

SOUNDSCAPES

When I walked into the third session of the PLC, the surround sound was a cacophony of instruments warming up. Musicians were on stage ready to work. Sam Reed said, "Gotta go make the donuts." Germaine gathered the circle of musicians to harness motivation by asking for reactions. "Building scaffolds for freedom" became a theme for mastering basics in order to then improvise. She talked about "the long arc of this project and the vision, small steps with radical intentions." Continued enthusiasm was expressed by all.

Specifically, Julian was looking forward to new challenges from the younger musicians. Marilyn described a heavenly atmosphere she aspires to achieve. Monnette said that even though she's been playing with Odean for a long time, it never feels old. Tom challenged the younger musicians to let their aesthetic filter through and be themselves. Everyone was happy that Bobby Zankel was there and Bobby, in turn, emphasized the goal of being oneself. He is inspired by the blend of ages and experience among the musicians. He heralded Odean as an example of someone whose whole life is an improvisation. I sense some growing awe from the younger musicians. Soon, sound was forming into music, the vocalist was singing and Germaine was dancing.

Odean the teacher took over and reminded the younger musicians to be alert and not miss a cue. He focused on sound dynamics, directing the musicians to play five notes, soft and loud at the same time. Odean is supportive of the more inexperienced musicians. For Odean, purity of sound is requisite as a springboard is for a diver. Julian then conducts **EPITOME**.

Driving to a gig the next day I told Odean that of all his compositions **EPITOME** is my favorite. He said, "Mine too." He explained that he hears a sound in his head that he always strives to reproduce. He described a full circle of sound, molded sound, purity of sound. Perhaps he perfected the skill of circular breathing to aid his quest. **EPITOME** for him is finding peace, heaven. Is it any wonder that he chose **EPITOME**, his composition that epitomizes a platform for all other of his compositions, to have the group try out musical concepts?

What is the wellspring of Odean's sound? Humans are hard-wired to be receptive to music. We are also psychologically receptive and the precursors begin in the womb with the first astounding sound studio, the prototype of jazz jam. There are vibrations, heart beats, circulatory swishes and other digestive gurgling that all become the backup rhythm section to a array of improvisational sounds including muffled voices and the racket of living, although muted. There is a festival of sounds and rhythms that a newborn is sensitive to resonating with at a later time. Lucky children are sung to, cooed, rocked, read nursery rhymes and even presented with actual music. Odean was surrounded by the sound of the choir in his church. With jazz there is syncopation, off beats, counter-rhythms, counter-melodies, off notes, blue notes, all in some combination often occurring together in complicated patterns but working together. Because of the '**kaleidophonic**' prenatal atmosphere that is both pre-verbal and pre-visual, music has the preeminent

potential of all art forms to set up a readiness, an exquisite receptivity to resonate with at a later time.

In his search to express the sound in his head, Odean first found his instrument. He told me:

“In the beginning I was playing the keyboards, piano and clarinet. I played clarinet and piano, I guess probably four or five years. I crossed over to the saxophone because it was an experience of trying to search and find a voice that would be close to the human voice. And, basically, it’s all derived from my child experiences like singing in the church. I was always looking for that voice that was going to sound like the human voice. The saxophone is the closest instrument to the voice. From studying the clarinet and piano I went through some additional instruments like the oboe, the alto saxophone, soprano saxophone but for some reason I feel very comfortable with the tenor. I mean, to me, the tenor saxophone is the closest voice to the human voice.”

Odean, with his tenor saxophone, then needed to find his sound.

“I was never fond of listening to horn players.” Odean wanted his sound to be unique. “I started listening to a lot of keyboard players. In terms of music I was learning all the different kinds of cross rhythms, seven/four, eight/four and things of that nature. From that experience I did research on Fats Waller, Bill Evans, ‘Fatha’ Hines, Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell. I always wanted to play long phrases like keyboard players. The greatest influence on me would be Hasaan Ibn Ali. He was a great great innovator. He was the kind of person that could just create all kinds of different melodies, rhythmic concepts, harmonic concepts, cross rhythms, two against three, three against five, seven/four, nine/four, eight/four and all kinds of different rhythms. After a period of six to eight months we started getting together practically every day and it was like a sort of institution for me.”

There are many historical underpinnings to Odean’s sound. Not to be overlooked is the innovation of his Saxophone Choir. Odean told me:

“The Saxophone Choir was derived from the church, being raised up in a Baptist church. I started writing for the Saxophone Choir in the early seventies and I started compiling different kinds of concepts. Around 1978 I started rehearsing and from 1978, the Saxophone Choir consisted of nine saxophones, piano, bass and drums. Occasionally, we played with just nine saxophones, no bass, no piano and no drums. That was the original idea, just to have the saxophones playing counterpoint and rhythm, rhythm changes as well as harmonic concepts.”

I can imagine Odean as a young boy sitting for hours lost in the harmonious sounds of the church choir his mother directed. Those beatific sounds were grand enough to prevail over the harsh circumstances of his life in Jim Crow South Carolina. There have been a few times over the years, seeing Odean conduct the Saxophone Choir, when I’ve thought that the sound in his head fused with the sound he created. I’ve seen him singing along to the choir, blissful. With the Temple of Bacchus in Baalbek, Lebanon as

the majestic backdrop, the audience seated in the tiered arena several feet below the massive stage, surrounded by huge pillars lit in gold and under a black diamond studded sky, I watched Odean move slightly aside from his octet as if to be both spectator and conductor when he appeared to pray, reverentially. No doubt, he heard the sound in his head expressed musically that night. In my psychological lingo, it is called oceanic oneness, peace.