Garth Cartwright, New Zealand born, South London-based, oft' wandering, is an award winning journalist, occasional DJ, sometime World Service broadcaster and the author of *Princes Amongst Men: Journeys with Gypsy Musicians* (Serpent's Tail).

Praise for *Princes Amongst Men*

'Roma music is redolent with Gypsy lore, language, passion and personality. [Cartwright] found a vibrant, living musical tradition that is central to pan-European culture' *The Times*

'A valuable chronicle of their personal histories [Roma Gypsies] and musical development… He writes lyrically and builds steadily to create a sense of anticipation' *Times Literary Supplement*

'Funny, revealing and frequently moving' *Observer Music Monthly*

'Excellent survey of Roma musicians in the Balkans… What distinguishes Cartwright is his style, his verve and his wholehearted engagement with his subject' *Guardian*

'As Bulgaria and Romania creep on to the travel and property pages, this book about Balkan gypsy music could become an essential alternative guide… For anyone interested in the reality of Roma culture, or planning a holiday in the region, this is the perfect offbeat companion' Sue Steward, *Daily Telegraph*

'Insightful, energised and empathetic' *Time Out*

'Reminiscent of Jack Kerouac or Hunter S Thompson…the prose is carefully written and keenly observed' *New Internationalist*

'You don't have to be a fan of gypsy music to appreciate Cartwright's book… Part travelogue, part musical history, it's full of picaresque tales told in an appealingly off-beat and impressionistic style' *Uncut*

'Cartwright is an observant and eloquent writer who demonstrates a strong understanding not just of how things are, socially and politically, in the Balkan states he's visiting but of how things got to be that way. He neither condescends to his interviewees nor patronises the reader, and his love of the Roma, their music and the various countries they inhabit shines through on every page' *The Wire*

'An insightful and poignant travelogue which should be handed out free to every *Daily Mail* reader' *Big Issue*

'This is a book about music by a man who has a bellowing and bizarre passion for Balkan brass. It is also about history, culture, tragedy, and, most definitely, joy. In short, it is about what it means to be a human being… In this work of enormous humanity Cartwright celebrates the power of music to transcend the most hideous suffering of a people' *Leeds Guide*

MORE MILES THAN MONEY

Journeys Through American Music

GARTH CARTWRIGHT

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obtained from the British Library on request

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To: Charlie Gillett, Chris Strachwitz
and the indomitable spirit of Curtis
Mayfield; three who, each in their own
way, helped shape how I heard America

Contents

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Since we don't know each other, I want to give you a complete picture of myself, why I'm interested in America, why I'm always occupying myself with America: because in America, there's the whole world. In Italy there's Italy, and in France there's France. The problems of America are the problems of the whole world: the contradictions, the fantasies, the poetry. The minute you touch down on America, you touch on universal themes. For better or worse, that's the way it is.

Sergio Leone

I always thought it was our America as much as anybody else's – circus people and carnival freaks, prisoners and music makers, troubadours, minstrels, hobos and poets and such, we can't let the goddamn country go down to politicians and corporate madmen and media people and college professors, run it over and ruin it all. It's ours, our goddamn country. We built the midway, didn't we? And we make the music that goes on the midway, from sea to shining sea. You know, goddamn, Ronald Reagan died recently and they flew the flag half-mast. Well, did they fly it at half-mast for Ray Charles? For Johnny Cash? Declare a national holiday? Yet these people, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, they moved and changed the daily lives more than any politician who are just grifters and scum. Wouldn't even let them in the goddamn midway. So let us now praise the real American heroes, the ones with heart and soul who changed things for the good.

Little Jack Horton

Gambling on a future: dice men, Mississippi, 1939

Prologue: Last Call at Lee's Unleaded

No moon illuminates our journey and the stars, why, they fear to shine. A damp Saturday night. October's cruel winds now wane but something ominous, witchy even, remains in the atmosphere. I try and explain this to the driver. He nods, says, 'Uh-huh, urban voodoo.' Well, I think, that explains everything. Silence envelops us as we continue through Chicago's West Side. Considering this neighbourhood is dense with public housing the quiet is eerie, almost unnerving. I stare into the gloom: few street lamps and little sign of human activity. Get the sense of a city under siege; doors bolted, lights dimmed, movement suspended. At traffic lights a jeep pulls alongside, all eyes on us, driver and passenger, pale-skinned outsiders. The Cherokee trembles, subsonic bass patterns reverberating through its chassis, bass like a war dance, and I – *as ever* – recognise in the rhymes Atlanta's Goodie Mob.

