

## Memoire 4

### The unreading of music.

Those who know my story know that in order to learn how to improvise, I had to undo my violin education. To learn how to play the violin to any performable level without learning to read music is impossible in terms of formal study - they are the conjoined twins of Western music practice. But there are other experiences that destroyed my faith in the notion that music is something that propels itself off the written page. A few memories remain stuck in my consciousness like signposts on my way to becoming an improvising musician.

I must have been 14 or 15 years old and 'the' violinist upon whom expectations were heaped. My final violin teacher (ever) was an imposing giant of a man who specialised in my public humiliation, so I was already well trained in stage insecurity. It wasn't that I was a child prodigy; it's just there was no one else to carry out the required duties. Sonata in G minor by Henry Purcell was the task at hand designed to show off the school's new spinet as much as its budding violinist.

On reflection, I realise now that the prescribed staging was set up for failure. The curtains remained closed as the audience took their seats ...as they opened, the head music teacher was to approach from the left hand side of the stage and me from the right to gentle applause from the assembled audience. We bowed, tuned, and I looked to the music stand to begin our performance. To my horror I realised there was no music on it, I'd left it backstage. We bowed and retreated each to his own side of the stage and disappeared. In a sweat, I ran around looking for the music backstage. Nothing. I couldn't find my accompanist either. I came back (stage right) to see if he was there, no he wasn't, I went back to my frantic search for Purcell. He arrived (stage left) to see if I was there, no I wasn't. By this time the audience were in hysterics as they thought it was all a pre-rehearsed piece of comedy. Eventually, I found the music, and we both appeared simultaneously (stage right and left), to thunderous applause and laughter. I was in a right state. We tuned, I looked to the music stand, the music was unopened and upside down. I stumbled through the trauma. It could well have been the worst performance of Purcell's Sonata in G Minor ever, bearing in mind that back in the 17th century when the piece was written, public torture and execution were still public entertainment.

The sonata was not a difficult piece of music, and it was some years later after digging deeper about the baroque that I realised in the repeats of the slow movements improvisation would have been an expected part of performance.

It's been hard to explain to myself and others in the music business (if, indeed, it can be said to still be a business), just how awful and myopic my formal music education was. I had won a music scholarship to a music school, the fees of which my parents could never have afforded. Yet after 12 years' education and at 18 years old, I had little practical knowledge of music and what to do with it. 'Certainly not a career in music', the school career officer had spat with horror, and since I was good at Art and Geography, he suggested a career in town planning! Being a confused 60s kid and lacking any mentor who could see my potential, I duly signed up for a course as advised, and a few months later found I had dropped out of university.

Of my own volition, I taught myself guitar, double bass, and drums at school. Guitar brought me the most success, especially with the opposite sex on whom (like most teenagers) I spent inordinate amounts of energy - I learnt several Dylan songbooks by heart in order to boost my serenading potential. Entrance to the school Jazz Society was policed by the password MJQ (Modern Jazz Quartet), which we religiously intoned at each session, I became hooked on Bebop. I got the gig in the school jazz group because there was a double bass but nobody willing to take it on. I learnt the parts by ear, either from the pianist (the history teacher) or off records. This stood me in some stead when it came to my first music work as a university dropout.

There was this larger than life West Indian character by the name of Hope Howard. He ran a calypso band with four handsome guys and four gorgeous women (all singing and playing percussion) - and me, the white boy on guitar. It took me some time to be able to play the laid-back lilting rhythms, my natural tendency being to complicate matters. Hope combined some quite disparate activities: he ran a psychoanalyst surgery (in reality a knocking shop), an involvement with illicit arms smuggling to Castro's Cuba (so he said), a chat show on local BBC

Radio Birmingham (interviewing boxer Mohamed Ali on one occasion - I remember a large wall photo of the event had been re-captioned by a radio wit with Hope saying to Mohamed 'You mean I'm the greatest?!), a social club which involved him in the odd small scale race riot, black activism, and the band.

One time we played a concert at H. M. Winson Green High Security Prison. It had been programmed to take place after the Sunday Service in the prison chapel. The place was packed (unusually empty we were told); when our female beauties arrived in front of some very hardened criminals, the place erupted in a primeval roar complete with foot stamping (on the floor) and fist smashing (on the pews) accompaniment. The noise was brutal; the guards went twitchy. It was the most intimidating of confrontations; I was 19 and terrified. I don't think anybody heard anything we attempted to perform. After 20 minutes, the guards closed the show down, and we were ushered out.

I don't know what happened to Hope Howard, but he left quite an impression with me. At the time, I was living with a West Indian woman (she came second in a 'Miss West Indian West Midlands' beauty contest, no less), had a temporary job on a building site, and rode an ancient British motor bike (a Panther 500). Hope had asked to sleep on the couch, as he was between apartments. I got up the next morning and headed downstairs to my bike and work, but I had forgotten my keys. I ran back upstairs to get them (less than a minute) ...to find Hope crawling naked with erection towards my girlfriend bundled up on the other side of the bed. Not sure of what to say or do, I came out with something lame like 'Have a nice day' and left. It was a time of free love, I told myself.