



A MUMBAI OF THE MIND: FERLINGHETTI IMPROVISATIONS ARTIST PERSPECTIVES

What was Ferlinghetti doing in Mumbai?

A *Mumbai of the Mind* was conceived and recorded during monsoons in Mumbai (Bombay, 2000) and, one year later (a few weeks before 9/11), during dog days in New York. It was in New York that Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Dog" appeared, biting me and Richard on the ass. (Ferlinghetti, when I told him this, replied matter-of-factly, "Well, that was a real dog.")

A vague recollection of Bob Dorough's reading of the poem (finally reissued on "The Best of the Beat Generation" [Rhino 78302]!), an image I'd carried for years, nudged at me as I listened to what we'd laid down in Bombay. Another dog, Gregory Alper's "Fat Doggie" (also a real dog), wagged and sniffed his way onto the record (the tail end of our "Dog" is a quote from his "Fat Doggie" [Adelphi 5009]). Once "The Dog" had come into play, we revisited the other poems in "A Coney Island of the Mind" and, as if by magic, found that they gave us a way to realize what we'd been up to in India. (Thank you, Mr. Ferlinghetti.)

Richard and I had gone to India in July of 2000, partly under the auspices of Niranjan Jhaveri's Jazz/India Vocal Institute (to work, for our 5-star supper, with a local rhythm section and study with singer Dhanashree Pandit-Rai), and partly on a grant from the university where I was teaching (theoretically to improvise and record with Indian jazz musicians). We'd come prepared (we thought) with a stack of jazz tunes; forms that might work with jazz musicians whose sensibilities included "Indian classical" idioms. Soon, in the wake of a few less-than-satisfying bandstand experiences, facing difficulties finding a recording studio with a piano, and inspired by the cross-cultural work of local jazz and Indian-classical musicians, we decided to start from scratch.

South Asian percussionists use tuned drums that could, we realized, provide harmonic settings for our (as-yet-unwritten) compositions and improvisations. (We had used tuned percussion as the primary pitch reference in our adaptation of John Cage's Indianesque "Solo #12"--"mud luscious.") The idea began to excite us, and we set about creating forms and tunings, eventually coming up with a "7 X 7" plan: seven pieces of seven minutes apiece, with a progression from one to the next (the full program to represent a sort of childhood-to-old age cycle). We created seven "modes" (the idea was *raga*-like), with associations (musical and extra-musical) for each. For example, my notes (7/23/00) for the one that turned out to be "Johnny Nolan" (the first cut on the recording) read: "character w/ story (parent and child), adventures of a day off, series of events and explorations, unexpected (gentle) changes in direction, morning, multiple pulse levels, changing feels, med- to fast-paced, include skipping 3s, *morsing*, C *mridangam*..." For "Still She Dances" (the last cut): "(character w/story) sexy, romantic, youth/mid-age, teasing, tender, some mystery, evening, first glances (free movement), lots of foreplay, sex, plenty of afterglow (free movement), meter in languorous 7 (4+3) w/some tension, *espressivo*, plenty of p to mf, C# *tabla*/C *mridangam*."



Notes in hand on a typical monsoon day, we traveled through flooded streets (past scores of tiny yellow three-wheel taxis and entire dripping families perched on single motor bikes) to “The Tune” studio in Andheri, a Bombay suburb, eager to meet the musicians with whom we’d be working. In the studio, we talked through the modes, tweaked tunings (to suit instruments and heat), then Bhooshan Munj, Rajesh Sreenivasan, and R. Venkatesh breathed life into the rough forms. By consensus, a highlight, in terms of where it took us emotionally and musically, was the one that was to become “Peacocks Walked.” It was one of the odder tunings, and felt deep and strange to us all. We left India shortly thereafter, and the pieces began to gestate.

Back in New York, after we’d found “A Coney Island of the Mind,” the poems seemed to fall into the music almost like homing birds; Ferlinghetti’s “Peacocks Walked” into one of our odd little soundscapes and we “heard the green birds singing from the other side of silence” in another (“Still She Dances”). Ferlinghetti’s poetry is full of different kinds of life: some pieces are short and bright, some are action-packed, some are languorous. We wanted to keep the poems alive, so we decided not to “set” much of the text; most of the poetry is sung to improvised melodies. Little composed phrases are nestled between the extemporaneous ones. Sometimes Richard improvised on the words as well, using his saxophone as a voice.

For Richard and I, the aim was to keep things free, and to use Indian ideas in our own ways. We were after our own aesthetic, which was informed by what we knew of the music of India, but with no intention to sound Indian *per se* (that would be a life’s work in itself). The pieces are predominantly modal, and our modes, like *ragas*, include lots of extra-musical associations. But we made up our own little *raga*-like modal entities, which Bhooshan Munj, Rajesh Sreenivasan, and R. Venkatesh played so beautifully on drums tuned to our specifications. Richard and I adopted other South Asian practices: we improvised drones on voice and sax (I played a little flute on a couple of them), and I included a bit of solfège in my improvisations and parts (using Western chromatic syllables instead of *sargam* or *swara* names). The percussionists use *tala* (time cycles) that are decidedly South Asian, but composites, reflecting the fact that the musicians represent two distinct traditions (*Hindustani*/northern and *Karnatak*/southern); *mridangam*, *kanjeera*, and *ghatham* are *Karnatak* instruments, while *tabla* is *Hindustani*. Richard and I kept South Asian theories and practices in mind (hence the album title), but we were definitely trying to create our own little sound world. The process was like a dialogue, between Richard and myself, with Bhooshan Munj, Rajesh Sreenivasan, and R. Venkatesh, and with Lawrence Ferlinghetti, through his poetry. As Richard put it, both the process and the product were an “ongoing improvisation,” a musical conversation that zigzagged across cultures, reaching forward and back in time.

Contact: Linda Whitman, 212-563-2271/email: linda@katchie.com

HARRITON CARVED WAX, 400 West 43 St #43M, New York, NY 10036-6318