I'm tired of lyin'
I'm sick of glorifyin' dyin'
I'm sick of not tryin'

I'm tired too. Bone weary and exhausted from pursuing an insane American quest. Lights change, jeep roars off, all fuel-injected rush. Our car splutters, barely idling. Pray silently: *please don't break down here*. A burnt-out tenement looms on our left, all shadows and ash, ash and shadows. Damn, how *did* I end up so deep in an urban cityscape few voluntarily venture into? I've felt more at home, safer, in North Africa, Pakistan even, than I do on these streets where we share a common language and culture. Chicago's urban decay reminds me of Guatemala City… edgy, broken,

hostile. Feel a twitch in my limbs. *Getting jumpy.* Strange how foreign one can feel in a cityscape that is very familiar. Mentally I've walked these streets across the decades: certain sounds from vinyl, images offered up in films, the sights and smells conjured by books, offered me what bluesman Big Bill Broonzy called 'the key to the highway'. This mythic key unlocking an America that exists beyond the McUSA we consume daily, allowing those who possess it to, as Americans say, cross the tracks. But who in their right mind wanders into black ghettos and Mexican barrios? Enduring eighteen chafing hours on a Greyhound bus just to get to Nashville? The red-eye exhaustion from driving for days on end solely to party in a honky-tonk? Or dancing in a Nevada desert sandstorm hoping for – *what!?!* – don't know… a 'vision', I guess. For near on two months now I've been constantly moving through America, an endurance test that recalls doomed Texan troubadour Townes Van Zandt singing

Livin' on the road my friend
Was gonna keep you free and clean
Now you wear your skin like iron
And your breath is hard as kerosene.

To be as desperate and free as old Texan outlaws appeared attractive from a distance but, by now, I'm too weary, too beat, to get tripped up on romantic conceits. Restless. That's how I explain myself to others. 'Restless: 1. unable to stay still or quiet. 2. ceaselessly active or moving: the restless wind. 3. worried; anxious; uneasy.' *Collins English Dictionary* has my number. What else explains an adult life spent fleeing convention and regulation?

Growing up in Auckland, New Zealand, surely contributed to my sense of rootless unease. Aware you're existing at the bottom of the world, this sense of isolation enforced by most of the media we consumed: once heralded as Little England, post-WW2 NZ swapped British colonial influence for the embrace of everything American. Go to a movie, switch on the TV, tune into a radio station… we were sold American and, as fledglings, gobbled and

gobbled. Tennessee held greater mythic appeal than Taranaki while California appeared the promised land. The Americans colonised my subconscious and, in April 1990, I landed on US soil, whippet thin and naive as only a Kiwi youth could be, determined to follow Huck Finn's example and light out for the territory. Whatever that territory was. For six months a rusty $600 Buick carried me through a land of some beauty and much disappointment, the imaginary America I inhabited in Auckland rarely coming in sight. After an extended sojourn in San Francisco I fled to London, a city so grey and unwelcoming my life till then appeared to have been lived in Technicolor. *Key to the highway?* First I needed to unlock my mind.

Tucked away in South London tower blocks across the nineties I realised how British politics and pop culture were immeasurably shaped by the USA – often by its worst elements – and felt no desire to return; Europe and Asia provided new sources of fascination. Instead, when American neocons ranted about 'Old Europe' refusing to join their 'war on terror' I despaired at what had become of the nation that once enchanted me. But after writing up a year in the Balkans among Romany Gypsy musicians, one replete with references to blues music and Beat poets, it became obvious I needed to look anew at the USA. Time, then, to try once again and find a key to American highways.

I returned to the USA unsure of what I would find. From London the rhetoric of Cheney and Rumsfeld suggested 'freedom' was twisted into covering for fear and repression while New Orleans, fabled city of song, now existed as an emblem for American decline and neglect. George Bush Sr was president when I was last here and now his namesake occupies the role; American military were in Iraq then and are again now. *The more things change the more they stay the same?* Let's find out.

