

## Conversation With The Trees

The man actually bowed to me when our mutual friend introduced us. He had dark brown skin and a stocky but fit build. He was wearing a small hat of kente cloth and seemed young despite his gray-dotted black hair and beard. This was backstage immediately after my 2009 Artscape triumph so it felt appropriate, if slightly embarrassing, to be treated like a minor celebrity. He introduced himself as Kevin Robinson and spoke excitedly about how much he'd loved my music, and wanted to get together to play and maybe do some recording together. I hedged. There were musicians out there who'd wrangle players to rehearse or record their own compositions extensively for no pay and with no real prospects; I'd gotten stuck in a few situations like that. Slightly defensive, I peppered Kevin with questions about the size and scope of his project, his plans for booking gigs, whether he had any money to pay us for the studio sessions. No big plans yet, and probably no money, he was frank about that—and yet something drew me toward him. Maybe his kind compliments or his ebullient personality. A few days later he came over with two saxophones, a Japanese shakuhachi flute, and some compositions handwritten on large-format scoring sheets. It was my strangest rehearsal ever. Kevin's manuscripts contained nothing but brief musical phrases, random-seeming sharps and flats, no key or time signature indicated, each note or measure paired with chord symbols that did not bear any obvious relationship to the line, nor employ the usual voice-leading standards, nor represent any recognizable style of chord progression. *You can play this at whatever tempo you want, or change the chords or the order of the chords, and just repeat it or transform it, or do whatever you hear.* I wondered if he was a crackpot, except that he seemed so earnest and real, and when

he began blowing long, beautiful, delicate yet powerful tones through the shakuhachi, his skill and musicality were obvious. I was hesitant at first, voicing the unusual chords, occasionally glancing back at him with a questioning shrug as he stood behind my left shoulder playing the melody. Everything I did seemed to make him happy. I grew more confident about playing spontaneously, began inventing ideas based only very loosely on his notated suggestions. Kevin responded in kind, speeding up when I did, digging in louder when I did—or else he’d make a sudden swerve into slow quiet lines, and I’d stop to listen for a moment before following him. When my grip on the keyboard had become very confident he switched up to baritone sax. Together we filled my small living room with intense sound. Something beautiful was happening. Kevin quickly became my all-time favorite bandleader. I started joining him and some of his friends at the midtown apartment of a guitarist and painter who also managed a natural foods market. It was like stepping into a beatnik scene from 1975: me and bunch of arty, bookish men in a room crammed with instruments, paintings, and vinyl records, drinking red wine from jelly-jar glasses and collectively composing crazy spontaneous music. Kevin’s scene was a primarily African-American one although I met white and Asian musicians through him, as well. He chafed at superficial boundaries; we were kindred spirits this way. At the time I also happened to be training for a sprint triathlon with a bunch of women friends in my neighborhood. In the same day I might go from a “brick” (bike/run) practice out on the trails near BWI with a half-dozen nice upper-middle-class white mommies, to an evening rehearsal or gig with Kevin and his pals, and revel in this enormous freedom and social latitude I’d somehow concocted within the modest parameters of my Baltimore life. My *American* life: here, there, and everywhere.

We began playing shows wherever we could around Maryland, and some in New York and D.C. Almost immediately I stopped asking what the gig paid. When we could land a museum or private party job, we got the usual hundred or two hundred bucks each, but more often it was just a passed hat or a cut of the door at a club. Or nothing at all. I was fine with that. This scene was just pure musical expansion. It lived entirely outside of professional advancement or mass-audience popularity. The only thing that ever annoyed me was when Kevin would sometimes invite another pianist to the gig and I'd have to alternate with them. I was greedy, but only for the chance to be a part of the sounds. If Kevin hadn't moved to the West Coast I would still hope to play with him and his friends today. He has an Ellingtonian gift for recruiting great musicians, people with big ears and solid musical impulses and just the right combination of confidence and humility, just the right balance between individuality and communalism.

After our early rehearsals he'd get wound up with joy and start explaining to me his vision. *Whatever we are, wherever we're from, we bring all of that with us to the music, I grew up here in Baltimore, single mother, hard life, some traumatic things happening, music was my healing but I could never really play the straight ahead stuff people wanted, and they thought I couldn't play at all, but I just went with my own voice, and you're here and you have the background and the education you have, New Yorker, writer, mom, all those things, and you bring all that, and Chris and Vattel have their stories, and everyone contributes, everyone brings it all together.*

In places like An die Musik in Baltimore or The Shrine in Harlem, we'd oscillate between periods of abstraction—the percussionist on quiet chimes, Kevin blowing long tones, the rest of us playing colorful spare little riffs here and there—and periods when we'd all fall together into a

raucous, stomping blues. I’d never exhibited perfect pitch but somehow I could quickly follow my way to whatever solid chord we had all magically settled into, or whatever key the bass player had established for a 12-bar-blues form. This alternation between “difficult” sounding music and good old-fashioned jam made us different from some of the more cerebral free-jazz collectives around Baltimore. We were radical individuals but we weren’t afraid of building a machine and channeling a groove together. Cleaving and cleaving, apart and a part.

