

LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD

Several years ago Odean told me he was unnerved by a tragic event that happened earlier that day when his subway train was suddenly stopped in the dark. He and others were eventually escorted out through the tunnel. He later learned that a young teenage boy had thrown himself in front of the train, committing suicide. Our conversation gradually shifted to Odean's childhood memory of being taken by his parents to hear saxophonist Wilber Campbell play Stan Getz' "Early Autumn." Odean said, "It was magical, a sound I would never forget." He paused and said, "I'll write some music tomorrow, expressing it."

Looking back but moving forward is a process that members of Odean Pope's **inspired circle** project funded by the PEW are beginning. The young boy, Odean, sat on the hard church pew in Ninety-Six, South Carolina, swelling to the exalted sounds of the choir that his mother directed. Last week at the Blue Note in NYC, the audience rode a rocket through the ether with his saxophone choir. Odean was 10 years old when his family relocated to North Philadelphia and as a teenager he was immersed in music, especially the music of the **inspired circle**, jazz musicians growing up in neighborhoods close by, who became some of the most influential jazz musicians of the century. Odean speaks of standing on the shoulders of his forerunners. The project hopes to capture the process that enables the next generation to stand on his and others' shoulders.

Back to Odean's afternoon on the subway. Memory is the cornerstone of creativity. There were two disparate experiences; one horribly upsetting that had just happened, the underground scare and the boy who violently suicided in Odean's teenage neighborhood. The second was a young teenage memory of such dazzlement that his musical memory has been ever influenced. I could see his identification with the youthful boy. Psychologically, Odean rejected the violent aggression of the suicide and infused it with the memory of having felt cherished by his parents. Perhaps this contributed to the enduring magic of Wilber Campbell's sound. Ultimately, along with his innate talent, the memory of time, relationship and sound all became part of his creative musical process. If I asked Odean how long it took him to write a particular piece, he might answer, 'anywhere from 15 minutes to 60 some years.'

There were sixteen musicians gathered around Odean at the second meeting for the project ranging in age and experience from venerable to student. Other professional musicians attended the preliminary meeting. All were searching for meaning and inspiration in one way or another. "Everything stopped and when I got to the end, I didn't know how I got there." "I'm hoping for a spiritual net when I do a high wire act and go off a cliff." "Something in myself comes out of myself." These were references to improvising with other musicians. Musicians were looking for a lifeline, hoping for something magical, transcendent, wishing to feel galvanized, looking for relationship, feeling both trepidation and anticipation. Time would tell if expectations were running too high.

The creative process transforms sound into music. What are the ingredients that

coalesce to prevent sixteen musicians (3 piano players, guitar, baritone sax, 5 tenors, alto sax, 2 bass players, 3 violinists, drummer and vocalist) from sounding like a traffic jam? Musicians improvise with and against each other, individually and yet cohesively. They play (around) with form, melody, harmony and rhythm. Each musician's excellence can provoke brilliance in the other. Listeners, suspended in sound, delight in the unexpected and take comfort in the familiar. When it works, it is transcendent, moments even of frisson. Perhaps such alchemy will happen.