I found out: kept finding and finding until the road heading south from San Francisco ran out in Chicago. South and West Chicago's bleak streets once served as a port of call for generations arriving from the Deep South; here almost a century ago the likes of

Louis Armstrong and Memphis Minnie made music that would prove a gash in Western consciousness. Many followed and their Chicago creations remain among the twentieth century's most influential: Mahalia Jackson developed a form of gospel vocal that now dominates popular song; Muddy Waters plugged in and the resulting electric shock can still be felt; Chuck Berry cranked out what came to be called rock 'n' roll music *('it's got a backbeat/you can't lose it').* These artists were teachers in the Sufi sense of the word, their wisdom travelling farther than simply that of musical influence.

The final night of this pilgrim's quest. And I'm so tired, so tired, so tired… haven't slept right since I don't know when. What better to do, then, than get in a ride and roll through Chicago's West and South Side? Here we are now, in search of destinations that may no longer exist, streets offering only abandoned buildings and the eerie quiet surrounding communities in collapse. We pull over, parking close to neighbourhood bars, and quickly exit the night into rooms full of sound and light where bands play on the floor or upon makeshift stages, small ensembles conjuring up the grooves that built Chi-town, singers talking in tongues, slippery rhythm sections, guitarists feeling for colour, music still capable of casting spells. Locals check us, two white men, but the driver's a familiar face and the focus rapidly returns to music and drinks and laughter, keeping the spirit flowing. We join the party, shot glasses held high, hips moving to the music. Again and again we do this, partying until instinct suggests we move on, casting long shadows beneath street lamps, slipping into darkness.

Last stop: Lee's Unleaded Blues Bar, way deep in the South Side. Shag carpet, heavy velvet curtains, fake marble bar, claret-coloured walls; Lee's offers *Superfly* chic, a loud, tough interior, hustler's paradise. Chicago is full of blues bars steeped in nostalgia but Lee's is unconcerned about tourist fantasies, no posters of Howlin' Wolf or Robert Johnson on these walls. Johnny Drummer leads the house band, a dapper, smiling man, his sound the Southern soul-groove black America now considers 'blues'. I order whiskey. A glass is placed in front of me but, as I turn to

observe Drummer, my drink gets lifted. On the South Side this is a minor affront, not something to make an issue of.

Order more whiskey and, this time, hold glass close. Johnny Drummer exits the stage and lush locals begin taking turns on the mic. A small, plump man in a fluffy Kangol hat, features impressively ugly, wrists heavy with gold, diamond-studded crucifix hanging round his neck – ghetto fabulous, indeed – starts singing of how all the girls love his hot dog. The tune's generic, limpid chorus and slick innuendoes fitting the post-midnight club vibe. 'Little Scotty!' someone shouts and many applaud. I've heard of Scotty; one-time pimp, sometime Sancho Panza to Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan, noted South Side soul-blues singer. Scotty acknowledges his audience, wraps what appears to be a badly burnt hand around the mic, begins to sing, musicians locking behind him, and I fall back to philosophising: *could it be that right here, right now, I'm witnessing a requiem for American music?*

American music has done more for US standing than any politician or policy, touching lives, inspiring dreams. A crippled French Gypsy banjo player called Django, upon hearing Louis Armstrong for the first time, muttered 'Ach moune' (Romany for 'my brother'). The Rolling Stones, when arriving in the USA in 1964, were asked what they wanted to see in the country. 'Muddy Waters and Bo Diddley,' they answered ('Where's that?' replied the credulous interviewer). Saharan nomads and Algerian rai singers, Soweto township dwellers through to Palestinian youths, all took inspiration from American music to carry their own native tongues forward. Zulus played jazz, Maoris sang soul, Japanese women mastered Ike Turner tunes, Slim Dusty employed a Texas twang when singing about an Australian town with no beer. And every nation has an Elvis impersonator. Even suburban brats raised on thousands of hours of junk US TV sensed in American music a mystery and longing that made the world infinitely more interesting. *Am-er-I-ca!* We loved that land even though we'd never set foot in it.

