón recording with Archie Shepp and with Jaco Pastorius, and Trevor Watters playing with Ariel Guzik’s plasmaht mirror²—when will they appear with their musics and voices and experiences and thoughts and wisdoms in future documents in and out of Mexico? When will it not be difficult to learn about it? Ah, yes, a great number of questions and a lot of possible answers.

At least for one question I have the answer right now: Yes, I can assure you, jazz is not dead. Jazz is not dead in spite of the murderers that the late Eric Nisenson once mentioned and wrote about in his book *Blue: The Murder of Jazz*:

So maybe we have all been murderers of jazz, maybe we have become so disconnected from each other that jazz, which is dependent on the interplay of audience and musician, can no longer be created in the way it has been in the past . . . But when these concerns get to be too depressing, I go to my stereo and play Coltrane's *Spiritual*, or Miles and Gil Evans's *Porgy and Bess*, or Ellington's *Far Suite* or even, for that matter, Jan Garbarek's *Visible World*, and like so many times in the past, jazz makes me a believer all over again. (247)

I could add some other names to Nisenson's list, some Latin American names, some Mexican names included, of course . . .

Yes, jazz is not dead. Not here in Guelph, not in the country I come from, the country the painter Jazzamoart comes from. Jazz is not dead and I celebrate it by reading once again, the sonnet lines above:

"Jazz is Sweet"

I who have always played without a score
Improvising naked in every stage
Today, I raise my voice amidst the choir
And with detail the adventure I'll relate

Sweet is the jazz from this hardened land
Strong it is as well, as gold should be.
Spanish, Black, Latin, Moor and Indian
From Mestizo roots; purer than the breed.

My Motherland's heartbeat is syncopated
Visible is what is audible in its hues
Rainbow is and volcano, wings and sound

Whether heaven harlots feast celebrated
Or deified then devilish solo dues
Telling on saxophone the scars they count

The final question is and was: Would it be exaggerated to say that jazz will set us free?

The answer is ours: "El jazz nos hace libres."

Notes

¹ This paper was first presented as "Mexico: Steps Against Desmemory" at the Guelph Jazz Festival and Colloquium, September 5, 2007.

² The espejo plasmata is an instrument invented by the composer and sound installation artist Ariel Guzik. It responds to electromagnetic energy from objects in the environment that trigger musical sounds from metal-coated strings.

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