When things got really flowing and loose and loud, Kevin would start to punctuate his horn lines with whoops and howls and shouts between flurries of notes. *GOD IS GREAT! GOD IS GREAT!* And the audience would whoop and howl right back at him. We’d go into full-on tent revival mode. For all my apostasy, I was fine with it. It felt real, not metaphysically but viscerally. This was the *LOVE*—unconditional. It was just *there*. It did not have to be earned via tremendous chops, knowing 500 bebop tunes by heart, or executing the fastest hippest licks. This was the thing missing that the churchly people in my childhood had kept talking about but did not really know how to demonstrate. It was the quantity I’d searched for since forever, since the school dances, since the obsessive days at the turntable and then the CD player, and later at the piano or the microphone with a crowd of other humans around: this rhythmic connectedness, this freewheeling togetherness, each of us our own contributing factor, in accordance with our abilities and in accordance with our needs.

Kevin could be a trickster. Once he stepped to the microphone at the top of a set and said, *Tonight we’re going to let our piano player start us out with a tune called “Conversation With the Trees.” Please give a warm hand to Sandy, and “Conversation With the Trees.”*

There had been no such song before this very moment. Kevin had not mentioned any

such title nor given us manuscript for it. He had not warned me he was going to ask me to play. He just made the announcement and smiled in my direction. I laughed and took a breath. Looked down at my hands on the keyboard, and began playing... something. I had an affinity for certain keys, based on the feel of them under my fingers as much as for the sound. I liked E dorian minor, with F# the only black key. I liked Gb lydian, almost all black keys. I liked Eb Major with the ninth emphasized, a smooth R&B sound to it. So I picked one of these keys, and laid down a few chords, vamping a bit, establishing a rhythmic pattern. Maybe adding a few melody notes here and there. I leapt into the unknown and yet I never felt frightened because I could hear my fellow musicians listening so very hard. There is something truly special and rare about feeling *heard* with such focused intensity. In all other parts of your life, it almost never happens. You go through your days misunderstanding and being misunderstood. Here, instead, was the practice of being perfectly simpatico with each other. Drummer Shareef Taher—whom I’d met on the bandstand just before we started playing—would pick up the thread and start a shimmering cymbal pattern to match it. Kevin would start blowing eerie, beautiful long tones. Saxophonist Jamal Moore would weave a similar path in response to Kevin. Vattel Cherry would pluck a huge, fat, resolute, reverberant note from his double-bass and let it hang there a moment. Soon we were all contributing, all matching each other’s energies, getting louder and more intense, defining a groove and locking into it, becoming one from the many.

Sometimes I would start to feel so entranced that the keyboard was not vehicle enough to share everything. I would find myself leaning into the microphone; I would open my ears to the collective cluster chord around me, form the idea of a note in my head, begin breathing. It would be just a vibration, just a tone somewhere in the mix of all the other vibrations being sent out

from the stage and through everybody’s bodies. I would sing a note. It wouldn’t be a pretty sound necessarily, or a brilliant one, it wasn’t overpowering or awe inspiring or glass-shattering, I would not blow the roof of the sucker, I would not tear the doors off the joint, I would not bring the rafters down, I would not call the chorus of angels to rapt attention, no seas would part and no one would fall to their knees in terror and awe. With my one little note I would not move anybody to tears or even demand their undivided attention. It would just be a sound in the mix, just another vibration.

We had a show at Puppets Jazz in Brooklyn. Husband and son and I made a weekend of it, staying with ePatrick’s cousin Mary at her Upper West Side apartment. She decided to join us at the gig, and on the long subway ride down I secretly worried that she might hate this music. As far as I knew, Mary and her husband Dan, both of them corporate executives, were pretty mainstream listeners—fans of U2 and other legacy rock, for example. But she came and listened to us doing our made-up-on-the-spot thing, and was captivated.

Afterward she said: *When in our lives do we ever get to see something being made from scratch right in front of us? Everything’s usually so packaged and slick.*

With great pleasure and relief I responded: *Exactly!*

In Kevin’s collective I began to understand what had been hidden from me, or rather, what I had hidden from myself, while chasing after some kind of sensible, market-oriented *professionalism* or *career* in music: the pure joy. I was still myself, still a slightly uptight and entitled brat with bourgeois expectations about life. In recent years, I had gotten bad at being on time. This irked me; a kind of Protestant-corporate punctuality had been a point of pride in my

youth. As a journalist I tried always to be five or ten minutes early for meetings, or sometimes even earlier, cooling my heels in a lobby, waiting for a reasonable moment to go upstairs and tell the receptionist I'd arrived to talk to my source. Now as a middle-aged mother-musician, I'd have to scramble to feed the kid his dinner and wash the dishes from earlier in the day and slap some water on my face to perk up, and then pack up all my gear to drive the two miles up to midtown. The rehearsal would have been called for 7 pm and now it was going on 7:10, 7:23, red lights all the way up Charles Street, 7:35. I'd get lucky and find a parking spot near the natural foods market and start lugging my keyboard and amp up the stairs. Kevin would meet me partway to help. In the living room I'd squeeze into a space, start setting up my gear, all the while saying *Sorry, sorry I'm late, so sorry.*

And Kevin and the other guys would smile, shrug, hand me a jelly-jar glass of red wine.

They'd say: *Girl, what are you talking about? You're right on time.*