There's little popular American music today that spells out *Am-er-I-ca!* in all its eccentric, offbeat brilliance; instead contemporary American music has more in common with the

Mc franchises on every high street: heavy-metal crybabies, moronic rappers, over-emoting R & B divas, freeze-dried country singers, scholarly jazzers, indie-rock entropy… music, once so much a part of a community's character, is now shrill and banal, a tinny squeak of sound. I'm generalising, sure, but one thing is certain when listening to twenty-first-century American music: the thrill is gone. 'The buying and selling of music, what they've done to it, is a disaster on the scale of cutting down the rainforest,' cartoonist R. Crumb once suggested to me as we sat hypnotised by the sounds emanating from his 78s of the earliest American music. A musical rainforest that helped the world to artistically breathe and now deforestation is almost complete… better be careful or I'll end up crying into my whiskey. After thousands and thousands of miles cutting across the USA, was I, tired and emotional at journey's end, sensing a music, a *culture*, I had loved for so long now turning to dust before my eyes and ears? Such thoughts. The kind that carry their own psychic blues weight.

Johnny Drummer introduces himself, a gracious man, happy to talk about being raised in Alligator, Mississippi, right smack on Highway 61, enlisting in the services, cutting a blues 78 for Sam Phillips but getting recalled to the navy for Korea before he could build a Southern rep, resettling in Chicago and 'What a city Chicago once was! My *God*, son!' Playing drums in countless South Side bands over the decades, a pro until his house burnt down and car got stolen in the same week, then working a nine-to-five for the District School Board, occasionally releasing 45s on obscure labels, switching to keyboards because they are easier on you than drums ('as you get older'), Johnny's perseverance establishing him as a South Side veteran. He pauses, looks at whoever's tripping up on stage, the crowd getting messy, catcalling and laughing, says, 'Two things you couldn't give me: land in Mississippi and a bar in Chicago.'

'Lee's used to be such a fine place,' he adds. 'Back in the seventies you had Junior Wells, Son Seals, a lot of good people played here. Now, well, look what we got.' *Look indeed*: the latest singer to take the stage, Yard Dog, is missing a leg so balances on

crutches while singing 'Slip Away'. A buxom black woman in a copper-coloured wig stands close, smiling and caressing him. Yard Dog, perhaps enjoying her attention too much, wanders off key. Still, he sings with feeling, giving the song a darker blues feeling than surely was originally intended, nodding and muttering 'uh-huh' as people shout affirmation. Gripping crutches, Yard Dog hobbles off stage. Copper Wig takes control of the mic, starts delivering a freak song, challenging every man in Lee's with each salacious line. Johnny, whose theme song is 'I Want to Get into Your Head Before I Get into Your Bed', shakes his head – tiny, pendulum gestures – and focuses back on me.

'I hear you been roamin' 'round America?'

'That's it, listening out for good music and trying to take freedom's pulse.'

'You find it?'

'The music or the freedom?'

'I know 'bout the damn music. How's the freedom?'

'If constant movement registers as being free, sure.'

'Uh-huh, that's a very American kind of freedom.'

'Travel?'

'Naw. Restlessness. Thinkin' you'll find someplace better down the line apiece.'

Down the line apiece: I found ruin and beauty, openness and intolerance, despair and hope. All encountered across a territory they call America. Johnny's watching me carefully, maybe expecting some smart-ass, white-boy answer. Me, an outsider just passing through, and him, a man who's spent a lifetime learning exactly what America has to offer. The night fades. Copper Wig's still singing about breaking bedsprings while church is only a few hours away. Sirens flood the air, lending a brief frisson to Lee's, an edge to everyone's lush consciousness, one that fades as police or paramedics rush past. I glance at Johnny and shrug, tongue too thick to offer any real insights right now upon my two score and ten American days and nights. He looks at me, gives another of those polite, sad shakes of his head, says, 'This is it, son – end of the line.'

Sound and vision: Ed Lee Natay and Canyon records founder Ray Boley, Phoenix, AZ, 1951

INTO THE SOUTH-WEST

San Francisco, Reno, Black Rock Desert, Las Vegas, Tucson, Phoenix

When you say 'America' you refer to the territory stretching between the icecaps to the two poles. So to hell with your barriers and border guards!

Diego Rivera

And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth – you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.

Black Elk

Lighting out for the territory: sharecroppers stalled on the way to California, 1937

chapter 1

San Francisco: A Baptism in Sound

'Everything cool?' asks the Bishop. I glance up at the towering figure in long purple robes, features fierce yet benevolent, and answer yes, thank you, all is cool. Considering this is St John's African Orthodox Church and the man addressing me is Ramakrishna King Haqq, aka Bishop King, founder of the only temple on earth dedicated to the worship of John Coltrane as a latter-day saint, things are most ricky-tick.

'You know, I'm about to start a journey,' I say to the Bishop, choosing words carefully, 'a long journey, across a lot of the US. I can't explain exactly what the journey is about 'cos it's a quest of sorts. All I know is that I'm guided by music and, y'know, I want to search out the American music I love. But I'm scared of what I'll find 'cos America is losing this music and… well, I think maybe losing its soul.'

'I hear you,' says Bishop King.

'So what I'm trying to say is, I think I made the right decision to come here today.'

'That's the spirit calling, son.'

The spirit calling. Why, yes, indeed.

San Francisco, Sunday morning, and I woke feeling ragged, suffering from both jetlag and a Golden Gate Bridge-sized hangover. Do the right thing, go to church. But not just any church; the congregation of St John's once worshipped Coltrane as God incarnate. I wonder what JC, being a humble type, would have made of this? In 1981 Alice Coltrane sued the church for the sum of $7.5 million ('Widow Of "God" Sues Church', read

a newspaper headline) owing to its apparent misappropriation of her husband's image. Alice's lawsuit went nowhere but the resulting publicity helped attract attention: the African Orthodox Church – a popular storefront church in black neighbourhoods – approached King about joining the fold. This meant recognising Coltrane as a saint (not God) and adhering to the Scriptures instead of the psychedelic mish-mash of chants and prayers the One Mind Temple (as St John's was then called) recited. King took the leap, studying for a Doctor of Divinity degree in Chicago and, in 1984, set up St John's African Orthodox Church. St John's never became simply another outlet for Bible thumping: I last caught the church in 1991, a wild and woolly mix of homeless centre, impromptu jam session and black gospel church. All of which made some kind of sense in Haight Ashbury, the messianic preacher with a massive afro and saxophone recalling a time when the likes of Charles Manson and Jim Jones also courted followers from the 'hood's poor, lost and disaffected. The playing was raw – one cacophony had me thinking 'uh ohhh, punk jazz' – but big fun, life-enhancing, the kind of thing that gave the Haight its loose, wild vibe.

Rising rents evicted St John's at the end of the nineties. Yet anyone possessed with the conviction driving Bishop King wasn't going to fade away and I found St John's residing in a Lower Pacific Heights church. This nondescript neighbourhood of warehouses, office buildings, used-car lots and shapeless apartment blocks – the kind of place you might choose to live if only to deny your very existence – appears anathema to St John's spirit and I can only guess the congregation have been lent this violet-coloured temple. Upon entering I noted Coltrane's version of 'My Favourite Things' playing through the speakers. A tall black man in purple robes greeted me. The hair's greyer, shorter but, unmistakably, it's Bishop King.

'You came from London to be here?' He sounded pleasantly surprised. 'See, this proves my point that jazz is the ambassador for the United States. It calls people from all over the world to America and they come to us because John Coltrane has moved

something in them. So someone like you comes here to give praise and thanks. That's good. That's the spirit calling.'

Well, maybe. A long time's passed since I last attended a church service. Yet music expresses the transcendental, articulates stuff beyond words. Which, I guess, is what I've come to worship. So how did the Bishop develop the Coltrane cosmology?

'In 1965 my wife and I had to decide where to go to see some jazz. Back then there were a lot of jazz clubs in town. A lot. We decided to go to the Jazz Workshop in North Beach. Playing that night was the John Coltrane Quartet. The room was small, crowded, very smoky, and what I heard there I like to call a 'baptism in sound'. I grew up attending Pentecostal churches and the experience in the Jazz Workshop was comparable to what happened at church when the music and preaching built to such a level the congregation felt a direct connection with God. The old folks called it 'the Holy Ghost falling on the people'. It manifested in different people in different forms. Some people would dance, some people would cry, some people would rejoice, some people would speak in other tongues. But for that moment, that period, time was arrested, so to speak. You were obeying the Holy Spirit. And, son, that's the feeling I got that night listening to the Coltrane Quartet. They played with a intensity beyond entertainment. A intensity that went beyond jazz musicians trying to push the envelope.

'Jimmy Garrison, he was the Quartet's double bassist, played a solo and it was like nothing I've ever heard. The man was lost in the music and where it was taking him. So much so, drool was hanging out of his mouth. He was gone with the music, way, way out there! I realised right then the music of John Coltrane was representative beyond culture. He was making music that wasn't just a cultural or ethnic thing. There was a higher calling to his art. I began to see God in the sound. This was a point of revelation. Not that I immediately went away and set up the church. More Coltrane's music allowed an evolution, or a transition, to begin. The consciousness level began opening, evolving. You understand now what I say about a baptism in sound?'

Uh-huh. At least, I think so. Not that I've ever felt a particularly religious impulse towards anything. But a baptism in sound… well, sure. Music talks in tongues I don't try to understand, speaking to the intuitive and primal, one of humanity's greatest resources to share and communicate with. Bishop King looked on as I mentally chewed this through. 'Everything cool?' he asked.

I'm early so kick back in a pew, thinking about JC, while the Bishop and his musicians set up. *The sound of John Coltrane*: thick yet swift and tending to coil and coil until exploding with power and tension. Not the warmest of saxophone tones – when my teenage self first heard Coltrane playing alongside Cannonball Adderley on Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* I preferred Adderley, his soulful blues tone more appealing than Coltrane's mercurial solos – but one that's come to signify an unswerving artistic discipline, Coltrane being to post-war jazz what Che Guevara was to Latino revolution. Indeed, JC came to represent a jazz pilgrim's progress: the saxophonist as seeker of spiritual and musical enlightenment. Coltrane was a romantic modernist, believing art must forever be an act of radical renewal, that creativity enabled communion with the cosmos. His excessive appetite for drugs and alcohol ended after Miles Davis fired him (and punched 'Trane out: for nodding off on the bandstand) and he turned to the disciplined pursuit of nirvana as practised by Hindu ascetics. The kind of intensity that goes with such beliefs energised Coltrane across the sixties, his music constantly evolving, challenging all others to challenge themselves, reaching apotheosis on 1965's *A Love Supreme*, the album's expansive title and sonic rush hinting at what a generation of seekers were searching for. Coltrane seemed to channel the decade's *zeitgeist*, an icon to Black Power and psychedelic rockers. Today Coltrane's sound still casts giant shadows across a very tame jazz scene but, just as agitprop and lysergic guitar solos failed to usher in a post-Woodstock utopia, the sheets of sound JC pushed forth post *A Love Supreme* register only as skronk. Coltrane belatedly realised this and hoped to

Meditation: Coltrane contemplates his tools

collaborate with sitar minimalist Ravi Shankar but liver cancer stole him away in July 1967.

I think of how Cannonball Adderley went on to pioneer soul-jazz and enjoy pop success, unhindered by Coltrane's excesses. I think of Miles asking JC why he soloed excessively, the reply being he didn't know how to stop, Miles saying 'you take the horn out of your mouth, John.' I think of Alice Coltrane's *Journey in Satchidananda* and how she turned the harp into a fluid instrument for surfing the jazz cosmos. I think abou— 'We serve food after the service but please make yourself at home,' says a young black woman who I hadn't even noticed approaching me. Food? OK, she's thinking I'm homeless and have come for the free food they serve after the ceremony. Only away from London two days and already considered a hobo. Bloodshot eyes and drawn features, I guess.

By 11 a.m. people are trickling in: smartly dressed black families, a smattering of fellow tourists, two youths with long hair and

instruments and several homeless men (who sit way down back). Bishop King begins the service with a Bible reading that he intersperses with thoughts on America today, at one point favourably quoting Black Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan. A long, silent prayer meditation follows. Several women start singing a psalm, loose and gospel-flavoured. Then the band kick in – keyboards, electric bass, drums, two saxophones, clarinet – the sound strong and full, rhythm section locking, keyboards providing a melodic bed, Bishop King blowing big, fat Coltrane-notes out of his saxophone while the clarinet player dances around him, looping notes like he's lacing shoes. Other members of the congregation start banging tambourines, the female choir wailing and howling. Two black kids, dressed for church, try to find some space to join in on trumpet. Not easy as the Bishop and a dreadlocked sax player are ripping great solos, but the boys' stifled squalls suit the atmosphere, slipping bum notes into proceedings, hungry to engage with this big loud ritual. A man carrying a pair of bongos arrives, sits, finds a rhythm, joins the jam. The rockers in the congregation clutch saxophones and listen intently until one starts to blow. Ouch! He stops, breathes, blows again. *Parpppp!* A little girl, obviously bored by proceedings, looks on with disgust: *the adults get to have fun but no one plays with me!* A homeless guy, hair sprouting in every direction, ambles forward, pulling notes out of his harmonica, dancing a little shuffle. He's not in the same key, maybe not even in the same dimension, as the band. But spiritually, sure, he's continuing the Haight vibe.

'John Col-*trane*': I recall proto-rappers the Last Poets snapping those three syllables over a beat while offering praise to a musician they considered a fellow militant, and this gets me imagining Bishop King, back in the day, surely positing JC as a proto-Black Panther, sax in one hand, shotgun in another, *A Love Supreme*'s scratched vinyl blasting through huge speakers, brain on fire with revolutionary dreams. Not that there's any sense of violent uprising in the air this morning; no, today's ceremony is about spiritual uplift via galvanic musical overload. I mean, this place is jumping as people dance and sing and play

and throw themselves into Coltrane's cosmic blues. Just like they did when jazz first announced its miscegenated self to America and the world around a century ago. Myself, I date the twentieth century's birth to 26 February 1917, when the Original Dixieland Jass Band entered Victor studios in New York to cut the first jazz recordings. The ODJB weren't particularly talented – five white New Orleans musicans who'd copped licks from playing alongside their black neighbours (soon to become a familiar story) – but once Americans (and then the rest of the world) got to hear their primitive riffing and barnyard stomp the century caught fire: this wild Southern sonic hybrid, a new music shaped in Louisiana and Mississippi, Texas and Tennessee, kin to what was developing in Cuba and Haiti, Brazil and Jamaica, a blend of African and Spanish, Jewish and Gypsy (and African), Anglo-Irish and French (and African), sent a rush of blood to everyone's head. And would continue to for most of the century. In St John's it still does: the joint is rockin', hot jazz, music that starts in the groin, demands the hips shake, engages the soul, *hoo-doo voo-doo*. The congregation's fired up, spirit calling, responding.

Jazz today: too often bloodless and cerebral, seemingly comfortable as a quasi-classical music. Witnessing Wayne Shorter, a sax-playing descendant of Coltrane, in London a few years past, I had to flee the concert hall, so stuffy and precious was the playing. Some might say Shorter was playing jazz but I only heard noodling. Coltrane's finest music has an earthiness – *native bloodlines* – that establishes it as among the USA's most potent twentieth-century musical creations. And there's very little in this world that rewards engagement quite like great American music. Sure, Pablo Picasso was no asshole, a great movie engages many senses, certain poems and novels resonate and many a life-enhancing invention, from combustion engines to instant noodles, has lead humanity forward. But American music, specifically the stuff made by the nation's most marginal citizens, celebrates the twentieth century's inclusive genius, the people's spirit, like nothing else. In 1977 the USA sent the Voyager spaceship to the farthest reaches of the universe and on

it, alongside Bach's Brandenburg Concerto, Senegalese percussion and Indonesian gamelan, is Blind Willie Johnson's 'Dark Was The Night' and Chuck Berry's 'Johnny B. Goode'. Lucky ET.

Yakety-yak! A sax is chattering and St John's jumps and the whole place is convulsive with sound and sweat and good vibes and if a noise approximating a field holler (or maybe it's just a hungry drunk) arises from the back pews, well, why not? All around the honkers and shouters push things forward, building a trance state. And I'm feeling fresh; a Coltrane blast clearing my hangover. The music continues to build, atmosphere casual but intense, Bishop King blowing serpentine sounds that caress and tease and murmur about places, experiences, full of colour and light, of humanity, how we rise and fall, blues and good news, mercurial stuff, not easy but startling, asking only absolute concentration, and the dread picks up a clarinet, starts blowing thin, beautiful shrieks while a sax player jumps on drums (the drummer now settled on keyboards) and the bassist, a young woman with a bright smile, keeps thumping that tough, liquid rhythm out, no drool but Jimmy Garrison's spirit lives, and the sound… loose, free-form (but not free jazz), churning, choir shrieking and shaking, congregation shouting encouragement, kids dancing, rockers and bongo and harmonica all throwing themselves in deep, chasing 'Trane's wild, mercurial sound far, far out. *Bam! Bam!* Recall Ralph Gleason writing of Cannonball Adderley's live North Beach set 'at times the atmosphere of the Jazz Workshop resembled a church as much as jazz club', and think, *yes!* Legend has Buddy Bolden, mythic New Orleans jazz pioneer, putting trumpet to lips and 'calling the children home'. Bishop King's blowing, music calling us to this temple of sound in the Frisco wastelands. The right place to start my American music quest? *Everything cool!*

San Francisco, golden city of utopian dreamers, is where my previous American sojourn finished in early 1991. I always imagined I'd make it back some day and after ruining my health riding ancient Balkan roads the idea of the New World held

a lot of appeal. When Greg, a Frisco friend and fellow musical traveller, mentioned joining his posse to attend the annual Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert I got to thinking about what else America might have on offer. One festival, no matter how unique, couldn't justify a US visit. But to use Burning Man as a springboard to follow up a lifelong passion for American music, music created by communities in specific locations? Well, as the Arabs say, I could feel the breeze beneath my nostrils. Before fleeing the USA for Europe last century I lived in Haight Ashbury, working menial jobs – digging ditches, washing plates, care work – available to those who didn't hold Green Cards. The pay was lousy but the Haight offered cheap rent, cheaper drugs and plentiful live music. A good time could be had, yes indeed. Even if I never fell for the Grateful Dead tie-dye and acid culture many of my neighbours embraced I liked the 'hood's vibe, the sense that the Haight remained an outpost of American outlaw culture. Fifteen years on and the dotcom boom has flattened San Francisco. Capitalism takes no prisoners and the Haight I wandered post-church was, while little changed architecturally, a place transformed. Only the addition of Amoeba Records, a vast second-hand music emporium, wins approval. Once-plentiful live music venues have vanished. As has the grungy character that fired the neighbourhood's raw brio. A few youths in Dead T-shirts linger, hoping for some hint of halcyon days, but the spirit is long gone, replaced by Gap, Starbucks and the chain stores that take the high out of high streets everywhere.

I wander along Upper Haight – still home to a few second-hand soul-record shacks and a majority black populace – but even here things are in flux: the 'Californian master race' Bay Area punk icon Jello Biafra once jested about making their presence felt with vegan organic cafés. I grab a bus uptown to North Beach. Italian cafés serving huge latte bowls and expensive cheesecake sit alongside City Lights, publishers of Ginsberg's *Howl* and the finest bookshop on the planet. The climate's humid, overcast, seagulls buzz overhead and a certain kind of tension hangs in the breeze. Can't put my finger on it, some uneasy energy still lingers. Yet for

what? The restless, intuitive vibe that once inspired Jacks London and Kerouac, Lenny Bruce and the finest West Coast jazz clubs, to take up North Beach residences is long extinguished. It's not just jazz that's faded, San Francisco's music scene has been a flatliner for many years – Counting Crows, a band who serve microwaved 'classic rock', and Green Day (ditto for 'classic punk') are the last Bay Area acts to gain real prominence. The city's musical energies have decamped north to Portland, Oregon, a college town where grungy alt.rock dominates. Cartoonist Joe Sacco – a Portland resident – has satirised his home town's preening musical narcissists, youths wilfully oblivious to the waning creative (if not commercial) energies now generated by rock.

Taking a Bart train across the Bay to El Cerrito, I arrive at Down Home Music, a vast emporium of American roots music and base for Arhoolie Records, the independent label founded in 1960 to record and reissue regional American music forms. Arhoolie founder Chris Strachwitz is responsible for uncovering a fabulous wealth of American and Mexican vernacular music; I figured I'd soak Chris for advice on my forthcoming journey but he groans when I mention Burning Man – his former documentary-making partner Les Blank is, apparently, now focusing on filming the festival's 'art cars' (neo hot rods) – and shrugs as to what I might expect to find across a USA where he once uncovered the likes of bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins and zydeco king Clifton Chenier.

'After World War II this raw energy was out there and the working class got factory jobs and pretty good money and they could support bands out of that. You didn't have the huge difference between rich and poor, people made good wages, unions were strong. Now… now it's almost like slavery, it's disgusting, people working so hard just to earn a living wage and they've got them hooked on all this crap they want to sell them. And that kills music. The Anglo world is totally the same everywhere. San Francisco and Chicago are still unique because people live in them but Houston and Dallas and cities like that are awful, completely deserted, people go and huddle in their yuppie areas

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